Based on the south coast of England at Littlehampton in West Sussex, PestFix has been working hard over the last 18 months to introduce the fully automated Agrilaser Autonomic bird dispersal system into the UK, in particular to the gas, nuclear and renewable energy markets.

This has not been done single-handed as it has been achieved in partnership with the product’s Dutch manufacturer, Bird Control Group, and a number of pest control servicing companies. The latter include NBC Environment of Snetterton, Exeter-based ISCA Pest Control, Riddance Environmental from Hitchin, Herts and Venables Pest Control Services based in Gloucester.

Notable installations at energy sites have included projects with National Grid Gas where two major infestations of ground nesting birds were resolved at their onshore terminals using Agrilaser Autonomic, supplied by NBC Environment. As Terry Robertson, senior operations engineer at National Grid Gas explains: “Our Elvanfoot site in South Lanarkshire was home to around 500 black headed gulls during the 2015 nesting season which caused us operational difficulties. We couldn’t access or work on site until the birds had left and then we had the expense of cleaning up afterwards which was a costly exercise.

“At first when I heard about it, I was sceptical of the Agrilaser, however the alternative methods were either too expensive, ineffective or just not viable so we gave it a go before going down a more expensive route. The system worked very well during this year’s nesting season and we were able to work on site unaffected by the presence of birds,” concludes Terry.

Another installation with NBC Environment was at the Dounreay Site Restoration at Caithness in the very north of Scotland. Dounreay was the first nuclear power plant in the UK but today it is a site of construction, demolition and waste management, all of it designed to return the site to as near as practicable its original condition. Located next to the sea, it was a favoured nesting site for Arctic terns and other ground nesting birds.
Another nuclear power station to experience bird problems is EDF Energy’s Hinkley Point B nuclear power station based near Bridgwater, Somerset. Again, located next to the coast, herring gulls and black backed gulls were causing problems as they were using the newly re-roofed turbine hall as a night roost which resulted in guano damage.

The Autonomic installation was so successful that the station quickly ordered a second unit to protect other areas of the site too and the EDF management has recommended the system to several of the eight other nuclear power sites around the UK. PestFix expects to be installing further Autonomic units at two other sites in the near future.

Thames Water and their partners Lightsource, Europe’s largest developer and operator of solar photovoltaic (PV) projects, are currently trialling Autonomic units at Europe’s largest floating solar panel array. This is located on the QE II Reservoir in London and is used to offset electricity used for pumping drinking water. The array is set to generate 5.8 million kilowatt hours in its first year of operation.

On 26 October 2016, the European Commission announced funding of just over €3 million, spread over three years, to create a project known as LIFE Laser Fence (this is part of LIFE EU programme). The aim is to eliminate rodenticide use, decrease crop losses by half and create awareness of the negative effects of chemicals and their impacts on the environment in Europe.

The project is a collaboration between Liverpool John Moores University, Bird Control Group (the Netherlands) and partners in the UK and Spain.

This project clearly echoes the desire within Europe to eliminate, or at least reduce, the use of rodenticides on farms. The LIFE Laser Fence project is seen as an environmental friendly solution.

Dr Alex Mason, who specialises in development and characterisation of sensor technologies at Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) and is project leader of LIFE Laser Fence said: “There is a strong European desire to eliminate poisons entirely. Coming up with a solution that fits both national and European policies means massive impact for the European economy and environment.”

The array has also become heavily infested with birds using it as a safe place to roost overnight away from ground predators. One of the results of this unwanted bird activity is heavy guano fouling on the solar panels which reduces power output by as much as 20%. In addition, the guano can permanently damage the special coating on the solar panels, the constant manual cleaning of the panels is time consuming and expensive and there is a considerable risk to the maintenance personnel from direct human contact with the guano, not to mention the risks associated with slipping.

The total budget of the LIFE Laser Fence is €3,135,928, with a financial contribution of €1,777,985 by the EU. The project started on 1 September and ends on 31 December 2019. Field trials will commence in 2017 in the UK, Spain and the Netherlands. Trials in the UK will be undertaken by the Hampshire-based Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust.

Heavy guano fouling on the solar panels at Europe’s largest floating solar panel array reduces power output and can cause permanent damage.

Agrilaser Autonomic is currently being trialled at this massive Thames Water site in London.

Facts and figures

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Some commonly asked questions about Agrilaser Autonomic

Dan England of PestFix responds to those questions he most frequently gets asked by pest controllers about the use of this somewhat high-tech product.

Where can it be used?
Agrilaser Autonomic is a highly versatile bird deterrent system. The main constraints to using the system are that it must be used on a secure site and not in areas frequented by unauthorised people. Rooftops, industrial and commercial facilities and utilities are ideal applications. Not recommended are public areas such as shopping malls and parks. However, the system is fully programmable and can be configured to work around danger areas or times of the day when the public may be present.

How does it work?
The concept of Agrilaser is simple. It employs an intense bright green laser dot that is tracked across a pre-determined path on the structure or area that one wishes to protect using waypoints programmed into the device by the user. It is not designed to hit the birds with the laser, nor should it be aimed at birds in the sky - these are the two common misunderstandings of the system.

As the diagrams opposite show, green laser light was selected as it is the most visible wavelength to both humans and birds, so creating the best repulsion. As the bright green dot continuously and relentlessly patrols the protected area, the birds move away, perceiving it as an unknown threat. Due to its constant movement day and night the birds stay away and do not habituate to the light.

Is it safe?
All Agrilaser products are classified as Class 3B lasers, which are safe for use in public areas. However, the laser dot must not be stared at for more than a split second and should not be viewed at all using magnifying glasses such as binoculars.

Does it need servicing?
Once installed, the Agrilaser Autonomic is simple to service and maintain as it has very few moving parts. It is fully weatherproof and requires only periodic visual inspection to ensure the laser unit has not been knocked or disturbed and to ensure that the projection lens is kept clean.

Only in the USA...
Spotted on one of the exhibitors’ stands at PestWorld in Seattle (see page 38) was an Agrilaser Autonomic mounted on a robot!

The system is being promoted as a fully autonomous patrolling robot to provide effective solutions for large territories.

The laser system is intended for use in large open spaces, such as airports, golf courses, roofs, storage areas, lawns or agricultural fields.

Marketed by Flock Free Bird Control, their literature explains that the robot autonomously follows a pre-installed route from one point to another, automatically avoiding all obstacles, permanent or moving.

At each point, the robot performs a bird deterrent process with the laser system and then goes to the next point to repeat the job there. The routes may be easily changed at any time to get the best protection of your site against birds.
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