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## CLUSTER FLIES

Cluster flies are so named for their habit of “clustering” in cracks and voids in buildings in the late summer and fall months. These large, sluggish flies then appear on warm sunny days within the structure during the late fall, winter, and early spring. They occur in large numbers, especially at windows and in south and west areas of the structure. They make irritating, buzzing noises, spin around and move sluggishly. While cluster flies may carry some infectious bacteria on their bodies, they are more of a nuisance than a health threat. They do not bite humans, feed on structures or furnishings, or feed on human food. Structures located on an exposed hilltop seem to be attractive sites for these flies. Stone structures are notorious for attracting cluster flies.

There are technically three different species of flies that exhibit similar, clustering behavior – true cluster flies, blow flies, and face flies.

The life cycle of true cluster flies begins with an adult female laying her eggs near the burrows of earthworms. The tiny maggots that hatch from the eggs seek out earthworms to parasitize, and feed upon the living earthworm until ready to pupate. The maggots then leave their host, pupate in the soil, and eventually emerge as adults. Interestingly, the adults feed on flowers, and are among the longest-lived insects. Two-to-three-year life spans are possible. Three to four generations of flies are produced each summer. As the days become shorter and cooler in late summer, the adults seek sheltered, protected, and preferably warm areas to hibernate for the winter. Human structures suit their needs perfectly. Adult cluster flies resemble houseflies to some extent, but are slightly larger, narrower, and non-metallic gray. The thorax exhibits many short, golden-yellow hairs. When at rest, their wings overlap at the tips, unlike a house fly.

Blow flies, also known as blue or green bottle flies, are active flies that can often be found in homes during winter and early spring. These insects develop in manure or carrion and generally appear in small numbers. They are strong fliers and are attracted to lamps or lights. The buzzing of their flight is extremely annoying.

Face flies are serious pests of cattle and may overwinter in structures or invade them during the summer. They closely resemble the common housefly; only an expert can make a positive identification. Overwintering face flies have habits similar to cluster flies. These pests are most likely to invade farm homes or homes located near pastures or near areas that cattle are kept since the maggots develop in fresh cattle manure. During the summer the adults feed on the mucous secretions from the eyes and noses of cattle and horses, hence the name face flies.

Control of cluster flies (referring to all three species described above) can be a frustrating experience to homeowners and pest management professionals alike. The number of flies varies greatly from year to year, and seems to be worst after wet summers. In some years certain structures defy all efforts at cluster fly control. Once flies are inside the attic and walls control is very difficult; therefore, prevention is best.

We at All Pest take an integrated approach to pest management. Integrated Pest Management (IPM) attempts to minimize the use of dangerous and environmentally-damaging

*“Committed to protecting human health and the environment”*

chemicals. However, although non-chemical means of cluster fly control can be very helpful, chemical treatment is usually required to obtain acceptable levels of control. Cornell University entomologists recommend creating a residual chemical barrier on the structure, which both repels and kills flies. The ideal time to create this barrier is August 15 – September 15, although earlier or later treatment is helpful. The chemical barrier surrounding the exterior of the structure is applied as a spray or mist. The spray is composed mostly of water, used to easily apply the active ingredient. The active ingredient, which is mixed with the water, is a pyrethroid (a synthetic version of a pyrethrin, a plant extract derived from the Chrysanthemum family.) Pyrethroids are used by pest management professionals because of their lethality to insects and arachnids (spiders), their rapid breakdown in the environment, and their low-toxicity to mammals.

The active ingredient is formulated as a suspension concentrate, in which tiny crystals of the chemical are suspended in a water base. When mixed with water to form the spraying solution the crystals do not dissolve. When sprayed on a surface the water evaporates and the micro-crystals remain on the surface, even on porous materials such as unpainted wood. The target pests then pick these micro-crystals up on their feet and bodies, and obtain a lethal dose of the chemical through their exoskeleton or by ingestion when grooming. This chemical and its formulation represent the very latest in pesticide technology.

When treating the exterior of the structure, our technician will request that you, your family, and pets remain in the home until he has completed his work and the pesticide application has dried. This will generally take 30 – 60 minutes. Once the application is dry, you and your family may resume normal activities.

**Please advise your technician if there are any edible plants located near your home. This includes herbs, tomato plants, vegetables, rhubarb, etc. These plants should not be treated with pesticide. We recommend that edible plants be moved away from the structure to accommodate future applications.**

Most often, our treatment will confer acceptable control of cluster flies in your structure. Pest management professionals view acceptable control as the presence of comparatively few interior flies in the fall months, and fewer yet in the winter and spring months. (Many fall flies observed on the interior will later die due to picking up a lethal dose of chemical when entering the structure.) Acceptable control does not mean the complete absence of interior flies – this is an unrealistic and generally unattainable goal. Flies are persistent creatures that have an uncanny knack for finding routes into the structure – even a treated structure.

Unfortunately, acceptable control in some structures, in some years, is extraordinarily difficult – or impossible - to achieve. Variations in year-to-year control are due to a complex set of variables, including persistence of chemical efficacy (affected by weathering, exposure, etc.), number of flies in the area (varying greatly from year to year), the presence of openings in the structure, whether the structure has been treated in previous years, whether the structure has been treated within the recommended time frame, and many other factors. If you do not experience acceptable control of cluster flies after our treatment please call our office. We will retreat at no charge and do our best to diminish the number of flies within your home for the remainder of the season.

**Homeowners can best help themselves by properly sealing as many openings to their structure as possible.** While this procedure is time-consuming and may require a dedicated long-term effort, it nevertheless is the first – and best - line of defense for flies and other insect and arachnid pests.

An excellent discussion of cluster flies and their control may be found at <http://ohioline.osu.edu/hyg-fact/2000/2110.html>.