

Zapping sales

Ventura's AgriZap built a better mousetrap that keeps its customers happy

By Jim McLain

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Back when he was studying law at San Diego's California Western University, Bob Noe didn't dream about one day building a better mousetrap.

But after more than 30 years and a diverse career — manager and attorney for a title insurance company, inventor and now manufacturer — that's exactly what he's doing.

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Bob Noe, 60, president of Agrizap, Inc., holds his Rat Zapper device.

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But after more than 30 years and a diverse career — manager and attorney for a title insurance company, inventor and now manufacturer — that's exactly what he's doing.

Noe is president and chief executive officer of AgriZap Inc. in Ventura, producer of a rodent-killing gadget called the Rat Zapper.

While the world might not be beating a path to his door, a sizeable chunk of it is. AgriZap is selling 50,000



Photos by Dana R. Bowler

See RAT ZAPPER on D10

Zapping rats electronically

The Rat Zapper kills rats and mice by electric shock. Its maker claims the system is a cleaner, bloodless and more humane way to eliminate rodents.

Chamber

Bait is placed at back of the chamber; rats enter from front opening.

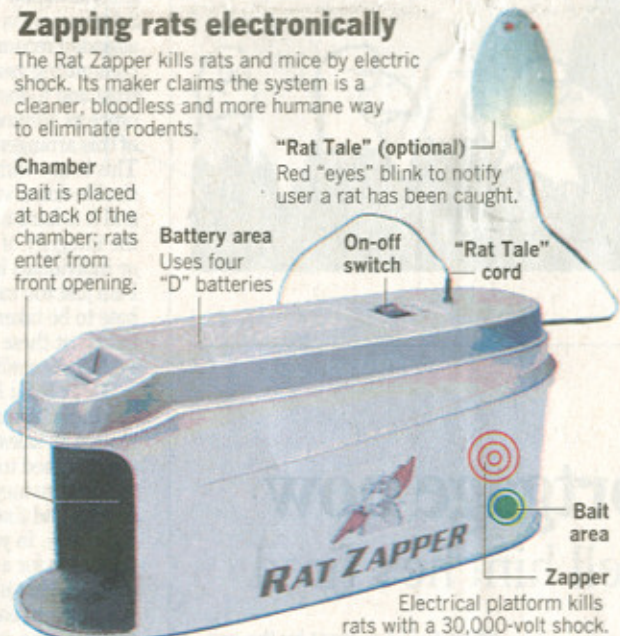
Battery area
Uses four "D" batteries

"Rat Tale" (optional)

Red "eyes" blink to notify user a rat has been caught.

On-off switch

"Rat Tale" cord



Zapper
Electrical platform kills rats with a 30,000-volt shock.

Disposal

User turns switch off and tips unit to dump dead rat into trash bin.

Source: Ratzapper.com

Star staff



The Rat Tale is a device that can be used with the Rat Zapper. The eyes light up when there is a rat or mouse inside the trap. This helps the customer when the trap needs to be placed on a roof or under a building.

AgriZap sees profits cut by suit against former partner

RAT ZAPPER From D1

to 100,000 Rat Zappers a year through a network of more than 3,000 retailers, Noe said. And sales are increasing at a rate of 30 percent annually.

The device, he said, offers electrocution as a quick, effective and humane way to get rid of rats and mice.

Promoted as "The Power Tool for Rodent Control," the milk-carton-sized Rat Zapper uses four AA batteries to deliver a fatal two-minute jolt of electricity to critters lured inside by the smell of dry pet food.

It is promoted as less dangerous to people, pets and wildlife than poisons and guillotine-like snap traps, and rodents don't slowly starve like they do when trapped on glue boards.

The traditional ways of getting rid of rats, Noe said, are cruel, messy and often ineffective.

Americans spend an estimated \$150 million to \$250 million a year to control rodents, but the traps and poisons they use haven't really changed in more than 100 years.

The idea

Noe's invention was inspired 15 years ago when a gopher died touching an electrified fence designed to keep dogs out of the garden on his Ojai ranch. Today his company uses a factory in China to produce two Rat Zapper models, the original "Classic" and the larger "Ultra" that uses more powerful D-size batteries. He calls that one a "Rat Zapper on steroids." Retailers set their own prices,

but they generally sell for from \$29.95 to \$49.95.

Compared with mousetraps selling for \$1 or less, that's pricey. But thousands were sold last fall when the Rat Zapper was featured in SkyMall, a shopping catalogue distributed to passengers on most major airlines, Noe said. Purchases at online stores have increased from 5 percent of sales to 30 percent in just three years.

"We're kind of the high tech brand of rodent control," said Noe, a sandy-haired 60-year-old surfer who once rode horses as an extra on the "Bonanza" TV show. "People seem to like that."

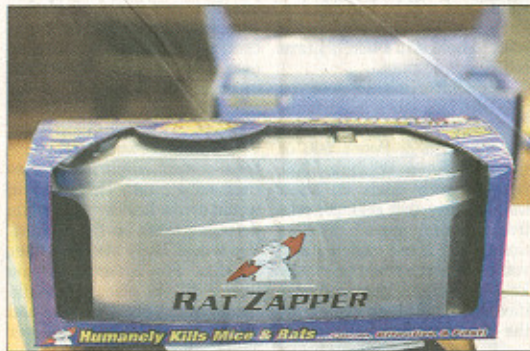
Green Thumb Nursery in Ventura, which has carried the Rat Zapper since 2000, sells about 200 of them a year, said Barry Pillard, the store's insecticide and pest control manager. His customers find them easier to use and a lot less messy than traditional mousetraps.

"A lot of people don't want to see the blood and guts and gore," Pillard said. "These electrocute them. You just pick it up and dump the mouse in the trash just like you're emptying something out of a cup."

Just turn it over and your problem's gone."

Lawsuit seeks damages

AgriZap, owned by Noe and fewer than 10 other investors, is profitable and had total revenues last year of a little less than \$2 million. But it would be making a lot more money, Noe said, if it hadn't become involved in a potentially lucrative business partnership that went awry.



Dana R. Bowler / Star staff

The Rat Zapper Ultra uses electricity to deliver a deadly shock to mice and rats by simply baiting the Rat Zapper Ultra with pet food. When the rodent goes for the bait, the system senses its presence and delivers enough electrical energy to kill the rodent with no blood.

That began in 2000 when Woodstream Corp., which has made Victor mousetraps in Lititz, Pa., for more than 100 years, asked him to produce Rat Zappers as part of its Victor line. Using the company's familiar red "V" trademark, the plan was to sell Rat Zappers through Woodstream's vast network of retailers, including Home Depot, Lowe's, Ace Hardware, Kmart and DoltBest chains. Over three years, the partners generated about \$225,000 in "Victor Rat Zapper" sales.

But in 2003, Woodstream dropped AgriZap's product and began marketing its own similar devices dubbed the "Electronic Mousetrap" and "Electronic Rat Trap," Noe said.

AgriZap's profits subsequently dropped by about one-third, Noe said, and shut the company out of some of the country's biggest retail chains.

In a federal lawsuit filed in 2004, AgriZap accuses Woodstream of violating its patent, fraud, breach of contract and unfair trade practices. The company claims it has incurred damages to date that total \$13 million.

Woodstream is the world's largest pest control products manufacturer. It is owned by Brockway Moran & Partners, a large private equity firm based in Boca Raton, Fla. Noe charged the Woodstream products are not as good as AgriZap's. He said the company copied AgriZap's technology, packaging and product descriptions to deceive retailers into believing they were stocking the original Rat Zapper.

Woodstream did not respond to two calls and an e-mail seeking comment for this story. In court filings, Woodstream denied all of AgriZap's allegations and said

it believes Noe's patent is invalid, the Wall Street Journal reported March 2.

"We feel quite confident in our position and hope to be successful in our efforts," Harry Whaley, Woodstream's president, told the Journal. But he declined to comment further, citing the pending litigation.

Noe said he expects the case to be tried in Philadelphia later this year. He is confident AgriZap will win because he has documents supplied by a firm that arranged manufacturing in China. The papers describe Woodstream's plan to test market AgriZap's product and then replace it with its own product.

"It's a total indictment," Noe said. "We got the goods on them. Sometimes you can find a smoking gun. We found a smoking arsenal."

Multiple possibilities

The Rat Zapper uses a resistance-switch technology that senses a mouse or rat and delivers a charge the instant that metal plates near the bait are stepped on. A red light blinks to indicate the gadget has done its job. All the owner has to do is turn it off, dispose of the rat, put in more bait and turn it back on. One set of batteries will kill at least 10 rodents.

To monitor the Rat Zapper's work in attics, behind stoves and other cramped places, AgriZap markets the Rat Tale, a plug-in remote with a 12-foot lead and red lights, which blink when the Zapper's does.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency is considering purchasing Rat Zappers, Noe said. So is Kraft

Foods Inc.

But he said he believes the biggest business prospect is a pending deal with Applicia Inc., a Florida company that makes an array of household appliances, including many for Black & Decker.

AgriZap and Applicia are working on developing a version of the Rat Zapper Classic under the Black & Decker brand that would be sold by major retailers. The project has the potential to increase AgriZap's annual sales by several hundred percent, Noe said.

The company already has a wide range of customers. The Dallas Aquarium has bought Zappers, and a Los Angeles diamond distribution business used the gadget to kill rats that repeatedly activated its alarm system.

One of the more unusual uses comes from Marine Sgt. Michael Heath of Oxnard. In a testimonial posted on AgriZap's Web site, Heath wrote that a friend sent him a Rat Zapper for Christmas after he complained rats were overrunning his base camp in Iraq. What the friend didn't know, Heath wrote, was that he had rescued an injured falcon during a battle in Fallujah and adopted it as a pet.

"Falcons' natural food is mice, mice and more mice," Heath wrote. "So here on day four of receiving your Zapper, I have caught two very nice meals for my pet 'George,' the Merlin falcon. I'm sure you never envisioned the Zapper being used to catch meals for a falcon, but, hey, Marines have been known to use things a little unorthodox in order to accomplish a mission."