

May 20 2010 Taking the sting from mosquitoes

SOMERS — Times may be tough, but Westchester and Putnam residents can relax this summer — defense spending in the war against mosquitoes won't be among the cuts.

Rockland folks may not be so lucky, after county health officials there acknowledged this month that they would suspend the mosquito-control program due to budget constraints.

In Westchester, the program began on time, May 1 — and the county will spend about a quarter of a million dollars, as it did last year, to stunt the growth of developing mosquitoes so they can't fly or suck blood out of their prey.

The crews of larvicide tossers go from storm drain to storm drain, dropping a gray briquette of methoprene into the grate and spray-painting an orange dot to let others know that the location's been treated.

"For the mosquitoes that we're targeting, this is the best method, because this is their favorite habitat," said Gene Argentina, a Westchester County Department of Health restaurant inspector who doubles as a mosquito controller in May and June.

"We used to have handouts to explain what we were doing. Now people hardly ever ask. I think they're just used to us now."



The county will treat about 55,000 sites, leaving 15,000 or so untreated because there's no area for water to collect. Until the end of June, a dozen or so teams will crisscross the county with maps, marking each location, starting in the north and moving south as mosquito season hits harder with each warmer day.

Westchester health officials said the larvicide program has shown good results. The department conducted a study of pairs of catch basins around Westchester in 2002, with one treated and the other left untreated.

"The results were overwhelming — 80 percent of the untreated catch basins grew so many mosquitoes that we cut the study short and treated them to protect the surrounding neighborhoods," said Caren Halbfinger, the Health Department's

spokeswoman. "A similar study, with similar results, was conducted in Philadelphia."

The work is more than protection against a backyard barbecue annoyance. West Nile virus is transmitted by mosquitoes to humans, birds, horses and other mammals, and about a decade ago it showed up as a burgeoning health problem. In New York since 2000, 32 people have died

from the virus. "Southern communities in our county are more prone, and we find more issues of West Nile virus in those," said John Ruggiero, who runs the larvicide program for the Westchester Health Department. "It appears to be a couple degrees warmer in the southern areas, and that's all it takes."

A Journal News computer analysis of the past 10 years of West Nile virus data from the state Health Department shows 329 humans contracted the disease, so about one case in 10 proved fatal, usually for those in at-risk populations like the aged or chronically ill.

The Lower Hudson Valley has fared well in that time, with only 17 cases of West Nile, though four people in Westchester died. The first was in 2003, the last in 2008. No one has died from the virus in Putnam or Rockland.

After an initial explosion of cases of dead birds showing evidence of the virus, the number has dwindled to the point that state health officials no longer compile bird data.

As the virus has appeared in other states and regions, and the pool of resources hasn't grown at a commensurate rate, fewer federal dollars are coming to New York. That means less that Albany can send to the counties, so local health officials have to weigh where they can get the best prevention value.

Putnam County officials expect no change in strategy from previous years, preparing soon to stop the pesky skeeters from breeding in bunches.

"We plan to larvicide, but it all depends on the weather," said Rick Carano, a public-health supervisor for the county. "If it's going to storm, it makes no sense." Putnam uses BTI, short for *Bacillus thuringiensis* var. *israelensis*, a microbial larvicide that lasts about 30 days before it breaks down.

The state Department of Environmental Conservation regulates larviciding through permits. But most experts say they think larviciding has the least effect on other species and on the ecosystem where it's deployed.

This year, for the first time in nearly a decade, the Rockland Department of Health will not put larvicide in the county's 35,000 catch basins.

Municipalities nationwide are cutting back on mosquito-control measures in an effort to save money, and Rockland's health officials called the decision "difficult."

Whatever humans do, Mother Nature has a role — rain and temperature can be critical factors in mosquito population strength and defense plans. Despite heavy rains locally during the spring, experts say it's too early to know whether we're in for a bumper crop of the flying bloodsuckers.

State health officials have seen a decrease in West Nile across New York. The worst year in the past 10 was 2002, when the number of dead birds that had been infected topped out at 1,410, while 83 human cases were found.

The next year was the worst for fatalities, with 10. That two-year period brought nearly half of all the deaths statewide.

State health experts say increased awareness about breeding areas — something as simple as a backyard bucket or unattended coffee cup with standing water — have helped municipal efforts, as well as individuals practicing prevention with repellants and more clothing at dawn and dusk, prime biting times.

"The counties have done a good job in getting the word out about the best ways to cut down on breeding areas," said Jeffrey Hammond, a state Health Department spokesman. "That's paid a lot of dividends from our perspective."

Staff writer Jane Lerner contributed to this report.

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What you can do

Though mosquito experts say it's too early to predict whether the summer will produce a big crop of the flying, biting pests, there are basic things the public can do to cut down on areas where the bugs breed:

- Mosquitoes can develop in water left standing for more than four days. To reduce the mosquito population around homes and property, reduce or eliminate standing water and debris.
- Dispose of cans, plastic containers, ceramic pots and similar containers.
- Call your landfill or public works department to learn how to dispose of used tires.
- Drill holes in the bottom of recycling containers kept outdoors.
- Ensure roof gutters drain properly. Clean clogged gutters in the spring and fall.
- Turn over plastic wading pools and wheelbarrows when not in use.
- Change the water in birdbaths twice a week.
- Clean vegetation and debris from the edges of ponds.
- Clean and chlorinate pools, outdoor saunas and hot tubs.
- Drain collected water from pool covers.
- Use landscaping to eliminate areas where pools of