

Screwworm sex earns departed US duo a 'Golden Goose'

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Screwworms can kill a cow in two weeks

The ins and outs of screwworm sex may not sound like a topic that would arouse passions.

Yet, it seduced a pair of American entomologists who dedicated years to unravelling the flesh-eating creature's carnal exploits—sparking derision and accusations of wasteful spending.

More than half a century later, and years after their deaths, Edward Knipping and Raymond Bushland are being honoured with the Golden Goose award, which recognises worthy work at first thought "silly, odd or obscure".

"Screwworm research may sound like a joke, but it isn't," award creator Jim Cooper said in a statement Wednesday.

Knipping and Bushland created the "Sterile Insect Technique" (SIT) for eradicating disease-bearing creatures such as the screwworm fly (also known as blow fly), the tsetse fly, and the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito which transmit the Zika virus.

It involves sterilising insects with radiation in the

lab and releasing them in infested areas where sterile males mate with females to produce infertile eggs.

"It saved the livestock industry billions and is giving us a way to fight Zika," said Cooper.

The screwworm lays its eggs in open wounds of warm-blooded animals, especially cattle. The larvae, or maggots, eat into the animal's flesh, and can kill a cow in under two weeks.

Barring an interruption for World War II, Knipping and Bushland did their research in the 1930s-50s "on a shoestring budget and in the face of ridicule," said the Golden Goose statement.

By 1982, however, their method had led to the eradication of screwworm fly in the United States, and many other countries since.

"Sometimes, offbeat, quirky-sounding science is the best science, paving the way for discoveries years down the road which can revolutionise medicine, physics, biology, technology and how we view the world," said awards backer Randy Hultgren.

Bushland died in Texas in 1995 at 84, and while Knipping passed away five years later in Virginia at 90.

The award, funded by science institutes and universities, will be bestowed posthumously in September.

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