

Electronic pest controllers yet to prove their case

We have all seen the ads about amazing new ways to rid your house of rats, mice and creepy crawlies forever with no chemicals, no odours, and no need for a pest manager.

The common factor in most of these ads is the promotion of ultrasonic sound or electro-magnetic wave generators which are claimed to so annoy or disorientate pests of all descriptions that they flee (yes, even fleas) without trace within no time at all.

But do the claims stack up?

In the USA, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), a bit like our ACCC, says nobody has provided any scientific evidence to support them.

A year and a half ago, the FTC said there had been no research to support the claims that ultrasonic or electro-magnetic devices will eliminate unwanted rodent and insect pests. The commission is still waiting.

Two years ago, the FTC sent warning letters to more than 60 manufacturers and retailers of ultrasonic pest control devices, stating that efficacy claims about those products must be supported by scientific evidence.

FTC staff reviewed print and catalogue advertisements and conducted a 'surf' of Internet sites marketing such devices. They found that many of the advertisements made explicit claims about products' abilities to eliminate rodents or repel insects. However, according to FTC staff, these claims "may not be in compliance with the FTC Act, which prohibits false and deceptive advertising".

Australian interest

In Australia, the ACCC has also shown an interest in ultrasonic pest controllers.

Recently, the ACCC instituted proceedings against an Australian company over claims made for its plug-in electro-magnetic device. The company claimed its device could rid premises of rats, cockroaches and other pests.

The ACCC alleged that the company made false and misleading representations about the performance characteristics of its electronic device in various TV and newspaper advertisements, on its website and in various brochures and promotional material.

These included claims that the device, when plugged into and utilising electricity from a mains power supply outlet will:

(a) prevent the intake of water and food nutrients by any noxious or destructive insects and vermin which inhabit the person's premises in proximity to the device;

(b) cause death by dehydration and/or death of such insects and vermin if unable to escape the effects of the device;

(c) generate vibrations that repel such insects and vermin;

(d) provide protection from noxious or destructive insects and vermin all day every day continuously into the future;

(e) break the breeding and feeding cycles of cockroaches, mice, rats and other noxious or destructive insects and vermin;

(f) not cause the noxious or destructive insects and vermin to develop an immunity against the protection to be provided;

(g) eliminate cockroaches, mice, rats and other noxious or destructive insects and vermin all day, every day, continuously into the future;

(h) gradually cause noxious or destructive insects and vermin (including cockroaches, rats and mice) to move out of a person's home;

(i) disorientate noxious or destructive insects and vermin such that they become easier to catch; and

(j) create an environment where things such as cockroaches mice and rats cannot eat, sleep or breed.

The ACCC alleged that the representations were false and misleading and in breach of sections 52 and 53(c) of the Trade Practices Act 1974 because the device does not work as claimed and the company had no reasonable basis for making the claims. The ACCC has sought court orders including: declarations; corrective advertisements; refunds to consumers; removal of the product from sale; and costs.

Huge marketing campaigns

Bell Laboratories Australian based technical manager, Terry Davis, has

had more than a little experience with these devices and is more than a little sceptical about some of the claims made about their efficacy.

"Electronic pest deterrence is a multi-million dollar industry which funds huge marketing campaigns through the media, the Internet and direct mail," Mr Davis said.

"Because we target the same market, in relation to rodent management, we tend to keep an eye on what is being said to consumers by the companies which make and market these products.

"For instance, on one website, electronic pest repeller.com consumers are advised to 'reduce harbourages, improve house keeping, and exclude rodents from gaining access'. If consumers do this, they say their device will work.

"Sounds like the problem could be

solved before ever plugging it in.

"More disturbing from the pest management industry's perspective are advertisements such as a U.S. TV commercial in which a pest controller is shown spraying the inside of a home until insecticide runs down the wall. The ad also shows the pest controller furtively rummaging through the homeowner's chest of drawers as a voice-over asks 'why should you trust a stranger in your home?'

"The message is, better to use an electronic deterrent than get in a pest manager who is by inference careless, untrustworthy and unprofessional.

"This type of irresponsible, false message would be highly damaging to our industry if it were to be replayed here," he said.

Mr Davis also said he knows of no efficacy data proving electronic deterrent devices actually work as claimed.

"For instance, we know that ultrasonic sound waves do not penetrate solid objects. Therefore, rodents while in their harbourages, remain largely if not totally unaffected as they snooze in the sound shadows."

Mr Davis also pointed to published research quoted by A. P. Meehan ("Rats and mice. Their biology and control, 1984") which shows ultrasonic sound rapidly attenuates (ie, does not travel far) in air.

"In our view money spent on these devices would be better spent on proven methods and employing the expertise of pest management professionals." ■

Terry Davis: "And, when we are asked by the public as to whether or not these things work we should have the confidence to respond with a resounding: NO!"