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County receives money for West Nile Virus surveillance

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As warmer weather approaches, the Greene County Conservation District will begin gearing up its mosquito monitoring and control program in an effort to combat the threat of the West Nile virus.

This year, the county will receive \$40,531 from the state Department of Environmental Protection for its West Nile virus program, according to a news release announcing 2008 allocations issued Monday.

The money primarily is used to trap mosquitos to test for the presence of the disease and to eradicate mosquito larva through the application of larvicidal materials.

Greene County has not had a positive test for West Nile virus since 2004. The presence of the disease also has declined statewide.

"We believe there is a correlation between the program's aggressive efforts to eliminate mosquito breeding habitat and the reduction in the occurrence of West Nile virus in mosquito pools and the avian population," DEP spokeswoman Helen Humphries said.

The disease, however, has not disappeared. "We must remain vigilant," she said.

West Nile virus is a mosquito-borne disease that can cause encephalitis. Mosquitoes acquire the virus from birds and pass it on to other birds, animals and people.

Most people bitten by an infected mosquito never develop symptoms and only one in 150 with symptoms develop the more serious West Nile encephalitis, DEP said.

The state and counties have been operating surveillance programs since 2000. Mosquitos, dead birds and other animals are tested for the disease.

The presence of the disease seemed to have peaked statewide in 2003 when it was detected in all 67 counties. In 2003, there were 237 reported human cases of the West Nile virus statewide, with nine fatalities. Last year, nine state residents contracted the virus, but none died.

Greene County has not had a reported fatality from the disease. In 2004, a Greene County man came down with the virus, however, it was determined he had contracted it during a trip to Colorado.

The last presence of the disease in Greene County was in 2004 when it was found in a dead bird submitted for testing. In 2003, three dead birds tested positive for the disease and in 2002, six dead birds and one mosquito sample tested positive for the virus.

Information on DEP's Web site indicates the number of mosquito samples collected in the county has increased since 2004 when the last positive result was found. Sixty-six mosquito samples were collected in 2004; 138 samples were collected in 2005 and 380 samples in 2006. Information for 2007 was not available.

The surveillance program in Greene County is operated by the conservation district with Terri Davin as the coordinator.

In addition to trapping mosquitos, the county coordinator applies larvicide to stagnant water pools where mosquitos breed. For killing larvae, the coordinators primarily use the naturally-occurring bacteria Bti and Bsph. These bacteria attack the digestive system of the mosquito larvae, and have no effect on people, animals or plants.

Products used to kill adult mosquitoes also are selected based on their environmental sensitivity, DEP said.

Residents also are urged to eradicate mosquito breeding grounds around their homes by disposing of containers that hold stagnant water, cleaning roof gutters and chlorinating unused pools.

People also should take precautions to avoid getting bitten by mosquitos by wearing long sleeves and pants when outdoors, particularly when mosquitoes are most active at dawn and dusk.

DEP also suggests people use insect repellents containing DEET, picaridin or oil of lemon eucalyptus.

For more information about West Nile surveillance and control program, contact the local coordinator at 724-852-5278 or visit the state's West Nile Web page at www.westnile.state.pa.us.

