

## Living with West Nile

By [Melissa Daugherty](#)  
[melissad@newsreview.com](mailto:melissad@newsreview.com)

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When the West Nile virus struck Marilyn Gamette about three years ago, the raging fever, rash and extreme nausea she experienced was first misdiagnosed as a bladder infection, then pneumonia. “It took approximately three doctors to finally determine maybe [West Nile virus] is what I had,” she said.

Gamette, a Chicoan, was the first person in Butte County with a confirmed case of the mosquito-borne disease. She was diagnosed when she was 64 years old, during a time when health officials were warning the public that senior citizens and those with weakened immune systems were most at risk.

Still, Gamette was an unlikely candidate in many ways. A long-time wildlife rehabilitator who, until retiring last year, spent 15 years working for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, she was well aware of the virus’ presence in the state and took precautions to protect herself. Plus, she was extremely active and healthy.

In addition to a 105-degree fever, her symptoms included a burning sensation from the base of her skull all the way to her feet, and a loss of muscle control. Within a month, she had dropped nearly 20 pounds.

These days, Gamette considers herself about “99.5 percent” recovered. She has lost some of her hearing and hasn’t fully regained her balance—not unlike many other survivors with lingering effects. She notes the case of a 26-year-old former world-class runner she corresponds with who is now barely able to walk.

She retold the story of her struggle with West Nile Monday evening (June 11) during the *I-5 Live!* segment on KCHO 91.7 FM. Gamette has become something of a West Nile spokeswoman, advocating for education about the disease as well as adequate funding for the agencies battling it.

“I think it’s important to be aware and to support local districts,” she said, noting the virus is not going away.

Gamette was joined on the program by Chico Councilman Scott Gruendl, who was speaking as the director of Glenn County’s Health Services.

For the past year, Gruendl has been working with the county Board of Supervisors, trying to secure a stable source of funding to pay for surveillance and abatement. Two special vector control districts within the county provide those services to Willows and another community. But most residents—about 15,500 people—live outside of the boundaries.

Glenn County has had the highest incidence of West Nile virus per capita in California for the past two years. In 2004, the state allotted \$125,000 in emergency funding for abatement measures. Last year, \$40,000 was kicked down. But this year, the county is on its own, leaving Gruendl to dip into Health Services’ emergency reserves to the tune of about \$70,000, he confirmed during a phone interview Tuesday afternoon.

This can’t go on, so the department is asking property owners to approve a special assessment. The cost is dependent on the size of the property, but the average amount for a single-family home is \$21. The measure requires a simple majority vote, although the ballots are weighted, giving big landowners a greater say. The mail-in ballots are due July 17. If approved, the tax would generate about \$170,000 a year.

Gruendl noted that the operation would be housed within Health Services, bringing together those who treat the infected with those working to locate and eradicate the insects. The arrangement would also allow the county to react at the onset of a major pandemic such as the bird flu.

Glenn County has had no reports of West Nile virus this year, but it's still early. The virus hasn't shown up on the radar of Butte County, either, said Dan Moench, assistant manager of the Mosquito and Vector Control District.

Butte County has seen a steady increase in cases since West Nile was first detected here in 2004, from seven that year to 25 in 2005 and 31 last year, two of them fatal.

Moench said district workers are already treating some area rice fields to kill mosquito larvae, but the main focus is on breeding grounds located within the cities. Recent rains, followed by warm temperatures, have provided the perfect environment for breeding, he said, noting that a species known to carry West Nile has already been found in traps in the heart of Chico.

Mosquitoes can lay eggs in very small amounts of water that collect in just about anything, such as plastic containers or clogged rain gutters.

"There are so many tiny sources like that," Moench said, "I could go on and on."

During the radio program, Gamette warned residents to protect themselves by using insect repellents and eliminating even the smallest amounts of standing water around their homes. She said mosquito and vector control districts should be mandatory and adequately funded, and echoed Gruendl's concerns about other illnesses.

"With global travel as it is," she said, "who knows what's coming down the pike?"