

# KiwiNet: helping fight fruit flies

**Throughout 2019, KiwiNet members took part in the Auckland fruit fly responses. Here, KiwiNet member Simon Cook, owner of Ranfurly Orchard Services (a Te Puke based company providing a range of services to fruit growers in the Western Bay of Plenty) and a KVH Board member, tells us about his time on the frontline.**

With a break between the gold and green kiwifruit harvest I took the opportunity to spend a week in Auckland as part of the fruit fly response.

The initial response had started to wind down in other affected suburbs (Devonport and Otara) but following two further finds of solitary male flies in Northcote, the decision was made to step-up response operations to a level that tells us more about any remaining flies in the area as well as determining whether there is any breeding population – to date there is no evidence of this at all. As well as the intensive trapping programme and the collection of fruit to be cut up and sampled for fruit fly, the response now included applying bait to every property in the area.

Following the last find on Friday 10 May and as such the announced increase in activity, on Sunday night I found myself driving to Auckland to spend the week assisting.



Monday morning started off with a briefing and situation update at fruit fly headquarters for all staff. These briefings occur daily at 7.30am and form the start point for each day. One thing that was repeatedly drummed into us was that whilst we did have Biosecurity New Zealand's response powers backing us, of much more importance to the success of the response was the continued support of residents.

As a new member to the team I then spent some time going through inductions and training on the role I was to be doing to start with - fruit collection.

One of the keys to identifying a breeding population is the search for fly larvae in fruit. This involves collecting vast quantities of fruit from the area around a find and bringing it back to a lab where it is thinly sliced and put under a microscope. Throughout the response over 1.2 tonnes of fruit have been collected and examined in the lab - a massive undertaking that so far has not found any sign of a breeding population whatsoever.

I headed out as part of a small team of three to start collecting fruit in the A zone. We were collecting all fruit off the ground and characterising it as windfall (still edible) or rotten. We would also shake the tree to see if any fruit would drop and then finally if there was plenty of fruit left on the tree, we would pick a few. All fruit was then double bagged in plastic and placed in fish bins for transport back to headquarters.





The collection of fruit basically entailed accessing properties and then crawling around on hands and knees picking up any traces of rotten fruit. As a result, I have developed a newfound hatred for feijoas and guava! One property took over three hours to deal with a couple of feijoas and a single guava – the grass under the guava was a thick mat of kikuyu grass that had berries embedded in it, defying any attempt to rake it up.

I was continually amazed at the support and co-operation of the residents who had response staff visiting their properties sometimes multiple times a day. After several months of having people on your property, wandering around your backyard, a fair amount of frustration could be expected but every homeowner I talked to was fully aware of and supportive of what we were doing.

On Wednesday I was shifted out of fruit collection and joined the baiting teams. The baiting was a huge operation with around 4,000 properties to visit and apply bait to. The baiting teams were split into five crews with a vehicle carrying the bait we were applying. The teams had a driver, a team leader, a door knocker, two data collectors and six or seven baiters. In total there were between 60 and 70 people involved in this part of the operation. The 4,000 properties we visited will all need to be revisited weekly for four weeks.



Baiting itself involved walking around with a drench gun squirting bait into the foliage of any dense leafy plants. We had to avoid getting bait on any buildings or fruit that may still be eaten and minimise the impact on property owners, but still do our jobs thoroughly and correctly. Some properties were quick and simple with little or no plants in their backyards, others were jungles that went back miles. It was really interesting even in the middle of a built-up area in Auckland just how dense and private some of the backyards could be.

It was fascinating to see the diverse range of people with all kinds of backgrounds that get pulled together for a response like this. I worked alongside forestry workers, bar tenders, regional council staff from around the country, students and even a guy that specialised in working with hoarders to declutter their properties. While I was there, I also ran into a couple of Te Puke post-harvest staff who had been released to help with the trapping programme, a job they had previously helped with during the Grey Lynn response.

The response is being run well overall and a great job is being done by everyone involved.

As an industry we pay a share of the cost of running the response operation. This is what happens under the Government Industry Agreement (GIA) partnership we have signed up to. Having been there helping on the ground I do believe we are getting value for our money and people working at all levels of the operation are working extremely hard. This is of huge benefit for us in the kiwifruit industry.

