Biting the national rat control bullet

Sharon Hughes, rodenticide development manager for leading manufacturers, BASF Pest Control Solutions, examines how best pest controllers can face up to the challenge of the biggest government cut-backs in living memory.

Successive rounds of local authority funding cuts in the 1980s and 1990s had a major impact on the co-ordinated control of rats and mice in towns and cities across the UK. But these earlier service belt-tightenings pale into insignificance in the face of the current national imperative to reduce government spending.

Over the past 30 years progressive budgetary cuts, sub-contracting and charging for pest control services – not to mention the privatisation of water authorities – have led to an increasingly fragmented and reactive approach to urban pest management; an approach which the most recent National Rodent Control Survey shows is barely keeping the lid on rat problems, in particular.

With local authorities preparing for economies of 25% or more for the next financial year, the threat of more service reductions and fragmentation is acute. With it comes the prospect of greater and more insatiable rat infestations unless positive action is taken to improve the efficiency of pest control on the ground.

More fragmented approach

When the primary responsibility for control lay with local councils and water authorities as a public health service, rats were generally controlled in the planned and co-ordinated way they need to be for greatest effectiveness. But all this has changed.

Chartered Institute of Environmental Health figures from 2002/3 show 76% of Local Authorities treating domestic rat infestations free of charge. In contrast, comparable NPTA data for 2008/9 reveals only 46% doing so.

In recent years rat control in both domestic and commercial properties has become more and more reactive as well as fragmented. Rat populations in many places have been allowed to build until they become seven and then only treated on individual premises, at different times and with little or no co-ordination.

Yet we know rats are no respecters of boundaries. They typically forage over 50-100 metres. What’s more, the territories of family groups within a colony tend to overlap to a considerable degree. In addition, we know individuals can travel over relatively long distances to seek out new territories, using the conveniently concealed routes offered by sewers and drains.

...ertained in a lot more frequently when the technician called. People were so pleased with the service that they recommended it to their neighbours who genuinely couldn’t afford it. Almost jokingly, one said: “I have been using pest control services for many years, but this is the first time I have been truly satisfied with the service.”

The pulse-baiting that the single-feeds allow gives valuable economies in both bait use and the number of visits required, which in turn offsets their greater unit cost.

Bait placement is key

Alongside the most cost-effective bait the onus must be on individual technicians to ensure the best bait placement from the outset too, making sure baiting is focused sharply on the most favourable locations for rat feeding and presented in a way which overcomes their natural neophobia as rapidly and completely as possible.