



The Painted Apple Moth Eradication Programme (vignette version: A)

On 5 May 1999, Dr Ruth Frampton learned that a new and potentially serious moth invader had been discovered in West Auckland. Over a hundred insects at all life stages could be seen. Ruth Frampton had been the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF)'s Chief Forestry Officer for four months, and was already managing Dutch Elm Disease, the Gum Leaf Skeletoniser, and Subterranean Termites. She now had a new threat to assess and respond to.

New Zealand biosecurity

New Zealand's Biosecurity¹ Act was passed in 1993, and the Biosecurity portfolio established in late 1996. Under the Act, the Chief Technical Officer (CTO)², appointed for relevant expertise, was the pivotal person in responding to a biosecurity incursion. To ensure that technical considerations took priority in decision-making, the Act gave CTOs, reporting directly to their Chief Executive, extensive statutory powers.

In 1996, the white spotted tussock moth was discovered in Auckland. The moth was feared as a major threat to forestry. The response, led by the Ministry of Forestry

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¹ Biosecurity: the exclusion, eradication, or effective management of risks posed by pests and diseases to the economy, environment and human health, in terrestrial, freshwater and marine environments.

² Then referred to by their area of expertise e.g. Chief Forestry Officer, Chief Plants Officer.

(MOF) involved “blanket” (extensive) aerial spraying over some of the most desirable residential areas, using the approved insecticide Btk³, available commercially as Foray 48B. After New Zealand and Canadian scientists developed a synthetic pheromone, an intensive trapping programme began. By June 1998, the tussock moth was declared eradicated, at a total cost of \$12 million.

During five months of aerial spraying, East Auckland residents became concerned at possible effects on their health. A study would find little impact, although pre-existing conditions might be aggravated. Anti-spray activity ceased when the spray programme ended.

Plant scientist Ruth Frampton, highly regarded in the scientific community, was one of the advisers to the tussock moth eradication programme, and felt it showed the need to be very cautious about undertaking any future aerial operation. Later, in a Cabinet-commissioned review, she criticised the early decision to start extensive spraying⁴.

The Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry

On 1 March 1998, MAF (with a staff of 2000) merged with the previously stand-alone MOF (a staff of 175) as the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry. Many forestry people saw this as a takeover, with agriculture people getting the best deal in structures and appointments.

Former MOF scientist Dr Gordon Hosking, a key figure in the tussock moth response, was seconded to MAF to prepare for a new Forest Biosecurity group. However, Dr Ruth Frampton was named as the new Chief Forestry Officer and Director of Forest Biosecurity. Frampton had led the successful emergency response to the 1996 fruit fly incursion. She had international experience, and, while seconded to the Office of the Minister for Biosecurity,⁵ had been closely involved in amending the Biosecurity Act.⁶ Frampton knew that, in some influential forestry circles, her appointment was regarded as inappropriate.

Forest Biosecurity had a staff of five and a budget of \$1.5 million to cover routine surveillance activities and export systems, as well as management of incursions. As Director, Forest Biosecurity, Ruth Frampton reported to the Assistant Director-General for Biosecurity, Barry O’Neil. In her Chief Forestry Officer role, the Biosecurity Act still provided a direct reporting line to Director-General Bruce Ross.

The Painted Apple Moth

In April 1999, entomologist Dr Peter Maddison, alerted by the concerned owner of an industrial site in West Auckland, discovered hundreds of caterpillars as well as moths, egg masses and pupae. He knew the moth was not native, and suspected it was the Painted Apple Moth; this would shortly be confirmed.

³ *Bacillus thuringiensis kurstaki*

⁴ Audit report p 63 and *The Dominion*, 14 May 1997, Scientists Defend Advice on Moth, Edition 1, page 14.

⁵ Rt Hon Simon Upton in the first instance, latterly Hon John Luxton

⁶ MAF Media Release 27 November 1998, Chief Forestry Officer Appointment.

Forest Biosecurity's new intruder was a completely unexpected arrival, "under the radar" of surveillance systems and not figuring on existing lists of potential pests.