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## Aerial Spray Questioned

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Suffolk County began spraying pesticides from a helicopter last week to control mosquitoes, even though it has not had a confirmed human case of the West Nile virus so far this year.



Nassau County, which has two confirmed human cases, has not, prompting some Long Island environmentalists to question why Suffolk chose to respond with aerial spraying when it could have attacked a limited West Nile threat by applying pesticides in targeted areas from the ground.

"It's a blanket exposure to the public and to the environment to the harmful effects of pesticides," said Adrienne Esposito, associate executive director of the Citizens Campaign for the Environment in Farmingdale. "They're only supposed to use that [aerial spraying] when the health risk of West Nile virus outweighs the health risk of pesticides."

Dr. Patricia Dillon, director of epidemiology and disease control for the Suffolk County health department, said the decision was based on a number of factors, from an increase in the number of mosquitoes, which bite both birds and humans, to a jump in the number of dead bird sightings.

For example, Dillon said Friday, calls about dead birds in the Mastic and Shirley area, one of the regions targeted for aerial spraying, since Aug. 11 make up 50 percent to 60 percent of all dead-bird notices in the area this year. Other regions that were subject to aerial spraying of resmethrin are Southold and Blydenburgh in Smithtown county park areas.

"We had two fatalities, eight cases last year. We don't want to ever see that again," Dillon said. "I consider last year to be a failure. ... We are concerned for the health of the population. We don't want to wait until a human has the disease. It's too late by then."

Debra O'Kane, executive director of the North Fork Environmental Council in Southold, suggested that county officials were using West Nile as an excuse to spray, when in fact their true purpose was to placate residents bothered by the high counts of regular mosquitoes this year.

"There needs to be a distinction between nuisance spraying and what is classified as disease control," she said.

Some even accused the county of creating undue concern about West Nile so it can control mosquitoes. "They're playing on the risk, and overstating the risk of the West Nile virus," said Peconic Baykeeper Kevin McAllister, who earlier this year sued to try to block Suffolk County's mosquito control efforts.

Very few communities decide to conduct aerial spraying, and Suffolk County so far is the only county in New York to do so this year, said Kristine Smith, a spokeswoman for the state Department of Health. She said it is up to local governments to decide whether to spray. It is unlikely that the pesticide Suffolk is using in its aerial spraying at very low concentrations will have "adverse health effects for most people," according to the department's Web site.

"Dead-crow density," a possible early warning of the West Nile virus, was "moderate" in Suffolk and Nassau counties for the week ended Aug. 23, the Web site said. Occasional human cases have occurred within a few weeks after counties reported moderate dead-crow densities, according to the state.

Nassau officials said they don't feel the need for aerial spraying to kill adult mosquitoes, although the state Health Department last week confirmed the first two human cases of West Nile on Long Island - a 60-year-old Hicksville man who is recovering at home after an extended hospital stay and a 57-year-old Bethpage woman who has fully recovered.

So far this year, there has been no spraying for adult mosquitoes in Nassau, either with ground trucks or by helicopter, said Dr. Abby Greenberg, director of disease control for the county health department. The county conducts routine aerial spraying to kill mosquito larvae in the salt marshes along the southern shore, she said.

Greenberg said that only 10 pools of mosquitoes out of 400 have so far tested positive, and that the mosquitoes were the kind that did not bite humans. It is also hard to determine, Greenberg added, where the two county residents were infected with the disease.

Greenberg said the county conducts aerial spraying only when large numbers of mosquitoes test positive in an area unreachable by ground spraying, such as in swamps.

"Aerial spraying is to be used only when ground spraying is not effective," she said.

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