The Facts About New World Screwworm

New World screwworm (NWS, *Cochliomyia hominivorax*) is a serious pest that affects livestock, pets, wildlife, and, less commonly, people and birds. Adult screwworm flies are about the size of a common housefly or slightly larger. Their larvae feed on the living tissue of warmblooded animals.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is leading an aggressive response to keep NWS out of the United States. Thanks to strong surveillance and rapid response programs, the current risk to animals and people in the United States remains **very low.**

This factsheet addresses common myths and misconceptions about NWS.

MYTH **All maggot infestations (myiasis) are caused by NWS.**

FACT Myiasis is an infestation of fly larvae (maggots) in tissue. It occurs when flies lay eggs in wounds or body openings. Not all myiasis is caused by NWS. Other flies—such as botflies and blowflies—can also cause similar infestations. In some cases, animals may be infested with maggots from both NWS and other species of botflies or blowflies at the same time. Species identification by an entomologist is required to determine whether it is NWS.

If you see suspicious wounds or maggots on animals, contact your veterinarian immediately. Animal health professionals should report suspected cases to the State animal health official and USDA Area Veterinarian in Charge.

If you have symptoms of myiasis, contact your healthcare provider. Healthcare providers should report suspected cases to the local or State health department.

MYTH **NWS can spread from animals to people and person to person.**

FACT NWS is not contagious and does not spread directly from animals to people or from person to person. Screwworm infestations begin when a female fly lays eggs on a wound or body opening. Eggs hatch into larvae that burrow into the wound and feed on living tissue. After about 7 days of feeding, larvae drop to the ground, burrow into the soil, and pupate. The adult screwworm fly emerges from the soil after 7–54 days depending on temperature and humidity. Female flies mate after 3 days, while males can mate within 24 hours of maturation, and the cycle continues.

MYTH **If an animal is infested, the whole herd must be culled.**

FACT Culling will not be used to manage herds in which individual cattle or other livestock are infested with NWS. Instead, premises with suspected cases of NWS will be placed under a hold order and not allowed to move animals until they are examined for NWS. Livestock infested with NWS will be treated and quarantined until all wounds heal and there is no evidence of reinfestation after 21 days. In rare cases, euthanasia may be necessary for individual animals for humane reasons or in cases when treatment is not possible.

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MYTH **Infested animals must be destroyed and cannot enter the food supply.**

FACT Animals that have recovered from NWS myiasis can enter the food supply if they meet all regulatory requirements, including release from on-farm quarantine and absence of residues, and they pass USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) inspection which ensures humane handling of animals and food safety requirements are met. FSIS inspection before and after slaughter will determine whether the entire carcass, or only unaffected parts, are passed for human food. Severely infested animals will not be allowed into food production.

More information can be found at askFSIS.

MYTH **NWS could enter the food supply and infest people.**

FACT The U.S. food supply is safe. NWS is not a food safety issue. It spreads only when an NWS fly lays eggs in a wound, **not** through meat, poultry, or dairy products.

MYTH **Coughing or other respiratory illness means an animal has NWS.**

FACT NWS does not cause respiratory illness or coughing. Instead, look for:

- Maggots or white egg masses in wounds or body openings, such as the nose, ears, genitalia, or the navel of newborn animals
- Foul odor or the smell of decay
- Signs of pain including irritated behavior, depression, not eating, and isolating themselves from other animals or people

MYTH **One infested animal that crosses the border will result in a nationwide outbreak.**

FACT Mexico, with USDA leadership and support, has established a layered system of safeguards to ensure livestock moving north toward the U.S. border are free of screwworm. These safeguards include:

- Enforcement of animal movement, inspection, and treatment protocols
- Upgraded infrastructure at checkpoints
- Modern electronic traceability systems systems

In the United States, USDA conducts intensive surveillance along the U.S.-Mexico border to detect screwworm should it reach the United States. USDA "tick riders"—mounted patrol inspectors who patrol the border—intercept and treat stray livestock for NWS.

These safeguards ensure that USDA would quickly detect a case of NWS in the United States and respond quickly to contain and eradicate it.

MYTH **An infested wild animal crossing the border could cause a national outbreak.**

FACT USDA is leading a coordinated effort to inspect transported wildlife and monitor free-ranging animals along the U.S.-Mexico border for signs of NWS. In partnership with the U.S. Department of the Interior and State wildlife agencies, USDA ensures a collaborative approach to wildlife surveillance and prevention. If a wild animal did bring NWS into the country, these preparedness efforts, combined with USDA's extensive surveillance, would ensure rapid detection and response, keeping the detection area small and localized.

MYTH **NWS could spread undetected across border States.**

FACT USDA maintains intensive surveillance along the U.S.-Mexico border to detect screwworm and ensure rapid response in the United States. This includes over 100 NWS-specific traps and approximately 7,500 insect traps across Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, and California—with no NWS flies detected to date. USDA also inspects free-ranging wildlife when in hand. Trapping, surveillance, and movement protocols in Mexico also help detect NWS before it can reach the United States.

MYTH **NWS would spread rapidly through the United States like it seems to be moving in Mexico.**

FACT NWS would not spread rapidly in the United States. Screwworms thrive in tropical and subtropical climates. They do not tolerate prolonged periods of very dry hot or very cold weather. Unlike a virus, NWS doesn't spread between animals, and infestations are easy to recognize. Rapid spread in a country is mainly due to humans moving infested animals over large distances.

USDA has the tools, workforce, and operational structure to respond to New World screwworm in the United States, including:

- National disease response strategy
- Draft NWS response playbook
- Training and webinars for Federal, State, Tribal, and veterinary partners