

Butte County suffers two more human cases of West Nile

Number of chickens infected with West Nile leading state at 33



File photo shows dead and dying mosquitos in a trap at the Butte County Mosquito and Vector Control office in Oroville – Bill Husa — Mercury-Register file photo

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OROVILLE — Two more human cases of West Nile virus have been reported since Aug. 26, according to Butte County Health Spokesperson Lisa Almaguer, bringing the total to four.

Additionally, California had 89 infected sentinel chickens with West Nile virus as of Wednesday and Butte County accounts for 33 of them. This doubles the next highest county, Merced, which has 14 chickens infected.

“We haven’t seen anything that would indicate disease here with our chickens,” said Butte County poultry rancher Christine Hanpelman.

“We haven’t had any sick chickens or dead birds out here. I didn’t realize Butte County had such a problem with West Nile virus. It seems to me, if Butte County is historically high in reports of the virus given that we do have a lot of surface water in the county; That I wouldn’t be

surprised,” she said. “What would be interesting is to see the amount of surface water in Butte County compared to other counties in the state. We may have fewer mosquito eating animals here in Butte County too.”

Hanpelman said her chickens are on the rainfall irrigated land on the east side of the valley, where they don’t see many mosquitoes. Being far removed from any bodies of water, ponds and unneeded standing pools, she said those chickens may just be in a “lucky spot.”

One reason Hanpelman said other chickens in the county may be infected are the “hobby raised chickens” that people have in their backyard.

“These are basically your backyard chickens or hens that people just feed scraps to. Usually, there’s not much awareness or health issues addressed with these chickens,” Hanpelman said.

“Look, we live in a very West Nile active area,” said Butte County Mosquito Vector Control District Manager Matt Ball.

“That’s why our district always stresses the importance of awareness about this issue. Per capita, we are always in the top five counties among the state when it comes to human cases of West Nile virus. We also have many chicken coops throughout the county that we manage each year,” Ball said. “We feed and take care of these animals, along with testing them for the virus on a routine basis. The size of our sentinel coops are the size of some back yard chicken sheds, they’re pretty big at roughly 8-feet by 14-feet. We really do give them luxury living quarters here.”

In doing so, these large structures attract the mosquitoes to the chickens, Ball said. Since these chicken coops are larger and more open than other coops, mosquitoes are prone to stick around and feed off the chickens more regularly. Ball said this is also a good indication of letting public health official’s know when and where infected mosquitoes are.

The district’s chicken coops are located in Honcutt, Palermo, M&T Ranch, Hamilton City, Biggs, the Gray Lodge Wildlife Area and in south Chico.

The property owners who allow the district to operate on their land get to keep the eggs — and the chickens are then donated to the property owners who want them, Ball said. This year’s number of infected chickens remains on par with the average Butte County sees every year.

Maurice Pitesky, is a researcher medical professional for the Veterinary Medicine Extension at the UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine. Pitesky specializes in poultry health and food safety epidemiology — the study of diseases and large populations.

“The reason chickens are ‘sentinels’, are because they don’t really get sick,” Pitesky said. “Chickens are the canaries in the coal mine for the West Nile virus. We use them to determine if certain areas contain infected mosquitoes and if they’ve contracted the virus themselves. It’s also a good way to put chickens in strategic places and check to see if they are producing the

appropriate antibodies to the virus. From a preventative health perspective, they do serve a beneficial service.”

Chickens can not transmit the virus, they are only carries, Pitesky said.

The three Ds of West Nile prevention

Butte County Public Health Officials urge the public to follow the “three D’s” to prevent infection:

DEET: This chemical is a proven insect repellent. Other recommended repellents include picaradin, lemon eucalyptus oil and para-menthane-diol.

Dawn and dusk: Mosquitoes that transmit the West Nile Virus bite in the early morning and evening. Public health officials urge to wear proper clothing and repellent if outside during these times. Make sure that doors and windows have tight-fitting screens to keep mosquitoes out. Repair or replace screens with tears or holes.

Drain: Mosquitoes lay their eggs on standing water. Eliminate or drain all sources of standing water on your property, including flower pots, old car tires, rain gutters and pet bowls. Any standing pools of water can be reported to the Butte County Vector Control District at 342-7350 or 533-6038.