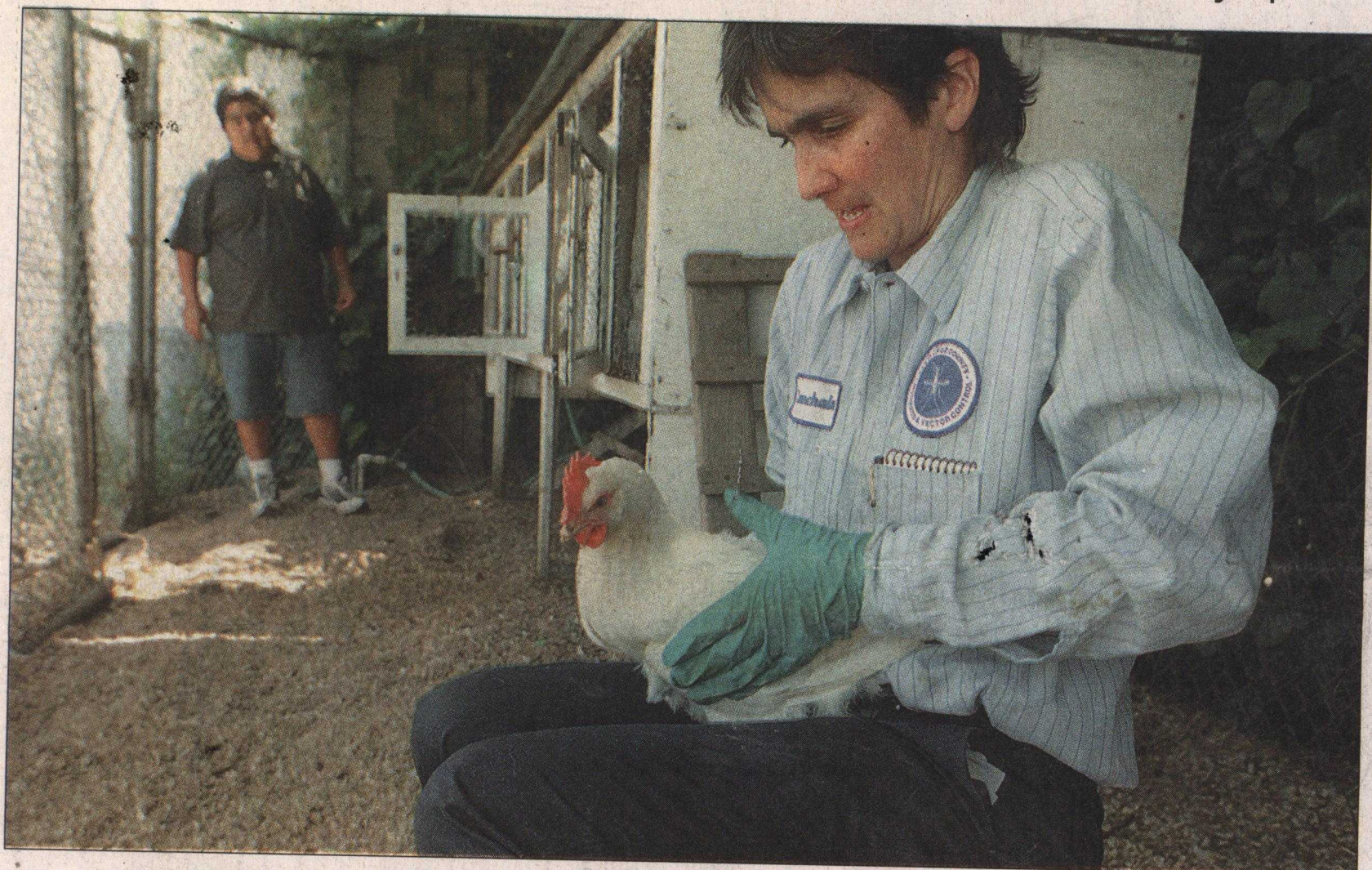


# Taking the sting out of mosquitoes

Vector-control agency targets insect pests and the diseases they spread



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Chanchala Goewey prepares to take a blood sample from a chicken at Watsonville High School. The local vector-control agency tests the fowl for such diseases as West Nile virus, a mosquito-borne disease.

By LOUISA DALTON

SENTINEL CORRESPONDENT

*Insects*

They swat 'em, they spray 'em, they trap 'em. The Santa Cruz County Mosquito and Vector Control District is here to help with those maddening summer pests.

"I feel responsible for every mosquito out there," said Paul Binding, the manager of the county agency located in Santa Cruz.

He and two other full-time vector-control specialists know how to fight the pests that make us sick or drive us crazy, especially mosquitoes, ticks and yellowjackets.

Most of the time, the three specialists work to keep the local mosquito population in check. Fifteen mosquito species are found in Santa Cruz County, including ones capable of carrying malaria and encephalitis.

Santa Cruz residents rarely contract disease from mosquitoes, but wherever the right mosquitoes breed, disease is a possibility. About 50 percent of the mosquitoes the district sampled in the last two years are capable of carrying

human disease. And Santa Cruz County contains prime mosquito breeding ground — a marshy area with a temperate climate. Mosquitoes lay their eggs in water and their larvae are aquatic.

Last year, when Binding and his co-workers put up a mosquito trap at Watsonville High School, they found high numbers of the mosquito capable of carrying West Nile encephalitis virus. West Nile encephalitis is an infection of the brain that caused nine deaths on the East Coast last year. The mosquito breeds in hard-to-reach underground water sources.

By finding and treating the water beneath truck scales and in wastewater and catch basins throughout the high school campus, they brought the number of Culex pipiens down by 42 percent.

To monitor for West Nile virus, the district also keeps a flock of chickens at Watsonville High School. They bleed the flock every two weeks to check for disease.

Please see **MOSQUITOES** on Page A4

## Insect pests



**YELLOWJACKETS** are a type of wasp that is encountered around homes and buildings. Their bite is painful and their venom can cause a life-threatening allergic reaction.



**TICKS** can carry diseases, including the debilitating Lyme disease.



**MOSQUITOES** can spread infectious diseases, including malaria and several types of encephalitis.

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## Mosquitoes

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"The hard part is catching them," said Chanchala Goewey, the technician who pricks the chickens.

Agriculture students at Watsonville High School care for the chickens, and collect and sell the eggs at the farmers market. So far, none of the chickens has contracted any mosquito-borne disease.

The largest mosquito breeding site in the county is the Watsonville Slough, a 600-acre wetland, said Binding. The slough is often difficult to get to, but because of the mosquito's short life cycle, they check mosquito larvae there every 10 days.

To treat the slough, they tramp through swampland in chest waders, carrying 50 pound backpacks.

"We push through vegetation hip- or thigh-deep," Binding said.

Almost all of the pesticides Binding uses are selective for mosquitoes and break down rapidly in the environment, causing little damage to other plants, animals or humans. Binding always tries to get the mosquito ear-

ly in the breeding cycle.

"Once they hatch and disperse," Binding said, "it is less environmentally sound to control them."

Binding actively serves only the south part of the county, which is home to 65,000 people in Watsonville and Aptos south of State Park Drive. About 60 percent of the calls he receives are from outside his service area, but North County residents don't pay the extra property tax (about \$11.50 per single-family household) to support the vector-control district. "Vector" is the biological term for an animal that carries disease.

Anyone who calls can receive information about how to fight mosquitoes and other pests, and can pick up mosquito-eating fish. The district also gives talks to school groups.

Binding promises to respond to any call within 24 hours. His troop of three at the Mosquito and Vector Control District stands at the ready to fight the county's insufferable little bloodsuckers.

For more information about the Santa Cruz County Mosquito and Vector Control District, call 454-2590.