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Residents debate mosquitoes, pesticide

Aggressive spraying brings out crowd in Paonia area

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Delta - Fogging trucks sit idle in the Paonia/Hotchkiss Mosquito Control District garage. The first mosquitoes are more than a month from hatching. But the buzz already is growing loud in the North Fork Valley.

This agricultural-rich area posted the highest per-capita numbers in the state for mosquito-borne West Nile virus last year in spite of aggressive and controversial spraying of pesticides since 1985.

To some residents and officials, that means it's time to do things differently.

More than 70 people, including at least one victim of West Nile virus, crammed a Delta County Courthouse meeting room last week to lobby for a better way of fighting the bite.

"This is a health problem. We need professional help," said retired rancher Rosemary Bilchak. "We are in a position where we are poisoned on a weekly basis."

Bilchak and others opposed to the seasonal fogging of Paonia and Hotchkiss with the toxic pesticide malathion point to the numbers: The odds of contracting West Nile virus are one in 113 for Hotchkiss and Paonia residents. That compares with one in 3,417 for Mesa County, one in 6,800 for Larimer County and one in 3,430 for Weld County.

They said they believe the Monday-night foggings are contributing to that rate by creating resistant mosquitoes and weakened human immune systems.

State and county health officials don't subscribe to that theory: They point to unusually wet weather last summer. But they don't sanction the rite of summer fogging.

"I would really like to see an integrated countywide program," said Ken Nordstrom, director of environmental health for the Delta County Health Department. "But getting to that place will be very challenging politically."

That was illustrated at the Mosquito Forum. It lasted nearly three hours, and questions still were being shouted as the meeting stopped.

Delta County Commissioners Jan McCracken and Olen Lund sat silent in the back row even when attendees begged them to take a stand. Three mosquito control board members in the front row also were silent. A deputy was posted in a hallway - a reminder that this issue has led to violence. The mosquito control building was damaged by a bomb in 2003.

Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment epidemiologist John Pape said he would prefer Delta County do less spraying. He suggested an integrated mosquito management program that would focus on changing human behaviors to avoid mosquitoes, eliminating standing water and other mosquito breeding grounds and using larvicide to kill insects before they hatch. Spraying pesticides to kill adult mosquitoes would be a last resort.

But mosquito district director Bill Kolb said after the meeting that the fogging will continue.

"The majority wish for that to be done," he said.

The district won't use malathion this summer and is working with the Colorado Department of Agriculture to come up with alternative chemicals. Kolb said the district will continue to use larvicides.

Michael Soule, a Hotchkiss biologist who survived West Nile virus, said the consequences will go beyond health issues and political stalemates.

"We have a serious problem," he said. "And it is going to become a serious economic crisis. People are going to stop coming here."

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