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UCD VET VIEWS

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WEST NILE VIRUS: WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR CATTLE PRODUCERS?

You've all heard by now that West Nile Virus is coming this way. You hear it on TV, in the newspaper, and on the radio. The virus is working its way west to California and will probably be here by next year. This month we will discuss this virus and what it may mean to you.

What is West Nile Virus anyway?

West Nile Virus (WNV) is a virus that normally infects birds. The WNV is carried by mosquitoes from one infected bird to another susceptible bird. The vast majority of infected birds do not become ill or show signs of disease. However, some species such as crows and jays can become ill and die. Therefore, in nature the mosquitoes spread the virus among the birds, the virus reproduces in the birds, few birds die and the cycle repeats itself wherever there are birds and mosquitoes. However, if you notice an unusual number of dead crows or jays in the future, your veterinarian can submit these animals to the laboratory to see if they died of WNV.

Why should I be concerned about this bird virus?

Once in a while, the mosquitoes will bite an animal that is not a bird. For example, if the mosquito is carrying the virus and it bites you—you may become infected with the WNV. When it comes to the WNV, humans are referred to as a “dead end host”. That means just about what it says. Humans are not the normal host for the WNV and when infected can become ill and die—“dead end host”. Horses are another species that can be a “dead end host”. So if horses or humans become infected they can become ill and die.

Why does this story sound familiar?

We have been dealing with viruses like this in the Western U.S. for many years. These viruses are referred to as Western Equine Encephalitis (WEE), Eastern Equine Encephalitis (EEE), and Venezuelan Equine Encephalitis (VEE). There is even a St. Louis strain that is rare. We have been vaccinating our horses to prevent equine encephalitis for many decades. It has worked well for our horses. However, once in a while these viruses “spill over” into the human population and people become ill.

Why is the West Nile Virus different?

In many ways the WNV is about the same as the other viruses we are used to dealing with. It does seem to be a more active virus. However, the WNV seems to spread more easily and infects people and horses more easily.

Does WNV affect cattle?

There is no evidence that WNV causes disease in cattle. However, viruses sometimes “change” so researchers will continue to monitor the WNV in a number of species.

What can I do to prevent problems from the WNV?

1. **Reduce mosquito populations.** Eliminate stagnant water in old tires, roof gutters, wheelbarrows, etc. Water that stands for as little as 4 days can become a breeding area for mosquitoes. Work with your county mosquito control district to help control mosquito populations.
2. **Use insect repellent containing DEET** (N,N-diethyl-meta-toluamide) on yourself and children when you are outside, particularly in the early morning, late afternoon, and nighttime hours.
3. **Vaccinate your horses.** Talk to your veterinarian about this beforehand; however, sometime between this fall and next spring you should vaccinate your horses. There is a vaccine currently available and there may be more vaccines coming in the future. The initial vaccination is a series of two injections given 3-6 weeks apart. However, it will take another 4-6 weeks after the second injection before the horse is fully protected. Therefore, don't wait until a week before mosquito season next year to start the vaccinations. You should probably vaccinate your horses before next spring and certainly before next summer. Visit with your veterinarian about this vaccine

and the best ways for you to lower the risk of WNV.

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