

Panhandle Health District

8500 N. Atlas Road
Hayden, Idaho 83835
www2.state.id.us/phd1

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Date: June 12, 2006

Contact:
David Hylsky
Staff Epidemiologist
(208) 415-5100 or
Susan Cuff
Public Information Officer
(208) 415-5108

Bonnors Ferry residents advised to take extra precautions against mosquitoes

West Nile virus not yet found in North Idaho, but flooding calls for vigilance

BONNERS FERRY – High water on the Kootenai River could result in standing water in the Bonners Ferry area for up to several weeks and residents need to take extra precautions against mosquito bites.

Mosquitoes lay their eggs in standing water and may be carriers of West Nile virus, a potentially serious illness.

Panhandle Health District experts say that using an EPA-approved insect repellent and covering up exposed skin are the two top strategies to avoiding being bitten by mosquitoes.

“We know that standing water is going to be a problem in the Boundary County area for the foreseeable future,” said Dave Hylsky, PHD staff epidemiologist. “Therefore, residents there need to take the steps they can to protect themselves, using insect repellent and wearing long-sleeved shirts and long pants when outside.”

Human cases of West Nile virus were discovered in 10 Idaho counties last year, infecting 13 people. Infected horses, birds or mosquitoes were discovered in 15 counties, primarily in southeastern Idaho. There were no reported cases in North Idaho of West Nile virus, in people,

animals or insects, last year. Two southern Idaho counties have reported the presence of West Nile virus-positive mosquito pools earlier this year.

West Nile virus is spread through the bite of an infected mosquito; it is not spread from person-to-person or from infected animals to people. The virus was first discovered in the United States in New York in 1999 and has spread steadily across the country. Last year, West Nile infection was detected in 3,000 people nationwide, resulting in 119 deaths.

About 80 percent of people who are bitten by an infected mosquito will not become sick, but others may experience a mild flu-like illness that can include headaches, body aches and a mild fever. Occasionally, the virus can lead to serious illness that requires hospitalization, especially in people over the age of 50.

Take avoid being bitten by mosquitoes:

- Reduce standing water on your property that provides mosquito breeding habitat, such as bird baths and decorative ponds;
- Cover up exposed skin when outdoors;
- Apply insect repellent approved by the EPA to exposed skin and clothing. Follow instructions on the product label, especially for children;
- Insect-proof your home by repairing or replacing screens;
- Avoid mosquitoes when they are most active at dawn and dusk;
- Report dead birds to your local Fish and Game office.

West Nile virus does not affect most animals, but can cause severe illness in horses and certain species of birds. Although there is no vaccine available for people, there is a vaccine for horses. Since the introduction of equine vaccines, the number of horses reported with West Nile infections has decreased dramatically, from 15,000 horses in 2002 to 1,253 last year.

Almost one-third of all horses infected with West Nile will die from the infection if they have not been vaccinated. People can protect their animals by contacting their veterinarian and arranging for a vaccination or booster shot for the 2006 mosquito season.

The most common sign of West Nile Virus in horses is weakness, usually in the hindquarters. Weakness may be indicated by a widened stance, stumbling, leaning to one side and toe dragging. In extreme cases, paralysis may follow. Fever is sometimes evident, as are depression and fearfulness. Lip smacking, chewing movements and fine muscle tremors may be noticed. Horse owners who suspect West Nile viral infection of their animal should contact their veterinarian immediately.

Like horses, certain birds also are adversely affected by West Nile virus. The Idaho Department of Fish and Game will test and document dead birds this season. Magpies, crows, raptors, ravens and jays are particularly susceptible to West Nile infection.

People who find dead birds should call their local Fish and Game office. Fish and Game will record all dead birds and test magpies, crows, raptors, ravens and jays that are appropriate for

testing. Generally, birds that have been dead for less than 48-hours are the best specimens for testing.

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Media contact information on West Nile virus:

- For people and prevention strategies, Dave Hylsky, Panhandle Health District, 415-5100.
- For equine or agricultural questions, Department of Agriculture, Coeur d'Alene office, 762-9586
- For information about wild birds or dead bird reporting, Department of Fish and Game, Panhandle regional office, 769-1414.