

VCP Insects

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Spring offensive planned in mosquito wars



Photos by Kurt Ellison

Mosquito fighters Dan Gomes, left, and Wayne Yetter count mosquito larva samples from Harkins Slough.

Stinging pests arrive early; spraying is likely this week

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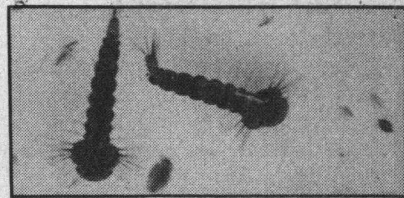
It's that time of year, when signs of spring begin popping up all around town. But along with colorful shoots sprouting on trees and chilly days growing warmer and longer are unseen, aquatic larvae, rapidly developing into buzzing, blood-thirsty mosquitoes.

Again this year, it appears the Watsonville area is looking at a heavy mosquito infestation. With swarms already airborne, the Pajaro Valley's fledgling mosquito-abatement district is preparing to launch an offensive.

To get a jump on the perennial problem, the city of Watsonville agreed in December to form a county service area for mosquito control with Santa Cruz County.

The CSA had expected that spraying could begin by March or April. But the mosquitoes follow their own timetable, and this year the insects are about six weeks ahead of CSA's schedule, according to Dave Moeller, Santa Cruz County agriculture commissioner and CSA manager.

"It appears that there is a significant population in the slough



The enemy

complex," Moeller said yesterday. He had recently been out to Struve Slough and found "an enormous population (of mosquitoes) at an advanced stage of development."

Lacking sufficient staff or revenue, Moeller said the North Salinas Valley Mosquito Abatement District has agreed to help the CSA determine the extent of the problem and conduct limited aerial spraying.

Four North Salinas abatement district staff members were in Watsonville this morning to take samples and assess the situation in the sloughs, which are prime breeding grounds for the mosquitoes.

"We're going to have to do something right away," Moeller

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said today after the survey. "Even before (staff members) got into the field, they said, 'You should have done this yesterday.'" Moeller said they saw male mosquitoes flying, meaning that the females — the ones that bite — aren't far behind. "Something's going to have to happen this week," he said.

Moeller said the CSA would follow what the city did last season. The city Public Works Department would be notified today, he said, to send fliers out to residents, alerting them of the upcoming spraying.

Last year, after attempts failed to annex portions of south county to the North Salinas abatement district, the city of Watsonville contracted with the abatement district for a one-time aerial spraying of portions of the slough system.

"It worked, (but) not as well as it could have," was how Peter Ghormley, director of the North Salinas Valley district, described the success of that effort. He said the spraying was limited by what he called "summer condominiums in the wetlands" and proximity to homes.

The CSA's startup budget of \$89,775, borrowed from the county General Fund for January 1994 through June 1994, was to pay for hiring an assistant manager and purchasing a new four-wheel drive vehicle, a ½-ton pickup truck, a 55-gallon spray rig, a mobile radio, and equipment and supplies to allow larvicide spraying of 500 acres within the slough complex.

To date, some equipment has been purchased, but Moeller said they are still in the process of hiring an assistant, leaving a "mosquito abatement district with a staff of one." The CSA will eventually have a staff of four, including Moeller. Additional laboratory and office equipment will also be purchased.

The CSA's total projected budget for fiscal year 1994-95 is \$308,063, including payback of the loan. The CSA will be entirely funded by an annual per-parcel fee of \$13.29 on parcels in the greater parts of the Pajaro Valley and Aptos. That fee is expected to go down after the one-time capital outlays are made.

The CSA will eventually be responsible for all mosquito sampling and control within its boundaries. In addition to seasonal control measures, the CSA will provide information to public and private agencies about how to avoid creating new mosquito breeding sources.

Moeller said he planned to attend an Association of Monterey Bay Area Governments meeting tomorrow in Watsonville that will discuss development of a Slough Water Resource Management Plan. The plan will address such slough-related issues as pesticide runoff, water movement, flood control and improving water quality for wildlife.

"That's fine," Moeller said of the plan's goals, "but some of the wildlife out there is mosquitoes, and we don't want to improve conditions for them. Mosquito abatement is conspicuous in its absence from this plan."

Frank Barron, an associate regional planner with AMBAG, said that while mosquito abatement is not part of the plan's original scope of work, "it could be written in later."