

FUMIGATION UPDATE

Far-flung fumigation

Company handles pest control on remote leper colony



As a fumigator in Hawai'i, operating the largest independently owned pest control company in the state, Michael Botha of Sandwich Isle Pest Solutions has done his fair share of interesting fumigation jobs. But the recent fumigation of the Kalaupapa

community on Moloka'i island was by far the most difficult, he says. Why? It is one of the world's only active leper colonies and very difficult to reach from the outside world.

In the late 1800s, the Kalaupapa community on Moloka'i, one of the most remote parts of the Hawai'ian Islands, became an island prison for sufferers of leprosy. In 1969, after treatment was discovered to stop the contagious disease, also known as Hansen's disease, it was no longer required for sufferers of leprosy to be quarantined on the nearly uninhabited island. Today, the small island is home to about 3,000 people. A remote peninsula isolated from the rest of the island by very tall cliffs, known as Kalaupapa National Historic Park,

serves as the residence for several lepers and their caregivers.

"We're one of the few companies that do pest management work on Moloka'i," Botha says. "We provide general pest management, structural fumigation and commodity fumigation on Moloka'i. We rent a warehouse from a coffee producer on the island, so we keep some of our fumigation and pest control equipment in storage there."

The area of Kalaupapa is difficult to reach because of some of the world's largest cliffs that surround the leper colony.

A Sandwich Isle crew of five, including Botha, spent three weeks on the island prepping and fumigating 30 historic

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Michael Botha uses a tree and a hanging scale to do his calculations.

buildings for drywood termites. All of the buildings are or had been patient homes.

Getting the fumigation equipment to the remote portion of Moloka'i was a job in itself. First, additional equipment was shipped on a barge from O'ahu to Moloka'i. From there, it was trucked to an open field at the top of the mountains where a helicopter Botha chartered from Maui waited. Workers loaded the equipment in 1,000-pound loads and the helicopter flew it over the cliffs to the tiny airport in the Kalaupapa community. It took nine trips and four hours to deliver all of the tents, clips and other equipment necessary for fumigation. The crew also brought three weeks' worth of food plus bicycles, a necessary mode of transportation on the island.

"We took half our crew and dropped them off on the runway to wait for the helicopter," Botha says. "The

other half was responsible for loading the helicopter from the warehouse. The helicopter would lower the equipment on the ground at the airport, the crew would unhook it and then they'd fly off to get another load."

There was one glitch on the helicopter's final trip to the Kalaupapa runway. Botha thinks the basket dangling under the helicopter might have been a bit overloaded, and much of their food fell out of the net.

"In Kalaupapa, there is no grocery store or restaurant," he explains. "There's a small store where residents can buy things, but since a barge comes only once a year, they only allow the residents to buy things. We lost our coolers with all of our meat, milk, eggs, drinks and spices.

"We did have our fishing rods with us, so we were able to catch fish. We also made friends with some of the locals who work in the leper colony. Deer run wild on the island because there are no natural predators there and they are seen as a nuisance because they destroy people's gardens. The locals shot some deer, so we had fresh meat every night. The great Aloha Spirit extended to us by the locals was amazing. We felt very privileged to have shared the beautiful colony and to meet the caring people who call Kalaupapa home."

Fumigating structures on such a remote island calls for improvisation as well, says Botha.

"To measure the weight of the cylinder and do our calculations, we used trees and a hanging scale," he explains.

Worker safety is a concern on every fumigation job, but with this one, the

workers of Sandwich Isle were dealing with an area known for the presence of a contagious, debilitating disease. Was there concern that workers could be exposed to leprosy?

"When we got there, we were quickly informed as to the protocols of working with the patients," Botha explains. "The contract representative discouraged any contact at all with the patients. Basically, we had no interaction with them at all. When we fumigated the patients' homes, the state workers would go in there and move the patients so we never even saw them."

From a technical standpoint, Botha says the fumigation of that many buildings — mostly houses — was not difficult.

"Everything went great," he says. "We were very fortunate with the weather. Kalaupapa peninsula normally has 25 to 30 miles per hour winds every day, so we'd start shortly after sunrise when the wind was down and try to get everything done as fast as possible before the winds picked up in the afternoon."

In Hawai'i, it's best to fumigate for drywood termites every five to seven years due to reinfestation, according to Botha.



Sandwich Isle fumigators use bicycles to get around while working on Moloka'i.