

Does this Protect Public Health or Is It a Grand Hoax?

Jack Milton
Jim Northup

What would you conclude if a public agency continuously supplied specious arguments that certain actions it was taking were effective? Would you conclude that the actions are not warranted? Might you worry that the agency is indifferent to the people? Might you worry that the agency has lost sight of its purpose or has ulterior motives?

You be the judge about the Sacramento-Yolo Mosquito Vector Control District (SYMVCD).

When asked for reassurances about the efficacy of aerial spraying in preventing West Nile disease, local officials offer the following three items as evidence of its effectiveness:

- A study in Fort Collins, Colorado, by Roger Nasci, past president of the American Mosquito Control Association and now employed by the CDC, which has been roundly criticized by scholars at the University of Colorado, who say that few conclusions can be drawn from it.

A primary criticism is that mosquito counts were dropping naturally at that point and the conclusion cannot be drawn that the spray was responsible. To top it off, nearby Boulder did not spray and had fewer West Nile cases.

- A “Louisiana paper,” which was, in fact, not even a study at all, but was essentially a report of how a district spent its money. This has no bearing.
- A Department of Health Services “report” of last summer’s aerial dousing of Sacramento, which has serious deficiencies. A glaring one is that the numbers literally don’t add up. And while the final case counts of zero are colorfully highlighted, at best the report shows the spraying could have reduced the number of West Nile infections by only a handful of cases. Even more importantly, the numbers would have gone down to zero without spraying.

“A great deal is being done to reduce risk due to West Nile virus, *but we have no idea about the efficacy of such measures,*” asserts Andrew Spielman, Professor of Tropical Public Health, Department of Immunology and Infectious Diseases, Harvard University (emphasis ours). “Infections like this come and go . . . People become most stimulated to do spraying when it’s at the peak of the epidemic curve. At that point, anything that you do will work, including doing nothing. You’re at the peak, and it’s going to go down anyway.”

Nonetheless, Yolo County public-health officer Bette Hinton has jumped on the spray bandwagon.

Wallace LeStourgeon, a professor of molecular biology at Vanderbilt University, who teaches an advanced course in environmental toxins, says that “*the evidence simply does not exist*” that adulticiding slows the transmission of the virus to humans.

A number of locales around the country have decided not to spray, and many have done as well as or better than surrounding locales that have sprayed, which certainly is evidence as to lack of spraying effectiveness. Fort Worth and Washington, DC, officials, for example, clearly considered human-health risk, and this was a critical factor in their decisions not to spray, along with the glaring lack of evidence to support the use of adulticide spraying.

On Tuesday, after gathering more than 1000 letters of support from citizens who are concerned that spraying isn't the best protection (dubious protection, which also comes with the price tag of pesticide exposure), we emailed the district manager and asked him to respect that a significant number of residents were being forced to participate in the indiscriminate urban adulticide spraying program.

We urge instead that larvicing be massively stepped up, along with public education, aggressive water management, and targeted spraying in areas where mosquitoes are found to be carrying the virus.

The district manager said that he agreed with Dr. Spielman but that we are not at the peak, based on experience of the last two summers, and he did not know where we got our data. However, the data from the Department of Health Services indicate that Sacramento's peak expression of symptomatic disease was August 1 last summer. The peak transmission was thus somewhere between July 19 and July 29. In Yolo the symptomatic peak last summer was between August 6 and August 13. The peak transmission was thus somewhere between July 31 and August 10. We pointed out that he had tacitly admitted that there was no reason to spray, and we asked him once again not to spray Davis.

The district manager had indicated that traps would be checked over the weekend, allowing our district to evaluate the situation and decide whether to spray in the week of August 7. The traps showed *zero* infected mosquitoes for Davis. Local mosquito counts had also dropped dramatically – 92% since the week of July 16 – yet Davis was sprayed anyway.

At this point the district manager is quoted as saying that the spray decision was a difficult one. On what basis was it difficult? This decision defies reason. It has been evident that in the past district officials have systematically ignored the science, and now they seem also to be disregarding the facts and numbers.

This is the background of the decisions to add poisons to the already badly polluted Valley air. And it leads us back to questioning: Do local officials have the competence to manage this process? If so, what's in it for them when politics trumps science and the facts?

Draw your own conclusions, but ours are that SYMVCD and public-health officials have engaged in irresponsible violations of the public trust and are treating a number of citizens with contempt. We agree with a recommendation in the Sacramento Bee last August to establish “citizens charter commissions” to review local special districts and recommend reforms and consolidations.” We also believe that the public should insist that elected officials go to bat for citizens who do not want to be exposed to harmful and ineffective toxic chemicals against their

will rather than passing the buck, as we've seen throughout this debacle.

This issue has many aspects, so we refer the interested reader to our web page, www.stopwestnilesprayingnow.org, for references to the above and explanations of additional concerns.