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New Year, Same Message for West Nile Virus Prevention

June 3, 2009 (Yakima, WA) — The Yakima Health District (YHD) has been notified that mosquitoes testing positive for West Nile virus (WNV) have again been identified in Yakima County. Mosquitoes in the sample that tested positive were trapped by the Benton County Mosquito Control District near Grandview - right along the border with Benton County. This is the first environmental positive for the state of Washington this year. Samples from this same area were also the first to test positive for WNV in Washington during July of 2008.

“This is the fifth consecutive year that WNV has been identified in Yakima County. It also appears that detection is happening earlier with each passing mosquito season,” states Laura Charters, Environmental Health Specialist with the Yakima Health District. “The prevention message, however, remains the same – to avoid West Nile virus illness you must eliminate mosquito breeding grounds and prevent mosquito bites.”

Reducing mosquito populations should be a community-wide effort. Since mosquitoes need standing water to breed, residents are encouraged to get rid of mosquito breeding grounds by emptying things that collect water around homes and businesses. This includes flower pots, trash cans, buckets, etc. If possible, flip empty containers over to avoid collection of water or properly dispose of them altogether. Residents should also change the water in birdbaths and animal bowls or troughs at least weekly and dispose of used tires properly. Irrigation systems should be adjusted so that they don't cause puddles or ponds.

Preventing mosquito bites can be as simple as staying indoors at dusk and dawn when mosquitoes are most active. If going into areas with mosquitoes, wear long pants, long-sleeved shirts, socks, and shoes. Mosquito repellents containing DEET, Picaridin, oil of lemon eucalyptus, or IR3535 are safe and effective ways to prevent bites when used in accordance with label instructions. Homeowners are also encouraged to screen doors and windows to keep mosquitoes out.

“Most people – 4 out of 5 – will never show signs of illness after being bitten by a WNV-infected mosquito. For a small number of people, though, WNV infection can be very serious and even fatal. That is why prevention is so important,” says Charters.

Symptoms of mild West Nile virus illness include fever, headache, body aches, rash and swollen lymph glands. Symptoms of the more serious WNV illness include neck stiffness, disorientation, coma, tremors, convulsions, muscle weakness and paralysis. Anyone experiencing any of these symptoms should consult their medical provider, especially if there is a recent history of mosquito bites. The very young and people over 50 are most susceptible to the more serious form of WNV illness.

Since the presence of WNV in Yakima County has been demonstrated consistently over the last 5 years, environmental monitoring activities for the virus will be scaled back by YHD in 2009 in order to focus on prevention education. Dead birds will not be tested by YHD for West Nile virus, but some may need to be reported to other agencies. If three or more dead birds are found at the same time in the same place, residents are asked to call the Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife's Dead Bird reporting line at 1-800-606-8768. The Raptor House Rehabilitation Center has also asked to be notified of any hawk, eagle, owl, or falcons found sick or dead in our area. They can be reached at 509-945-7334. Other dead birds can simply be disposed of by picking them up with a shovel or gloves, double bagging them, and putting them out with regular trash pickup. The YHD is also discontinuing mosquito testing for WNV.

WNV monitoring by veterinary partners in Yakima County identified 26 positive horses in 2008. Almost all had either never been vaccinated for WNV or had not received their yearly booster. WNV illness in horses is most often severe and results in the death of 1 in 3 horses on average. The Yakima Health District suggests that owners vaccinate their horses and other equine against WNV and provide yearly boosters. Owners should talk to a local veterinarian about available equine WNV vaccines, some of which can be administered to foals as young as a few months.

For more information on West Nile virus visit the YHD Website at www.yakimapublichealth.org and click on the West Nile virus link under the Information heading. You can also get automatic updates of WNV activity in our area by following the YHD on Twitter (www.twitter.com/yhd_wnv).

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