



Written by [Rebecca Terrell](#) on September 6, 2016

Floridians Oppose FDA-approved Genetically Modified Mosquitoes

Florida residents are abuzz with opposition to U.S. health regulators' approval of releasing genetically engineered mosquitoes to combat the insect-transmitted Zika virus. British firm Oxitec, Ltd., a biotech company that specializes in insect control, claims that its mutant mosquitoes can reduce the population of a species that transmits the disease.



Last month the Food and Drug Administration ([FDA](#)) green-lighted a clinical trial in Key Haven, an island community in the Florida Keys — one of the hardest-hit areas of Zika transmission in the country. FDA announced that “the proposed field trial will not have significant impacts on the environment.” Its technology involves an engineered gene inserted into adult male *Aedes aegypti* mosquitoes. When the mutant males mate with wild females, their offspring cannot survive to adulthood. Known as the “yellow fever mosquito,” *A. aegypti* carry other viral diseases such as dengue fever and chikungunya.

[Oxitec](#) says its tests of the “self-limiting” OX513A insects, conducted in Brazil, the Cayman Islands, Panama, and Malaysia, have reduced wild populations by more than 90 percent — what they call “an unparalleled level of control.” However, according to [Tech Times](#), the World Health Organization “said that while the technology demonstrated an ability to reduce the population of mosquitoes in small-scale field trials, there’s no sufficient data yet on the epidemiological impact.”

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The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention agree that while mosquito populations may have declined, “there is not data from any of Oxitec’s other trials that show a reduction in disease.” This important distinction is noted in a [Center for Food Safety](#) petition urging the FDA to reject Oxitec’s Florida field trial bid. “Once released into the environment, this new, living engineered organism cannot be ‘recalled,’” petitioners cautioned, pointing out the significant number of independent scientists opposed to genetically modified mosquitoes as both ineffective and dangerous. “The environment, including our homes, should not be a testing ground for risky new GE [genetically engineered] technologies,” reads the statement, which says the FDA’s decision “will set a dangerous precedent for other GE insects in the pipeline.”



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Local doctors in Florida have since raised another concern: that Oxitec's mosquitoes may promote the spread of antibiotic-resistant bacteria. "To ensure the male GM [genetically modified] mosquitoes live in the lab while genetically programmed to sire dead offspring, Oxitec injects them with the antibiotic tetracycline," explains [FLKeysNews.com](#). "Dr. John Norris submitted a petition to the Mosquito Control District earlier this month, signed by 19 colleagues, wanting to know more about the types of bacteria the insects have on the surface of their bodies." Doctors are concerned that these bacteria may already have developed antibiotic resistance in the lab before being spread by mosquitoes in the environment.

Stiff opposition from Floridians such as Norris has led the Florida Keys Mosquito Control District to place a non-binding referendum on the ballot in November, asking Key Haven residents whether they want to go forward with the trial. A recent survey by the [Annenberg Public Policy Center](#) reported that 60 percent of Floridians favor the use of genetically modified mosquitoes, while a similar study in May by [Johns Hopkins University](#) discovered that 58 percent of Key Haven residents oppose the measure.

The U.S. owner of Oxitec, synthetic biology firm Intrexon Corporation, is pulling out all the stops to ensure success of the referendum. It has formed a political action committee called The Florida Keys Safety Alliance, reports [FLKeysNews.com](#), which is hiring door-to-door canvassers at \$15 an hour to "speak with voters" and convince them to cast a "yes" vote on November 8.

Stockholders certainly want to see the referendum passed. Intrexon [acquired](#) Oxitec in August of 2015 but has since garnered negative attention over the controversial mosquito project. "Intrexon has been something of a battleground stock since its IPO [initial public offering] in August 2013," says [Real Money](#). "The stock's IPO price was \$16, and it rose as high as \$66 in July 2015 before embarking on a choppy decline" to its current \$25 range. Oxitec's success could turn this tide.



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