

# POLICY BRIEF



## The New World Screwworm Threat: A Preventable Crisis at America's Southern Border

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### Summary

The New World screwworm (NWS), a parasitic fly whose larvae consume living flesh, has resurged in Central America and Mexico, posing a growing threat to US livestock, wildlife, pets, and even humans along the southern border. Recently, the pest has migrated into the United States, with 5 confirmed cases in Texas and New Mexico. Unlike common flies that target dead tissue, female NWS flies lay their eggs in open wounds—even small cuts or scratches. Once hatched, the larvae burrow into living tissue, causing severe damage, and—if left untreated—can kill their host within days. This is not a distant or theoretical risk; more than 2,100 human cases have already been reported across Central America and Mexico. The United States successfully eradicated this pest decades ago using the Sterile Insect Technique (SIT), which relies on releasing sterilized male flies to suppress reproduction. However, current production levels of sterile flies are insufficient to contain the pest's renewed northward spread. With over 26,000 cases already reported in livestock in Mexico, imports halted since May 2025, and now 5 confirmed cases within the United States's borders, the situation is escalating quickly. Without immediate expansion of sterile fly production and coordinated containment efforts, this \$100 billion threat will continue spreading across the United States, putting ranching, wildlife, and public health at serious risk.

### Problem

#### **Biological Threat: Live Flesh-Eating Parasite**

The New World screwworm, known scientifically as *Cochliomyia hominivorax*, is a highly destructive parasitic fly whose larvae feed exclusively on living tissue, unlike common blowflies that only scavenge dead or decaying flesh. Female NWS flies aggressively seek out any open wound or moist area on warm-blooded animals and can lay 200–400 eggs in a single site. Once hatched (often within 10–21 hours in warm weather), the larvae burrow deep into healthy flesh using sharp mouth hooks in a characteristic “screwing” motion, causing rapidly expanding, painful wounds that deepen as more flies are attracted to the

infestation. Left untreated, these infestations lead to severe tissue destruction, secondary infections, weight loss, reduced productivity in livestock, and often death of the host within 7–14 days. This parasite affects cattle, other livestock, pets, wildlife, birds, and occasionally humans, turning even minor injuries into life-threatening crises and creating a dangerous self-reinforcing cycle that demands constant vigilance from ranchers, pet owners, and wildlife managers.

## **NWS Outbreak Advances Past the US Border**

As of June 8, 2026, authorities in North America have reported approximately 185,000 cases of the New World screwworm in animals, more than 2,100 cases in people, and at least ten confirmed human deaths attributed to the parasite. In Mexico alone, cumulative livestock impacts already exceed 26,000 cattle cases, along with thousands more in swine, dogs, horses, and other species. Detections have pushed steadily northward, and the fly has officially made its way across the border. Preemptively, the United States suspended livestock imports across the southern border on May 11, 2025 to reduce the risk of accidental introduction while sterile fly dispersal operations attempted to contain the advance. This rapid northward movement, combined with the fly's ability to exploit any warm-blooded host, creates an imminent and escalating threat to American agriculture. On June 3, APHIS and USDA confirmed the first case inside our border, located near Crystal City, Texas. A three-week-old calf was carrying larvae in the umbilical area, and was quarantined. Since then, the fly has been detected in another calf, a goat, and two dogs. A single female fly can lay upwards of 3,000 eggs in her 30 day lifespan. As such, it is more urgent than ever to prevent the fly from establishing its presence here in the United States.

## **Inadequate Sterile Fly Capacity to Contain the Threat**

Current sterile fly production is critically insufficient to stop the northward advance of the NWS. The only major operational facility is the US-Panama COPEG (Commission for the Eradication and Prevention of Screwworm) plant in Panama, which produces just 100 million sterile males per week, all of which must be flown north for dispersal in Mexico. The new USDA facility in Edinburg, Texas only had its groundbreaking in April 2026 and will not begin operations until November 2027, starting at 100 million flies per week and later scaling to 300 million, while Mexico's upgraded Metapa facility is expected to add roughly 100 million per week starting in Summer 2026. However, there are serious doubts about whether it can meet that target despite US funding. Even at full planned capacity, production will only reach about 500 million per week—the minimum experts say is needed for effective containment and a pushback to Panama. This shortfall leaves the US southern border vulnerable, relying on limited distant releases and import bans that merely delay the threat rather than solve the underlying infestation pressure in northern Mexico.

## **Solution: Expedite, Accelerate, Maintain**

### **Leveraging X-Ray Technology for Immediate Production Capacity**

Expedite approvals and partnerships that are capable of rapidly building and operating sterile fly production facilities using proven X-ray technology to reach at least 500 million sterile males per week. Private operators could achieve full-scale production far faster than government timelines by leveraging existing know-how from the successful 1960s eradication campaign. X-ray sterilization is safe, effective, and low-cost compared to alternatives; it mirrors the previous success of dentist office technology, avoids the security risks of radioactive sources, and has been proven superior to cobalt or less-reliable e-beam methods in relevant contexts.

### **Building Domestic and Regional Production Abilities**

Accelerate construction and expansion of the USDA sterile fly production facility at Moore Air Base in Edinburg, Texas while supporting the modernization of Mexico's Metapa facility, to create a network for domestic and regional capacities. Relying solely on the distant Panama COPEG facility's 100 million sterile flies per week leaves the US vulnerable to logistical delays and insufficient releases near the border. Domestic and nearby production ensures reliable, high-volume dispersal directly into high-risk zones, strengthening the biological barrier against the New World screwworm. The Edinburg facility targets initial operations beginning in November 2027 at 100 million flies per week and scaling to 300 million. When combined with Metapa upgrades and private-sector efforts, total production can reach or exceed the critical 500 million sterile males per week needed for effective containment and pushback to Panama, aligning with USDA's five-pronged strategy that includes adjusted dispersal operations into South Texas.

### **Strengthening Import Controls, Surveillance, and Dispersal Operations**

Maintain and strengthen the livestock import suspension at southern ports while enhancing surveillance, wound treatment protocols, and sterile fly dispersal grids along the border region. Import controls buy critical time by limiting new introductions, while ramped-up monitoring and releases create an immediate defensive barrier until production can scale. Past successful eradications in the US and Mexico relied on integrated SIT plus movement controls; current dispersal adjustments into southeast Texas demonstrate this approach in action, with quick detection of isolated cases showing the system can respond when resourced properly.

## **Policy Recommendations**

Provide emergency supplemental funding and streamlined permitting for private and public sterile fly facilities while directing USDA to prioritize X-ray-based SIT capacity that can deliver 500 million+ sterile flies per week without unnecessary delays or security overhead. Direct USDA/APHIS to fast-track private sector partnerships, optimize the Edinburg facility timeline and output, and coordinate with Mexico for synchronized eradication efforts, including full utilization of the Metapa upgrade. Border states like Texas should also enhance local surveillance, educate ranchers and veterinarians on early wound treatment and reporting, and support or co-fund rapid response sterile fly dispersal operations in high-risk zones.

## **Why Now?**

The New World Screwworm has reached the United States, creating an imminent risk of establishment in the US if sterile fly production is not strengthened quickly. The 1960s eradication proved SIT works when production matches the threat scale, yet today's ~100 million flies per week output is insufficient against a resurgent outbreak. Government timelines project full additional capacity in more than a year, while private solutions could deliver results within months. Economic stakes are enormous: unchecked spread could cost the US cattle industry an estimated \$100 billion in lost animals, treatment, and market disruptions. Human and wildlife health risks, though currently lower in the US, will rise sharply if the NWS gains a foothold. Delaying decisive scaling of production risks repeating history in reverse, allowing a once-defeated pest to return and entrench.

## **Conclusion**

The New World screwworm represents a preventable but rapidly escalating catastrophe on America's southern border threatening ranchers, food security, wildlife, and public health with a flesh-eating parasite that was successfully eradicated decades ago through American innovation. Proven Sterile Insect Technique remains the most effective, safe, and economical tool, but current production lags dangerously behind the need for a barrier of 500 million flies per week. Government facilities are moving forward, yet bureaucratic timelines and limited output leave a critical gap that private sector partners could close far sooner. With livestock imports already restricted and detections pressing northward, policymakers must act urgently to approve, fund, and integrate rapid private production alongside public efforts. By prioritizing scalable, low-risk X-ray technology and layered regional cooperation, the US can once again push this threat south of Panama, protecting American agriculture and avoiding billions in potential losses. The solution exists. The time to implement it at full scale is now.