MEDIA RELEASE

Date: Saturday, 10 November 2018
Contact: Suzette Ebanks
Direct line: (345) 244-1760 | Mobile: (345) 926-2018
Tel: (345) 949-8092 • Fax: (345) 949-5936
E-mail address: suzette.ebanks@gov.ky
www.gis.ky • www.gazettes.gov.ky
www.twitter.com/caymangovt
www.youtube.com/user/CIGovtInfoServices
www.facebook.com/caymangovinfo
Official Government Portal: www.gov.ky

GIS MARKETING & COMMUNICATIONS
CAYMAN ISLANDS GOVERNMENT

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Update on MRCU/Oxitec Research Collaboration

GRAND CAYMAN (GIS) – Government and UK-based biotechnology company Oxitec are entering the next stage of a collaborative research project.

Begun in May 2018, the initiative seeks to pilot and assess the role of Oxitec's self-limiting, non-biting, male *Aedes aegypti* mosquitoes in the integrated programme that the Mosquito Research and Control Unit (MRCU) uses to combat the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito.

For the last five months the research partners have worked together to test how the release of the genetically modified mosquitoes, pioneered by Oxitec, can be best combined with MRCU's integrated control programme. Their objective was to achieve suppression of the dangerous, disease-carrying mosquito.

Given that the historical end of the *Aedes aegypti* season occurs in October-November, the joint team of scientists will now spend time interpreting and assessing the data. The shift to the monitoring phase of the program will also track the elimination of the mosquitoes from the environment.

The trial took place in three neighbouring but geographically distinct areas of West Bay. Its objective was to allow MRCU and Oxitec to compare the outcomes in areas that used both different levels of genetically modified mosquitoes and traditional control methods, with another area that utilised only traditional controls.

Noting that his department has both control and research functions, MRCU Director James McNelly, PhD, said his department and Oxitec had regularly reviewed data during the release phase of the programme. With the season ending the decision was taken to transition towards the monitoring-only stages of the programme.

As such Oxitec has since ceased releases of mosquitoes, although Oxitec personnel continue to monitor traps that have been left in the areas under review.

MRCU also monitors the overall populations of all mosquitoes in the West Bay area, including *Aedes aegypti*, through its established trap network, which confirms that mosquito population numbers have remained unexpectedly low this season.

“The design of the project was sound and the collaboration has been positive and grounded in a mutual desire to learn if our approaches can work together. As intended, this programme provided both Government and Oxitec with valuable information that we can use going forward,” Dr McNelly remarked.

He added, “The project has given us valuable insight into how Oxitec’s approach might be integrated with our conventional tools. It also allowed us to monitor the population dynamics of another container-inhabiting mosquito that is a secondary vector of the diseases transmitted by *Aedes aegypti*. This is the Asian Tiger mosquito also known as *Aedes albopictus.*”

The joint MRCU-Oxitec team continues to evaluate mating between the wild *Aedes aegypti* population and Oxitec’s males, as well as the eventual lack of persistence of Oxitec’s mosquitoes in the local environment.

Meanwhile Oxitec is still employing local personnel to help with the continuing research responsibilities that it maintains under the current agreement.

While the project, which cost Government $588,000, has now stopped releases of Oxitec’s male mosquitoes, MRCU and Oxitec are considering a further, no-cost collaboration in 2019.

Oxitec’s CEO, Grey Frandsen thanked the Government for the opportunity to assess how the company’s technology might best be used alongside MRCU’s integrated control programme in the Cayman Islands environment.

“This project will help shape how we can build new interventions in the future. We applaud MRCU’s willingness to pilot new, innovative tools that can play a role in combating this disease-spreading mosquito. It is efforts like this that will help to eliminate this dangerous public health threat, and we look forward to future collaborations,” Mr Frandsen commented.

For the official Cayman Islands Government web portal, www.gov.ky:

Web title: Next phase for MRCU project

Web blurb: The research trial with bio-tech company Oxitec has moved into the monitoring stage.