

Data shows Sacramento County center for West Nile virus in California

By LARRY MITCHELL - Staff Writer
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OROVILLE -- Local mosquito fighter Matt Ball is thankful Sacramento County's West Nile virus statistics aren't Butte County's.

Most of the West Nile virus that has been detected in California this year is concentrated in one part of Sacramento County, the data shows, said Ball, manager of the Butte County Mosquito and Vector Control District.

To date in California there has been one confirmed human case of West Nile. It was reported last week in Kern County, not Sacramento County.

But in the virus' prevalence, Sacramento County dominates the picture.

The state tests dead birds to see if they have been infected with West Nile. Statewide this year, 169 birds have been found to have died from West Nile. Of those, 122 were in Sacramento County.

Mosquito-control districts trap mosquitoes and send them to a state lab to be tested for West Nile. So far, 222 of these "mosquito samples" have tested positive for West Nile. Of those, 116 were from Sacramento County.

He'd hate to face such a concentration of West Nile, Ball said. "If you have that hot of an area, it's crucial to try to find where the mosquitoes are coming from, and that's rather hard to do."

Luz Marie Rodriguez, a spokeswoman for the Sacramento-Yolo Mosquito Control District, said her agency has sprayed insecticide from the air over populated areas to reduce mosquito numbers.

She said one reason her district's West Nile numbers are the highest in the state is that the large district has a very thorough surveillance program.

"If you look, you find," she said.

So far this year, West Nile has not been detected in the north valley. But Ball said it's pretty certain the virus will appear here before long, and he advised residents to take precautions.

Those include draining any standing water where mosquitoes can breed, such as in flower pots, bird baths or rain gutters.

Try to avoid being outside in the early morning and evening -- times when mosquitoes are most active, he said. Wearing repellent can be helpful, also.

Every year at this time, Ball said he worries that the season will bring a lot of West Nile, and with it, sickness and death.

Since the disease arrived in California in 2002, 110 residents have died of it. They include seven people from Butte County. There have been fatalities in Glenn and Tehama counties as well, according to the state Department of Public Health.

Of people who get the disease, 80 percent experience no symptoms, 20 percent have mild symptoms, such as fever and headache, and one in 150 becomes seriously ill, a department fact sheet states.

According to a statewide website on West Nile, the disease is more prevalent at this point in the year than it was at this time last year. For instance, by June 22 last year, there had been 16 positive mosquito samples compared to 222 this year.

Numbers of human cases of West Nile have been declining in California and in the nation, Ball said, adding he didn't know why.

In the state, the highest number of human cases in a year was 880 in 2005. The lowest yearly number was 111 in 2010.

West Nile, which first appeared in this country in 1999, is common in Africa, West Asia and the Middle East.

"Birds play an important role in maintaining and spreading this virus," the department's fact sheet states.

"Mosquitoes acquire the virus from infected birds and then transmit the virus to people."

On the Internet: <http://westnile.ca.gov>

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