

Region set to fight West Nile for another season

By JASON MISNER
The Champion

Halton Region's top health experts are crossing their fingers that a \$1.2 million plan to battle West Nile virus yields similar results to last year, during which there were no humans infected with the mosquito-borne illness.

On Tuesday, Halton's health and social services committee unanimously endorsed the health department's recommended plan to fight the spread of the potentially-deadly West Nile. Warmer weather will greet the area soon, increasing the possibility of the virus transmitting.

The recommendation will go before regional council this Wednesday for ratification.

The program, which mirrors last year's, will see another assault waged on mosquito larvae — which are not fully-matured mosquitoes — by hiring a private contractor to poison thousands of storm-water catch basins and standing pools of water. Both sites

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DR. BOB NOSAL

are breeding grounds for the pesky biters. As well, it will include surveillance of the disease in mosquitoes, birds and humans, and public education.

Also, adulticiding, which involves the spraying of a pesticide called malathion, will be used as a last resort to combat West Nile. The biggest difference this year is the 2004 budget is about

\$300,000 more than 2003's. That's partly because the 38,000 catch basins scattered in Halton will have to be larvicided four times rather than the three times done last summer.

A staff report stated testing by the provincial government of the environmentally-safe pesticide, methoprene, showed it lasts 21 days and not the 28 days as originally thought. Methoprene will only be applied if larvae have been found.

Standing pools of water will be treated with a product called Bti if larvae are detected. It lasts seven days.

The program's costs are to be shared equally with the Province, like it was last year.

The uncertainty of the impact of West Nile, given it was first discovered in North America in 1999, makes it imperative that a protection/preventative program be in place, Halton's medical officer of health, Dr. Bob Nosal said after the meeting.

"We will continue with the program," he said, noting there was West Nile activity in the region last year. "As far as what the impact will be, who knows. It's still an emerging disease, it has not been here long enough."

"We will have a much better idea after three or four years of this."

The health department thinks last year's program helped the region stave off any major West Nile onslaught. In addition, the natural history of the disease, which suggests it's moving west after starting in the east five years ago, and a cooler, wetter spring in Halton likely limited the influence of West Nile.

In all, there were no human cases of the disease last year and no one was hospitalized for having any potential West Nile symptoms.

It was a different, and deadlier, story in 2002. There were 60 human cases resulting in one death; 74 West Nile-positive mosquito pools found versus only 19 last year; and a number of residents were hospitalized for virus symptoms, like high fever and muscle weakness.

Oakville was a hot spot for the virus that year. The results were alarming enough that the Ministry of Health and Long-term Care paid McMaster University officials to conduct a blood survey of 1,500 residents in south Oakville.

It concluded the risk of getting seriously ill, like developing encephalitis or meningitis, after contracting West Nile is higher than had been thought. McMaster researchers have said they will do their own follow-up study to find out why.

Regional councillors insist the West Nile program is vital and are urging residents to keep doing their part.

Burlington Regional Councillor Rick Craven, chair of the health and social services committee, said he lives near a ravine and was constantly draining his outside bird cage of water.

"I was very conscientious of the expectation to fight West Nile at the neighbourhood level. What we need is Mother Nature to be on our side another year."

"I thought the level of citizen participation was a large part of the success of the program," said Halton Chair Joyce Savoline.

Results from a phone survey conducted by York University for the Region last year indicate residents are getting the message, the staff report said.

It showed 93 per cent knew how the virus is spread and that more than eight out of every 10 people removed standing water on their property.

Mosquitoes get West Nile from an infected bird and pass it on to humans through bites.

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Catholic board calendar now set

Final exams are still three months away but the Halton Catholic District School Board has already approved its 2004-05 school year calendar.

At Tuesday's regular board meeting, trustees approved a calendar consisting of 190 instructional days, four professional development (PD) days and a variety of holidays.

Students (and especially parents) will be interested to note that the first day of instruction will be Tuesday, Sept. 7. The last day of instruction for secondary students will be Wednesday, June 29, 2005 while for elementary pupils this will fall on Thursday, June 30, 2005.

Examinations for secondary students have been scheduled for January 27 to February 5, 2005 and from June 22 to 28, 2005.

Statutory holidays and break periods for 2004-05 include: Labour Day, September 6; Thanksgiving, October 11; Christmas Break, December 20 to 31; March Break, March 14 to 18; Good Friday, March 25; Easter Monday, March 28; Victoria Day, May 23.

Professional activity days have been scheduled October 8 and December 3, 2004 as well as February 4, April 22 and June 30 (secondary panel only).

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