

New Camp Fire horror: Mosquitoes in droves

Pools, septic systems havens for the insect nuisances



Butte County Mosquito and Vector Control District employee Eric Gohre examines a mosquito trap he set near Pearson Road Thursday in Paradise. (Matt Bates — Enterprise-Record)

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CHICO — It's the time of year when the mosquito abatement office starts revving up with news about protection and prevention against the bugs.

But for the Butte County Mosquito and Vector Control District staff, it's a spring like no other. The mosquito control district is reeling from the Camp Fire, but in a way that many may not realize.

"The Camp Fire has thrown us unforeseen challenges. We are overwhelmed," said district manager Matt Ball.

Ball and his staff have been dealing with abandoned pools here and there throughout the county, but those numbers are rampant in Paradise.

“You’ll come up and there will be no house, but a pool in the back yard full of green water,” Ball said this week. No one is visiting the house site to deal with the pool, as one by one, the house debris is collected during clean-up.

Worse yet, the clean-up does not include pools, which are left as is, but fenced. The district is encouraging property owners to get mosquitofish for free for those pools. Switching on the pool recirculation system can help move the water and prevent egg laying, Ball said.

It’s not only those surviving pools that are causing problems, but the septic systems. Lids to most of the septic tanks have either been displaced or melted, opening up underground mansions to all the egg-laying mosquitoes that find their way in.

“This Camp Fire burn scar is taking resources and effort,” Ball said.

The special district is trying to add staff, but struggling with the cost of it, thanks again to the Camp Fire.

“We’ve lost revenue because of the disappearing property tax from Paradise. To go from a single-family home to a bare lot means a re-evaluation downward.”

Ball said he doesn’t yet know how depleted his budget is, hoping the state’s promise to backfill lost revenue will include his office.

“You know, this is about public health and safety.”

Butte County Mosquito and Vector Control District employee Eric Gohre shows a trap full of live mosquitoes he set near Mendon’s Nursery Thursday in Paradise. (Matt Bates — Enterprise-Record)

Every year, Mosquito and Vector Control deal with the flying enemy that brings in West Nile virus and other diseases. They struggle to identify and deal with standing water that is heaven to egg-laying mosquitoes.

The scope is amazing when the numbers are analyzed: More than 18,000 buildings destroyed by the Camp Fire, of which roughly 15,000 were either businesses or homes, but with some kind of septic system, he noted.

Regular spiel

Mosquito control has already been spraying, but hasn’t yet started fogging. It’s also been occupied by the storms from the generous rainy season that dumped and flooded more acreage than normal.

Beyond mosquitoes, it’s also working on tick control, but rather than a chemical reaction, it’s trying to educate people on how to avoid or how to deal with ticks.

Already in place are the district's sentinel chickens distributed to seven flocks throughout the district, which covers Butte County and Hamilton City but not areas served by the Durham and Oroville mosquito abatement districts. Blood from the chickens is tested regularly for viruses.

Mosquitoes are caught by traps Thursday in Paradise. (Matt Bates — Enterprise-Record)

District staff have begun checking traps, standing water, abandoned pools and the like for mosquito larvae. Spring hatch mosquitoes are the most likely to carry and transmit West Nile. Inspections and control — like spraying — is underway at storm drains, catch basins, retention ponds, detention ponds and the like.

This year, flood water catchment areas are another concern, and are being monitored and treated.

“Identifying mosquito sources early in the spring and eliminating the mosquitoes in their larval state is essential ...,” notes the district newsletter.

In the air

Aerial surveillance has started with helicopters and planes to spot unmaintained swimming pools, along with standing water on duck clubs and artificial wetlands.

When a candidate pool or pond is spotted, field staff on the ground check out the area.

Mosquitofish

Once again the district is giving away mosquitofish by appointment. The distribution points are the district office, 5117 Larkin Road, Oroville, 533-638, and at the Chico substation 444 Otterson Dr. 342-7350. Appointments are required.