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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**MRCU Responds to GeneWatch FOI Release**

Following recent reports by some local media questioning the success of the recent public health programme that deployed genetically modified, non-biting mosquitoes to combat *Aedes aegypti* mosquitoes, the Mosquito Research and Control Unit (MRCU) would like to clarify a number of points:

1. On 29 June 2017 the minutes of the West Bay Programme Steering Group reflect that a draft of a document, described as the interim report to be submitted to the National Conservation Council (NCC) by MRCU as part of permit conditions, was circulated for input to members including representatives from MRCU and Oxitec.
2. The minutes note that at least one previous report had been sent in February, and that the deadline for the submission of the document was the following day 30 June 2017.
3. The minutes and subsequent emails also reflect that data was to be added to the report at the request of one of the MRCU representatives Alan Wheeler PhD.
4. Emails show the document was then recirculated within MRCU for members of the steering group to indicate any further requirements prior to circulation to the NCC.
5. The same emails confirm that no further input was received from the MRCU team. Then MRCU Director Bill Petrie signed off on the report by phone as he was off-Island at the time. The final document became the eight page Annual Report MRCU - June 2017 on the Friendly *Aedes aegypti* Project in West Bay.
6. This report is the document that was disseminated directly to the media at a meeting of the National Conservation Council in October 2017.
7. Page seven of the report notes a 62% suppression rate, which was based on one methodology of calculating and stating the suppression rate.  In the time since the report was issued, MRCU scientists have had a further opportunity to review the data and believe that an alternative methodology of calculating and expressing the suppression rate needs to be determined and agreed. This will be done by Steering Committee at the outset of the new project.
8. MRCU’s co-ownership of the document is what Ministry of Health Deputy Chief Officer, and then Acting Director Nancy Barnard, was referring to in an emailof 27 October, 2017, when she noted that Government could not simply disclaim figures in a joint report signed off by the then Director Petrie.
9. Emails between varied MRCU and Health Ministry staff, preceding and following sign-off and released in response to Freedom of Information requests, reflect a sometimes heated discussion between the scientists who were members of the committee concerning what key performance indicators for the programme should look like. A common theme is what would ensure the people of the Cayman Islands the best value for money. These discussions continued for some time.
10. To address these discussions and move forward in as informed a manner as possible MRCU and the Ministry of Health subsequently negotiated a new contract with Oxitec. The earlier programme and its resulting data focused solely on the release of genetically modified mosquitoes as a control measure. As such the new programme will seek to add to available data by looking at the results when varying levels of release of these mosquitoes is combined with traditional ground control measures, as well as when the ground control measures stand on their own. (More details contained in a press release to be published within the next day or so.)
11. MRCU will use the combined data from the 2016-17 and 2018 programmes to evaluate the potential for the release of genetically modified mosquitoes to be included within its Integrated Mosquito Management programme. (This is the programme that works toward the objective of eradicating Ae. aegypti from Grand Cayman.)
12. When the contract for the 2018 programme expires at the end of the year Government is under no obligation to renew.
13. Government has currently made no direct payments to Oxitec, although the parties are still discussing the settlement of some costs for the extension of the previous programme. The contract for the 2018 programme has arranged for a payment of $294,000 to be payable on 31 May and a second payment of the same size later this year. To date costs have all been in-kind, such as: providing office space, space for the Oxitec trailer on the MRCU compound, electricity and water. There have also been some personnel related expenses associated with MRCU employees working on the evaluations.
14. Oxitec investment to date is estimated at CI$588,000. The programme also employs four Caymanians and one person married to a Caymanian, all with an academic background in the sciences.

Commending Ms Barnard for her work toward developing the new programme while serving as Interim MRCU Director, Dr. Wheeler states: “The new project will evaluate the Oxitec mosquito as part of an integrated control strategy alongside other control techniques. I consider Ms. Barnard to have successfully re-negotiated the contract with Oxitec to allow a thorough evaluation of the technique before plans to expand it to other areas of the island.”

New MRCU Director Jim McNelly PhD says his team and Oxitec, are in agreement on how, where and when to proceed with the evaluation. It will also be up to MRCU to evaluate what success will look like.

Dr. McNelly adds that discussions between MRCU and Oxitec have led to the creation of a sound strategy that includes a range of techniques, which will be enhanced by access to more efficient equipment.

Ms Barnard emphasises the importance that the ministry, the agency, and she herself, have placed on public transparency for the collaboration with Oxitec.

Noting that some of her own comments in the recently published emails have been misinterpreted, Ms Barnard cites as an example an email to Dr. Wheeler on 27 October which when taken in context makes clear that she is observing that as the joint author of the report on which it had also signed off, MRCU could not simply subsequently attribute development of the document solely to Oxitec, as Dr. Wheeler appeared to have suggested in a preceding email.

The Deputy Chief Officer went on to say: “In my emailed communication to Dr Wheeler which was taken out of context by the Cayman Compass, I was not implying that information should be concealed. Anyone with whom I have worked will be aware that I am a staunch supporter of openness, accountability and government transparency.”

“Rather, I was stating that the public could not be told the report was formulated by a private sector company because this was not the case. The June 2017 MRCU annual report on the Oxitec project was prepared by MRCU in conjunction with Oxitec under Dr Petrie’s directorship. Dr Wheeler, along with the rest of the MRCU-Oxitec Steering Committee approved and signed off on the contents of that report.”

Accordingly to ensure that the Caymanian public has full access to the data contained in the FOI release and can read for themselves the documents from which media discussion is being drawn, the Ministry of Health will also publish the Annual Report and full FOI release on its website [www.ministryofhealth.gov.ky](http://www.ministryofhealth.gov.ky) by close of business today (16 May 2018).

**(GIS)**

**For the official Cayman Islands Government web portal,** [**www.gov.ky**](http://www.gov.ky)**:**

**Web title**: MRCU responds on FOI emails

**Web blurb**: Emails on use of GM mosquitoes in Aedes aegypti control at [www.ministryofhealth.gov.ky](http://www.ministryofhealth.gov.ky).