

Collier Mosquito Control District History

The Collier Mosquito Control District (CMCD), today one of the most effective mosquito control agencies in the state, if not the nation, sprang from rather humble beginnings over 50 years ago.

In 1950, Naples was a sleepy little town surrounded by water and as yet undiscovered by tourists and escapees from the frigid north. Interstate 75 did not come as far south as Naples and the Naples Airport more closely resembled its WWII training base origin than the busy metropolitan aviation center it is today. In fact, Naples was hard to find on a map and even harder to get to, at least for people who wanted to visit. Mosquitoes, on the other hand, knew right where Naples was located and they did not need a highway or an airport to be able to reach town. And reach town they did! They severely limited outdoor activities and, in general, made life less than desirable during the mosquito season.

That was the setting in November of 1950 when a referendum was held, in accordance with Florida laws, to establish an independent special taxing district with the mission of controlling mosquitoes in Naples. The positive results of this election created the Naples Mosquito Control District (NMCD).

When initially established, the NMCD covered only six square miles of *Old Naples*. It was governed by a Board of Commissioners composed of three individuals elected by the residents of the District. It had no employees, no equipment and no money—not a very auspicious beginning.

During the summer mosquito season of 1951, the City of Naples provided the newly formed District with a truck and a driver to carry out its spray activities. Board meetings were held at City Hall, and the City Manager lent his assistance and expertise in the running of the program under the direction of the Board of Commissioners of the NMCD. As tax revenues were collected and distributed, the NMCD began hiring personnel, buying equipment, and also began reimbursing the City for the assistance they had provided during the beginning years.

The first director of the District, Mr. C. M. Storter, was appointed in 1953 and served until he passed away in October of 1957. As the District was not active during the winter months, the Board chose to supervise the activities of the District and postponed the search for a new director until the following summer.

The summer of 1958 arrived and the search for a new director began. Brandt G. Watson was chosen to be the second director of the District and began his career in March of 1959. Mr. Watson would serve in that position until his retirement 29 years later. He was the guiding force for the NMCD and established the commitment to providing quality mosquito control to the community which flourishes today. Under Mr. Watson's direction, larviciding operations began.

After leaving City Hall, mosquito control activities were overseen from an office in the Balch Building. In 1961, feeling a need to house its own operations, NMCD purchased land on Airport Road (later to become Airport-Pulling Road) and proceeded to build their new headquarters. At that time Airport Road was a two lane gravel track separating the Naples Airport from the palmetto scrub that constituted much of the Naples area. The District paid \$5,000.00 for the site of what is now the Gulf Coast National Bank and Nichols Floor Covering, Inc.

Residents of East and North Naples, seeing that the NMCD had made life in Naples much more enjoyable, petitioned to be incorporated into the District. In 1963, the NMCD Board of Commissioners voted to approve the incorporation of these two areas and made the request to the Collier Board of County Commissioners that the expansion issue be placed on the November ballot. When the referendum was approved by the voters within the District, the NMCD grew to over 16 times its original size, from six square miles to 98 square miles. Such rapid growth required the NMCD to change its basic approach to mosquito control operations. As a result of this growth, the need arose to monitor the 98 square miles for necessary control measures to be taken. Thus began the District's landing rate count inspection program. Following the implementation of the landing rate count surveillance, light traps were placed in several locations to monitor the number of mosquitoes which flew into the traps overnight.

The District had become too large, with too few roads, for NMCD to rely on ground fogging operations to provide adequate mosquito control to all of the residents. As a result, during the summer of 1964, the District contracted with the Lee County Mosquito Control District to make two trial aerial adulticide applications on two separate days to areas within the NMCD. Counts were taken before and after each flight. The results were extremely positive and it was the decision of the Board to purchase the District's first aircraft. After an extensive search, the District purchased the first of several twin engine Beechcraft D-18 airplanes in January of 1965. These airplanes, commonly called Twin Beeches, were outfitted with insecticide tanks and nozzles to make them into aerial versions of fog trucks. Flying at dawn, they could apply a layer of insecticide-laced fog over large areas of the NMCD. This provided mosquito control for areas of the District that could not previously be serviced. All but the mosquitoes were happy with the increased level of service.

Recognizing a good thing when they saw it, the residents of Golden Gate City petitioned the Board to become part of the District. After a feasibility study ruled out the possibility of expanding into the area at that time, Gulf American Land Corporation (GALC) contracted with the District in 1967 to provide mosquito control services, to be paid for by GALC. This contract continued until the residential area of Golden Gate City was, after due process, incorporated into the District in 1971. This expansion enlarged the District by 25 square miles.

A similar contract arrangement was made with the Isles of Capri Mosquito Control District Board of Commissioners to provide service to the Isles of Capri residents. (This District was later dissolved.) This contract continued until, again by due process, Marco Island and the Isles of Capri joined the District in 1972, bringing in an additional 82 square miles. In two years the District had more than doubled, growing from 98 square miles to 205 square miles.

With all the expansions during the District's first 25 years, the Board of Commissioners for the NMCD felt that the name of the District was no longer indicative of the area that was being covered at that time. They requested that the state legislature pass a special act changing the District's name to the Collier Mosquito Control District. This legislation was passed in 1975 and the name change became effective in January of 1976.

It was also in 1976 that the District purchased the first of several Douglas DC-3's to replace the Twin Beech aircraft. The DC-3's had a larger cargo capacity which allowed them to treat larger areas than was possible with the Twin Beeches.

Although Goodland had been voted into the District in 1972 with the expansion into Marco Island and the Isles of Capri, they requested that they not be included because their water was supplied by individual cisterns at each home-site. By 1982, a municipal water supply system was in place and they petitioned to be incorporated into the District. By this time, Chapter 388, the statute governing mosquito control, had changed and it was no longer necessary to place expansion issues on the ballot. Instead, the request for service was made to the Board of Commissioners of the CMCD and they, in turn, made the request to the Collier Board of County Commissioners. The request was approved and the District increased by one (1) square mile to 206 square miles.

While the Twin Beeches and later the DC-3's were used for the control of adult mosquitoes, there was another aspect to the District's control program. In 1969, the District contracted with Crescent Airways, Inc., to lease a Bell 47 helicopter. In the terms of the lease, Crescent also provided the pilot who relocated to Naples for several months during the mosquito season and flew on inspection and larviciding missions. This lease arrangement continued for ten years. In 1979 the CMCD purchased several Hughes TH-55's and Bell UH-1B helicopters (Hueys) from the government surplus program. The Hueys were initially equipped with tanks and spray booms for treating mosquito breeding sites. Later, some of the Hueys were equipped for thermal fogging for adult mosquito control. The TH-55's were used to ferry inspectors to breeding sites that could not be reached from the ground for inspection.

In 1984, the CMCD entered the computer age with the purchase of an IBM System 34 mainframe computer. The computer system was used to control the financial activities of the District. It was not until 1989 that the aircraft parts inventory was also integrated into the system. The first budget to be created on an IBM PC occurred in 1986, on a PC shared by several employees. The District has since migrated to a network system with PC's on every desk, in every department, utilizing state of the art software and equipment.

Although the District had a larviciding program as part of its control activities since the late 1950's, it made a monumental attempt in the mid-80's to effect control with large-scale larviciding efforts. Over a span of several years, it was proven that the large-scale larviciding program did not decrease the need for adulticiding. As the gateway to the Everglades and the Ten Thousand Islands, Collier County has unique problems not shared by other districts. Because of the migration of salt-marsh mosquitoes, aerial adulticiding remains the primary control method.

A surveillance program was in effect since the early 1960's within the District. Inspectors reported landing rate counts at specific locations daily and light traps were utilized. In 1986, the District enlarged its surveillance network by increasing the number of New Jersey style light traps located at strategic sites throughout the District. New Jersey light traps and daily landing rate counts continue to be the basis of the surveillance system in place today.

Also in the mid-80's, the timing seemed appropriate to investigate the possibility of replacing the older military helicopters with newer models that were capable of multi-purpose usage; i.e., for Ultra Low Volume (ULV) adulticide applications, for larviciding missions, and for inspecting. At the time, the Bell UH 1B helicopters were used for larviciding and adulticiding operations and the TH-55's were used for inspecting activities. The first Hughes 500D helicopter was purchased in 1987; the CMCD fleet of helicopters now numbers five (5) Hughes 500D helicopters. These helicopters have proven able to provide the multi-purpose usage envisioned for them.

Mr. Brandt G. Watson, long time Director of CMCD, began his well earned retirement in January of 1988. Although retired, Mr. Watson still stops by the office to see how the war against mosquitoes is progressing.

Upon Mr. Watson's retirement, the search for a new Director began. The CMCD Board of Commissioners interviewed several applicants but chose Frank W. Van Essen, Ph.D., to fill the position of Executive Director of the CMCD. Dr. Van Essen continues to fill that position today. Under his direction, and in cooperation with the Board, many innovative activities have evolved and the District has entered the 21st century in an admirable and effective manner.

During the legislative session in 1988, a special act was passed increasing the number of Board members from three to five, and to allow for staggered terms of office. As the current commissioners were elected in 1986, an election was held in 1988 to elect two additional commissioners. This action staggered the terms of office to allow for continuity during election years.

The District expanded again in 1989 to include 36 square miles along the eastern edge of the District. A portion of the eastern District line was located one mile east of CR 951. With this expansion, the Eastern boundary of the District at one mile east of CR 951 was extended from the Lee County line south to Marco Island. This brought the total area covered by the District to 242 miles.

That was also the year that the District established a public education program. Educational programs were developed and presented in the schools throughout Collier County in an effort to promote a better understanding of science in general and mosquito biology and control in particular. These programs have become extremely popular with students and teachers alike, and have been incorporated into the curriculum of most of the third, fourth, and eighth grade classes in the local schools. District personnel also made themselves available as speakers for civic organizations so that adult residents of the District could have a better understanding of mosquito control.

Through the years, as the size of the District expanded, so did the number of staff members and equipment. The lease expired for the District's hangar operations on the Naples Airport in 1985. The decision was made to combine all operations of the District and negotiations were conducted to lease land on the airport property large enough to house a complete CMCD facility. Preparations began in 1984; in 1990, the District moved its headquarters and flight department to a newly constructed facility at 600 North Road on the Naples Airport. This was the first time that the flight department was located on the same property as the headquarters.

In 1991, after much experimentation and justification, the use of thermal fogging with District aircraft was replaced with Ultra Low Volume (ULV) applications. This was a major shift in operations and took place for a number of reasons, including environmental and logistical considerations. This proved to be a learning experience and required that operational techniques be changed as well as equipment. However, within a short time, the District was able to provide an even higher level of mosquito control than previously possible.

With the District's move to new facilities in 1990, the old property on Airport-Pulling Road was leased to commercial enterprises. In 1997, the CMCD Board of Commissioners decided that the property should be sold and it was placed on the market. The property, originally purchased for \$5,000 in 1961, sold for \$1,125,000. The proceeds from the sale were placed in an account to be used for the purchase of new aircraft, as the Board and staff members were in agreement that it was time to replace the District's fleet of DC-3's because of their age and parts availability. A number of different aircraft types were considered and a decision was made to purchase Short Brothers and Harland Ltd. SC-7 Skyvans. Three of these aircraft were located in Australia and purchased in 1998. A ferrying company delivered the aircraft, flying them from Australia. These aircraft have proven to be very safe, effective, easy to maintain, and easy to fly. The aviation department has been happy with their purchase.

With the 50th anniversary of the District in 2000 came further expansion. At the request of residents of the area, the CMCD Board of Commissioners voted to incorporate 66 square miles of northern Golden Gate Estates into the District. Of the 66 square miles incorporated, 33 square miles would receive services in 2001 with the second 33 square miles of the expansion area receiving services in 2002. This expansion brought the total area of the District to 308 square miles.

The Immokalee area became a part of the CMCD in 2003, adding 34 square miles to the District, for a total of 342 square miles. In 2004, given the rapid growth in the eastern portion of Collier County, the District annexed an additional 59 square miles of the Eastern Golden Gate Estates, for a total coverage area of 401 square miles.

From 6 square miles to 401 square miles, from a borrowed spray truck to eight aircraft, from personnel on loan to 27 dedicated, well educated, well trained and experienced personnel, the Collier Mosquito Control District has come a long way since 1950. But one thing has not changed over the years—a commitment by the CMCD to provide the residents of the District with the highest level of mosquito control possible, and, to do it with a smile.