

Number of human cases of West Nile virus in Butte County hits 30

A substantial increase in human West Nile virus cases in Butte County has been reported, and the Mosquito and Vector Control District is recommending people take steps to avoid being bitten by the mosquitoes that spread the disease.

By [Ryan Olson](#), Chico Enterprise-Record

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The number of human cases of West Nile virus in Butte County has hit 30, the highest number in the state.

Glenn County has the second highest number at six, according to the state public health department.

Butte County's number also exceeds the 24 cases it saw through 2014, according to [information from the state](#).

Lisa Almaguer, communications manager with the [Butte County Public Health Department](#), said cases were coming in hourly and they were only halfway through the mosquito season.

"We are very troubled by the amount of cases that is coming through," Almaguer said.

She said there were 25 confirmed cases of people with West Nile showing symptoms, which can range from flu-like symptoms to more serious neurological conditions. An additional five people have tested positive for the illness, but haven't shown any symptoms.

Typically, 80 percent of people infected don't show symptoms. Others may develop flu-like symptoms and about 1 percent of those infected develop a more severe neurological illness, such as encephalitis or meningitis.

Currently people in about half of the current cases with symptoms in Butte County have displayed neuro-invasive symptoms and some have been hospitalized.

People of all ages infected with West Nile may develop symptoms of neurological illness, according to Almaguer said.

The virus can lead to death. There have been seven fatal cases in Butte County since the disease arrived in 2004, although none yet this year.

The [Butte County Mosquito and Vector Control District](#) reported the cases are spread throughout the county, although they are more frequent where urban areas meet agricultural lands.

Doug Weseman, the district's assistant manager, said officials believe the drought is playing a significant role with the human cases. The drought can extend the mosquito season and concentrate mosquitoes and birds around agricultural lands that are still being watered.

Mosquitoes can transmit the virus between animals and humans through bites.

The district is also reporting a record number of 88 mosquito groups, or pools, has tested positive for the virus. There have been 21 dead birds that have tested positive as well as 34 sentinel chickens, although the chickens don't die of the disease.

Weseman said human cases are primarily west of the foothills. The highest number of cases is in the Chico area, but there have been patients in areas like Dayton and Honcut.

"Where you have more humans, you're going to have more cases," he said.

Almaguer said about half of the cases involve Chico residents. She said there was often a source of standing water nearby.

Almaguer said we may never know for certain if the drought has led to the increased number of cases

Butte County was the first in the state to report human cases of West Nile this year in mid July. Those first two cases were discovered during testing following routine blood donations and the unrelated patients didn't show symptoms, according to a county public health press release.

Almaguer said most of the non-symptomatic cases involved blood draws. She said donated blood that has tested positive for the disease is discarded and doesn't enter the blood supply.

Through Aug. 5, there had been only three human cases of the disease in the county. Weseman said that number has been steadily increasing each week.

The first human death in 2015 was reported July 20 in Nevada County, according to the California Department of Public Health.

The state reports 36 human cases have been reported in 10 counties as of Saturday, including Butte, Glenn, Kern, Los Angeles, Nevada, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, Santa Clara and Tulare. The state information indicated Butte had 16 cases, but it usually lags behind locally provided numbers. A state health official noted its tally is updated every Friday.

Regarding the difference in the number of cases in Butte County, Weseman said the local district may receive updated information sooner than the state. However, he praised county public health for reporting the numbers quickly. There were surrounding cases that have multiple cases, but they haven't yet been verified and reported.

Weseman said the district has ramped up its mosquito control efforts, including treating a record number of agricultural lands. The district has flown over 50,000 acres so far this year, compared with 34,000 acres last year.

The district has also increased the number of field technicians and has fogging crews out three nights a week. The district's pilot is also flying twice a week to try to create buffers between urban areas and ag lands.

While officials are doing all they can to keep mosquito numbers down, Weseman said it's important for residents to avoid being bitten.

Mosquitoes are most active at dawn and dusk. If residents have to be outside at those times, Weseman recommended wearing a proven insect repellent like DEET or wearing long-sleeved shirts or pants to minimize getting bitten.

"West Nile virus is out there. It's not a joke," he said. "It's not some media hype. It's real, especially in our county."

Almaguer suggested that people visualize what they might be doing when mosquitoes are most active. Doing so may encourage people to remember to wear bug spray or suitable clothing.

Despite the drought, there can still be sources of standing water where the insects lay their eggs. Weseman said some people may be storing water for plants, but it's important to make sure that water is clean.

Reach reporter Ryan Olson at [facebook.com/NorCalJustice](https://www.facebook.com/NorCalJustice) and 896-7763.