

Defense spending

Agency seeks more funding to combat insect-borne diseases

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As rising North State temperatures herald the beginning of bug season, the Butte County Mosquito and Vector Control District is preparing for all-out war against mosquitoes. More than a mere nuisance, the insects carry West Nile virus and other diseases that threaten humans, birds, pets and livestock, presenting a serious threat to public health and safety.

Like any war effort, battling disease vectors requires money, which is something MVCD Manager Matthew Ball said his agency could use more of, and he hopes county residents will agree.

On April 25, property owners throughout the county and in Hamilton City will be mailed a ballot to approve or disapprove Proposition 218, a “special benefit assessment” to bolster the agency’s funding.

The measure’s proposed rates for a single-family residence on 1 acre would be \$9.69 annually, and 8 cents for each additional acre. Properties with multiple dwellings, such as apartment complexes and mobile home parks, would be charged differently—\$3.78 per unit between five and 20 units and \$4.85 an acre, respectively—as would as would ag lands (8 cents per acre) and range lands (2 cents per acre). Ball said the rates were determined based on an assessed benefit for different types of property.

Funding for the MVCD topped out at \$3.1 million in 2008, and has decreased each subsequent year to the current level of \$2.5 million as the economy has taken a hit, Ball explained. Prop. 218 would generate an estimated \$700,000 in additional funding.

“The first thing we’d look to do is expand our public education and outreach program,” he said. “We’ve been open for 66 years and to this day still find people that don’t know who we are and what services they can take advantage of with a simple phone call.

“We’d also like to expand those programs to best educate the public on the dangers of mosquitoes, ticks and other insects of medical importance. The more we can educate the public, the better we can protect them and they can protect themselves.”

Butte County’s first official West Nile virus case was diagnosed in 2004; rates have been up and down since, with a marked rise in recent years.

“Last year was definitely one of our highest yet,” said Kiyomi Bird, a program manager and public health nurse with the Butte County Public Health Department’s Communicable Disease and Emergency Response Division. She noted that 2013 saw 24 diagnosed cases, compared with 10 in 2012 and one in 2011.

Ball explained one of the MVCD's primary defenses is its surveillance program. The district maintains about 40 traps around the county to monitor mosquito populations ("That way we can send our limited staff to hot spots," he said). Some of the trapped mosquitoes are tested for viruses, and Ball said some additional funding would be used for more traps and testing to better cover the agency's large service area of about 1,600 square miles.



Mosquitofish eat mosquito larvae.

He said surveillance is especially important as the county faces threats from mosquito populations both domestic and foreign, as two invasive species have recently been found in California. The Asian tiger mosquito established itself in Los Angeles and San Gabriel counties three years ago, and the yellow fever mosquito has been identified in Fresno, Madera and San Mateo counties.

"We've been fortunate that we haven't seen them migrate north yet," Ball said, "but it's very possible with interstate commerce and travel, and we need to

be able to know when they arrive."

Exotic species can carry a host of other diseases, including dengue and yellow fevers, malaria and the chikungunya virus. Ball noted dengue fever outbreaks already have occurred in Texas, Florida, New York and Hawaii.

Bird said her agency works closely with the vector-control district, and that the Public Health Department "relies a good deal on their surveillance."

"We work hand in hand with them to keep watch," Bird said. "We share information on the vicinity of infection so they can focus abatement measures there, and they let us know where they find infected mosquitoes so we can be on the lookout for sick people."

Ball noted other uses for increased funds would include expanding tick monitoring for Lyme disease and other ailments in high-use outdoor areas, such as Bidwell Park and around Lake Oroville; an expanded mosquitofish breeding program (the fish, which eat mosquito larvae, are provided to residents free of charge); and more pesticides, particularly to kill mosquitoes in the larvae stage.

Ball also said he hopes to increase capital to buy new equipment, citing spray equipment so outdated the company that sold them—and replacement parts—no longer exists, and the fact the MVCD's fleet includes a 1989 Toyota pickup.

"Our staff doesn't have a problem with driving around in old trucks," Ball said, "but with the public funds already given to me to oversee and spend wisely, I hate paying \$500 to \$3,000 a year to maintain vehicles that aren't really worth it, just because we can't afford to replace them."

Chico Vice Mayor Mark Sorensen has raised questions about imposing new fees on county property owners, but said he won't oppose the hikes if he's convinced they're dedicated to serious public health risks.

“I think it’s worth some good, careful scrutiny when a public agency has an operating budget that high and is looking for 700,000 more dollars,” Sorensen said. “I want to make sure that money is justified before we put our hands back into the pockets of the men, women and children of Butte County.

“The money they already receive is funded by a percentage of property taxes, and it’s worth considering that, as property values rise, it may take care of any deficit they’re experiencing,” he added. “It’s our job to pay close attention to where the money is going, because surely that department’s biggest expenditure is salaries and benefits.”

Ball said his agency already has cut to the core, and is not seeking employee gain. In addition to trimming travel and other operational costs, permanent MVCD staff has been reduced from 18 to 15 in the last few years, with seasonal staff shrinking from 14 to 10. Nobody in the department has received a raise in three years, he explained, and a recently signed contract with the county means there will not be raises this year, either.

“We’ve made cuts behind the scenes so that the public wouldn’t feel an effect on services, except perhaps when it comes to manpower in the field,” he said. “The fewer troops you have on the ground, the fewer enemies you are going to kill, in terms of mosquitoes.”