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W. NILE TEAM TUMULT AS TOP STAFF BUGS OUT

By HEIDI SINGER

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June 16, 2003 -- The city's West Nile virus program is in turmoil, with key personnel departing - and important steps to prevent an outbreak being done improperly or not all,

officials told The Post.

That could mean more spraying this summer because efforts to identify and kill mosquito larvae have fallen behind schedule. At the same time, anti-spraying officials have quit, current and former workers said.

Spraying is used to prevent an outbreak of the disease when other methods fall short, but it has proven highly controversial, sparking protests and lawsuits over its possible health effects.

Departed officials believe Health Commissioner Thomas Frieden was unhappy with their cautious approach to spraying.

Frieden denied it, and said: "Some of the times we sprayed, mosquitoes came back quickly . . . My point is not that we should spray more or less but that it should be done right."

Dr. Waheed Bajwa, the entomologist now running the mosquito-control program, has no past experience controlling mosquitoes or any other disease-spreading insect, according to his résumé.

"Because the larviciding is not being done," said one worker, "there's going to be a lot more mosquitoes, and then they'll just spray a lot to cover their asses."

Another important job, trapping mosquitoes to monitor early signs of an outbreak and pinpoint problem areas, is barely under way, with only two field technicians and one student on board - in contrast to 16 this time last year, current and former officials said. They say mosquito trapping is down 85 percent from last June.

A Post request to interview Bajwa was declined.

Ultimately, though, all the workers and officials contacted by The Post blamed the turmoil on Assistant Commissioner James Gibson, who has increasingly been taking charge of the program.

Current staff said morale under Gibson is poisonous, and departed officials said he pushes spraying aggressively.

Gibson declined to comment, but Frieden denied the program is falling apart, blaming disgruntled ex-employees for spreading false information.

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Frieden said all work is going according to schedule, although the wet spring has made it difficult to kill the larvae since rain flushes away the chemicals.

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The city had 29 cases of West Nile last summer, the most since four years ago, when the virus first surfaced. With the large number of cases came tensions within the program over how much to spray, and key members eventually departed.

Daniel Markowski, who ran the mosquito-control program and believed in spraying as little as possible, quit in February. He was followed last week by Varuni Kulasekera, the mosquito-hunter who has tramped through city swamps and parkland uncovering the pests.

"The fact that they lost Dan bothers me because he was a real resource. That says there's a problem," said Wayne Crans, who supervises New Jersey's mosquito-control program. "Dan and Varuni picked the program up by the bootstraps and gave it some credibility."

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