

Researchers study drought as a way to predict West Nile virus

By Janet McConnaughey
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NEW ORLEANS — The worst outbreaks of West Nile virus seem to follow summer droughts preceded by mild winters, a pattern researchers are studying as a possible way to predict where the virus might hit hardest.

"Drought is where this is focused," says Paul R. Epstein of the Center for Health and the Global Environment at Harvard Medical School.

Though Epstein sounds convinced, other researchers say more work is needed. "I suspect that it is going to be more complicated than just saying that West Nile virus transmission will increase or decrease based on periods of rainfall," said Dr. Ned Hayes, an epidemiologist at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Epstein, one of several researchers studying factors in the spread of West Nile for a seven-year government study, points to these historical patterns:

The initial U.S. outbreak in New York in 1999 followed a three-month drought and three-week heat wave. Last year's devastating spread followed a year of widespread warm winters and spring or summer droughts.

This year the disease has spread throughout the West with Colorado reporting more West Nile virus cases than any other state.

Colorado, Nebraska and other states with the worst outbreaks all have had droughts.

The Harvard researcher may be right, but he hasn't proven it, said Dr. Bob Shope, a Texas professor who echoed the CDC official's caution. There has been no controlled study and more data is needed, said Shope who teaches at the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston.

Still, Epstein explains how drought could intensify an outbreak, especially in urban areas.

Standing water collects in drains and catch basins, stagnating and attracting the female house mosquito for egg-laying. Ponds and creeks dry up, reducing the numbers of frogs, dragonflies and other predators.

Remaining sources of clean water become a gathering spot for birds making them an easier target for the insects. While house mosquitoes prefer birds to people, later in the summer, the species that find people just as tasty as birds become more pervasive.

Epstein's research was sparked by similar patterns with St. Louis encephalitis, a closely related bug. That encephalitis strain first showed up in this country in 1933, three years into the Dust Bowl drought that started in the East and moved west.

At the CDC in the 1970s, Dr. Thomas Monath compared St. Louis encephalitis and weather. Ten of the first 12 big urban outbreaks, he found, came after two-month droughts; an 11th occurred after one month of drought.

The fact that the mosquitoes that spread St. Louis encephalitis also are thought to spread West Nile strengthens the argument, but three or four years is probably just not enough time to make any absolute conclusions, Monath said. "With St. Louis encephalitis, we were able to look back about 40 years over a series of multiple outbreaks."

Going after larvae as much as possible is a good idea in areas prone to either virus, he said. "It's much easier to control or prevent the disease by early measures than it is to try to prevent an outbreak once the virus is cranked up."

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— Dr. Ned Hayes
epidemiologist

NEWS IN BRIEF

Four men charged with manslaughter in Chicago nightclub stampede that killed 21

CHICAGO (AP) — A nightclub owner and three other men were charged with manslaughter in a stampede that killed 21 people last winter — a tragedy prosecutors said was caused in part by the owners packing the place to five times its capacity.

E2 nightclub owner Dwain Kyles, his alleged partner Calvin Hollins Jr., party promoter Marco Flores and Hollins' son, Calvin Hollins III, a club manager, pleaded innocent Tuesday. A grand jury handed up the sealed indictments last week. "They put individuals into a precarious situation where any incident could — and

unfortunately in this situation did — lead to tragedy," said Cook County State's Attorney Dick Devine.

Involuntary manslaughter involving multiple deaths carries up to 10 years in prison. The Feb. 17 stampede at the E2 nightclub started after someone used pepper spray to break up a dance-floor fight. Patrons fled for the doors, crushing each other on a narrow staircase.

Prosecutor Robert Egan, reading from the indictment, said the owners willfully packed the club with about 1,200 people on the night of the stampede, roughly five times its capacity of 240.

Safety officials urge adoption of new device to prevent electrical fires

BETHESDA, Md. (AP) — An inexpensive device that detects wiring problems could prevent many of the 40,000 electrical fires that damage U.S. homes and kill 350 people each year, safety officials said Tuesday, urging homeowners to install Arc Fault Circuit Interrupters.

The device, also called an AFCI, cuts power when it detects electricity arcing from damaged wires. Homes with old wiring are especially vulnerable to this problem, which can occur when wires or cords overheat or are pinched by furniture, pierced by nails, frayed from age or gnawed by rodents.

AFCIs cost as little as \$25, but the Consumer Product

Safety Commission said installing one can be dangerous and should be done only by a licensed electrician.

While not officially recommending that all consumers use AFCIs, the safety commission said people should consider having them installed, particularly in the more than 50 million U.S. homes with wiring more than 40 years old.

Hal Stratton, chairman of the safety commission, said homeowners should have the wiring in their homes tested to see if an AFCI would improve safety.

Electrical fires cause hundreds of millions of dollars in property damage each year, according to the safety commission.

California to buy 2,800 acres and create \$150 million nature preserve

LOS ANGELES (AP) — The state has agreed to buy 2,800 acres for a tentative \$150 million to block construction of a \$2 billion golf course and housing community and create a nature preserve in its place.

State officials said the deal with landowner Washington Mutual, the nation's largest lending bank, is expected to win final approval in early October, the Los Angeles Times reported Tuesday.

Washington Mutual planned to build a 3,050-home golf course community on the oak-dotted Ahmanson Ranch land on the border of Los Angeles and Ventura counties.

The plan was approved by Ventura County in 1990, but since then various lawsuits

and the discovery of a rare frog and flower had stalled the development.

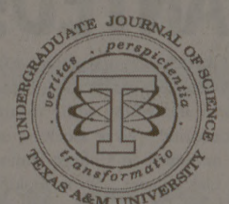
The planned \$2 billion development would have brought in 8,000 residents and resulted in 37,500 more vehicle trips per day on area streets and freeways, according to an environmental impact report.

A \$1.5 million campaign to save the acreage was joined by celebrities including director Rob Reiner.

The property is a convenient location for hikers and bikers and serves as a wildlife corridor at the head of the Malibu Creek watershed.

The acquisition would be subsidized by Proposition 50, a bond measure approved by voters last year for land and wildlife preservation.

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