Aerial photos track stagnant swimming pools in battle against West Nile

A new weapon is being used in the battle to protect Kern County from the West Nile Virus. For the first time, the Kern Mosquito and Vector Control District has taken aerial photos to spot possible stagnant swimming pools.

Kern County is the "hot spot" for West Nile Virus this summer. So far 64 local cases have been identified and three people have died. That's a lot more cases than any other area of the state this year.

Eyewitness News has learned the aerial photos were taken last Monday, the 13th. Mosquito District Manager Rob Quiring says the fly-over covered about 60 square miles of Bakersfield, and identified hundreds of possibly stagnant pools.
“Eight-hundred that are suspected,” Quiring told Eyewitness News. “That are green, or murky or partially filled.” The photos cover block after block of homes, and seen on Quiring’s computer screen -- the bright blue clean pools are clearly different from the circles of dark green.

Residents have contacted Eyewitness News with concerns about swimming pools at vacant homes in their neighborhoods. Stagnant water is a prime location where mosquitoes can breed.

The mosquito district knows the usual trouble spots for standing water -- like sumps and drains -- and those areas are regularly treated with ground spraying to control mosquitoes.

But, swimming pools present a different problem. “These sources are obviously mainly in backyards,” says Quiring. “So, we don't know where they are until we take a photograph and get the addresses. So it's going to be a big help to us.”

Quiring says the pools showing up green in the aerial photos are listed as "questionable." It's believed there are more "questionable" pools this year because of the high number of home vacancies and foreclosures.

The district says the photo project also generated a list of addresses for the questionable pools. Quiring says that information is being organized and he expects to have crews checking on the pools by the end of the week.

The mosquito district says these suspect pools are considered a nuisance, and workers can simply go into the backyard of a vacant home. "That's our job, and state law allows us to do that -- the health and safety code," says Quiring. "So, that's what we're going to do."

Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger was in Bakersfield earlier this month declaring a local West Nile Virus state of emergency. The governor also pledged state funds to deal with the problem.

Quiring says $5,000 of that state money was used for the aerial photo project.

Aerial spraying for adult mosquitoes was just done across Bakersfield on August 9th and 13th. By next week they hope to know how effective that was.

The district will check their mosquito traps, looking for not only how many mosquitoes they find -- but more important -- they hope to see a lower percentage of mosquitoes with the virus.

And, Quiring says nothing will get rid of all the mosquitoes -- so it's still important for people to take precautions not to get mosquito bites. That means using insect repellent with DEET. It's also best to wear long-sleeves -- especially at dawn and dusk when mosquitoes are most active.

But, while the aerial spraying knocks down the number of adult mosquitoes -- it only interrupts the mosquito/virus cycle. Quiring says it's still important to prevent that cycle from re-starting.
And that's why it's vital to track down any source of standing water where mosquitoes could breed. "We have to go back and find the breeding sources," says Quiring. "Otherwise the adult population will be back to where it was."

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