

GOING REMOTE: DIGITAL RODENT MONITORING

Monitoring pest activity is very much a part of integrated pest management (IPM). The monitoring devices used can be as simple as a sticky traps for insects all the way through to electronic remote monitoring devices (ERMD). UK-based international journalist **Frances McKim** reviews the progress being made with digital products within the pest management sector.

Digital technology has advanced and transformed the way we live our lives. Running alongside this in pest control has been an increasing demand for accountability, electronic documentation and data. This combination of factors has resulted in the development of electronic remote monitoring devices, in particular for rodent control.

In his presentation to delegates at PestWorld 2015, world-renowned US rodent expert, Dr **Robert (Bobby) Corrigan** of RMC Pest Management Consulting



Daniel Schröer, CEO of Futura Germany, holds a rat trap with inbuilt remote sensor

declared: “Remote sensors can hold us accountable. They provide monitoring with data, with assurance and with 24/7 surveillance. There’s no better way to monitor rodents than with correctly installed remote sensors in combination with skilful pest professionals – a total no-brainer.” He likens the shift to remote sensors being as ground-breaking as the switch from insecticide sprays to gel baits.

Having said this, Dr Corrigan admits that the uptake of digital technology using remote sensors has been slower than he originally forecast. This is a view shared by **Daniel Schröer**, CEO of Futura Germany.

“In 2005, we invented the first eMitter digital mousetrap. We were convinced digital traps would reign supreme over the next five years. Well, they didn’t! But this is now rapidly changing.

“Covid restrictions made physical access to several sites difficult, data demands, standards and legal requirements are ever increasing, as is the request for non-toxic control techniques. This year we have seen a remarkable rise in demand. Now our forecast is that in the next five to ten years IoT devices will replace over 50% of routine pest controllers’ visits,” he concluded.

Rentokil, the world’s largest pest control business, has certainly grasped the opportunity with both hands. Its own PestConnect digital rodent monitoring system was launched on a nationwide scale in the UK in 2019. Since then it has grown four-fold and now accounts for roughly 10% of its UK portfolio. Aimed at key accounts and SME businesses where contracts are in place, its sales proposition states: “We’ll give you 24/7 monitoring for rodents for more or less than what you are currently paying for eight visits.”

The benefits offered to the client are round-the-clock monitoring with a much-enhanced suite of data reports. For the technician it upskills their technical capabilities, gives them enhanced knowledge of the site and offers them more time to focus on infestation management, as well as a more interesting and challenging job. In short, it switches them from ‘bait box checkers’ to technical experts.

In August 2021, prior to the announcement of its Terminix acquisition, Rentokil claimed to have over 200,000 PestConnect units in the field across the globe, accounting for around 3% of its commercial customer base. Rentokil’s ambition is for this to increase to 25% of commercial customers by 2026, primarily in the bigger markets, which includes Australia and New Zealand. However, its growth plans are currently thwarted due to a shortage of computer chips coming from China.

Of the international servicing companies, Rentokil is not alone in this shift to digital systems. Developed at the company’s Innovation Centre in Sweden, Anticimex has also installed more than 200,000 SMART devices, including with Flick in Australia.

Orkin, on the other hand, whilst still an advocate of remote digital systems, does not have a universal global system. It prefers to leave the choice of system to each of its companies to select what fits best for their market and their customers.

For individual pest control companies there is an ever-increasing range of ERMD systems to choose from. Some of the international chemical companies have developed systems, such as Bayer and Corteva, which are being rolled out, albeit slowly, across the globe. The rodenticide trap manufacturers such as Kness, Bell Labs and Woodstream have also introduced digital products, to compete against the specialist digital companies such as Futura, GreenTrapOnline, Dimo Xignal, Ratsense and IPMSquare.

Digital remote monitoring looks set to advance into other sectors of the industry beyond rodents. Systems are under development for outdoor pests such as foxes and squirrels, stored product insects, flying insects and cockroaches. One of the most recently launched is the Spotta system for bed bugs, developed by a research company based in Cambridge, UK.

In terms of the Australian market, it seems likely that the number of pest managers trialling remote sensor technology will increase in the next couple of years as systems become more readily available. Flick Anticimex will continue promoting its SMART system and more supplier systems are expected to become available to the wider pest industry. The upfront cost of the equipment, monthly subscription fees and device renewal charges – plus the need to sell the idea to the customer – may still be prohibiting factors in the meantime.



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