

Mosquitoes fly free amid pandemic

Virus pulls health departments away from killing bugs

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Bug spray, swollen welts, citronella. It's mosquito season.

And in a normal year, the health department serving Ohio's Delaware County would be setting out more than 90 mosquito traps a week — black tubs of stagnant water with nets designed to ensnare the little buggers.

But this year, because of COVID-19, the mosquitoes will fly free.

The coronavirus has pulled the staffers away, so they haven't set a single trap this year, according to Dustin Kent, the program manager of the residential services unit. Even if they had the time, the state lab that normally would test the insects for viruses that infect humans isn't able to take the samples because it also is too busy with COVID-19.

That means the surrounding community, just north of Columbus, has to wait until potentially deadly mosquito-borne illnesses such as West Nile sicken humans to find out if the insects are carrying disease.

"It's frustrating knowing that we can do a more preventative approach," Kent said. "But we're stuck reacting."

In Washtenaw County, Michigan, mosquito samples aren't being collected because the health department didn't have the staff or ability to hire and train the summer interns who would typically perform the work.

In COVID-19 hot spot Houston, a third of mosquito control staffers are working a COVID call center, stocking warehouses in Texas and preparing coronavirus testing materials.

And across Florida, public health officials couldn't test chicken blood for expo-



RICK BOWMER/AP

Around the nation, public health workers are being pulled away from mosquito duty to deal with COVID-19.

sure to mosquito-borne viruses — chickens get bitten by the insects, too, so they can serve as warning signs — at the overwhelmed state lab until mid-June, a task that normally begins in the spring.

Monitoring and killing mosquitoes is a key public health task used to curb the spread of deadly disease.

In recent years, top mosquito-borne illnesses have killed some 200 people annually in the country. But those low numbers are due in part to the efforts of public health departments to keep the spread at bay, unlike in other countries where hundreds of thousands are sickened and die each year.

"Mosquitoes are the biggest nuisance and pest on this planet. Hands down," said Ary Faraji, the president of the American Mosquito Control Association, a nonprofit that supports public agencies dedicated to mosquito control. "They

are responsible for more deaths than any other organism on this planet, including humans."

This is a physical job that can't be done by telecommuting from home. Keeping track of mosquitoes and the diseases they carry requires setting up traps, and searching backyards and commercial lots. Public health workers patrol irrigation ditches, and overturn the backyard tires, plastic bins and garbage that can hold standing water where mosquitoes breed.

Around the U.S., more than half of public health departments combat mosquitoes.

In some states, including California and Florida, specific departments are dedicated to tracking and preventing their spread. The goal is to find infected mosquito populations and kill them before they get to humans, or at least warn the community about their

presence as mosquito-borne epidemics are happening more frequently nationally as temperatures rise.

But a joint investigation published this month by KHN and The Associated Press detailed how state and local public health departments across the country have been starved for decades, leaving them underfunded and without adequate resources to confront the coronavirus pandemic, let alone the other work like mosquito control they are tasked to handle at the same time. More than 38,000 public health worker jobs have been lost since 2008. Per-capita spending on local health departments has been cut by 18% since 2010.

So as public health workers scramble to summon enough of a workforce to address a once-in-a-generation pandemic, they're being pulled from normal mosquito-related tasks. The

short staffing is leaving many localities flying blind on potential mosquito threats.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has stepped in to help and is now running mosquito testing for at least nine states, including Arizona, Florida, North Carolina and South Carolina, said Roxanne Connelly, entomology and ecology team leader for the CDC's National Center for Emerging and Zoonotic Infectious Diseases, as well as evaluating human blood samples for mosquito-borne disease for 40 states.

Even with limited testing to measure the problem and relatively low rates of disease this year, there are worrying signs.

Fourteen people in the Florida Keys have come down with locally acquired dengue, which can cause fever, severe body aches and vomiting.

Massachusetts has

found its first mosquito carrying Eastern Equine Encephalitis, which kills about a third of people infected, according to the CDC.

West Nile virus has been found in mosquitoes, birds or other species in at least 18 states and has infected people in nine.

The flu-like symptoms of diseases like West Nile — fever, body ache — worry Nina Dacko, who supervises the mosquito control program for Tarrant County Public Health in Fort Worth, Texas.

"I wonder which cases are going to be missed as everyone is going to expect COVID and then move on when they test negative," she said.

And while public health officials say small outdoor gatherings are safest when it comes to avoiding exposure to the coronavirus, some worry that the risk of acquiring mosquito-borne diseases could rise.

"Everyone knows if you're outdoors, that's where you're actually going to get exposed," said Chelsea Gridley-Smith, director of environmental health for the National Association of County and City Health Officials.

Lab crunches may be increasing that risk.

Local governments often rely on the same public health labs to test whether mosquitoes are carrying diseases like West Nile, dengue or Eastern Equine Encephalitis that they do to test humans for infectious diseases, like COVID-19.

As a result, much of the country is weeks behind where they would normally be in testing mosquitoes for the presence of dangerous diseases, said David Brown, technical adviser for the American Mosquito Control Association.

Stopping mosquitoes requires getting information in real time. If a mosquito is carrying West Nile virus, "you want to know that today, not two weeks from now," Brown said.