

“Who Ya Gonna Call?”

Santa Barbara Coastal Vector Control District

The Santa Barbara Coastal Vector Control District (VCD) is a special district that provides a service with regional benefit to the County. The Grand Jury felt that a report on the VCD, highlighting its role in the fight against West Nile Virus (WNV), would educate the public. West Nile Virus was detected in neighboring Ventura County in April, 2004.

Property owners in Santa Barbara recently accepted annexation to the District and a once-a-year tax assessment of \$7.17 per single household. This report may encourage other cities to either begin the annexation and assessment process for their own residents or at least promote their own readiness for the diseases that may hit the county this summer or in the future.

Introduction

Americans are increasingly aware of pests that are bearers of disease from across the nation and around the world. Bees become Africanized, ticks carry Lyme Disease, mice transmit Hantavirus, and mosquitoes bring West Nile Virus. Such insects or animals that carry or transmit disease are called vectors.

West Nile Virus in particular has caused alarm in health agencies, in light of almost 10,000 reported human cases in the United States and 262 deaths in 2003 alone. The number of deaths of birds and horses is incalculable. VCD warns that West Nile Virus could explode in California this summer, as it did in Colorado last year. Studies have shown that the virus is most prevalent after a mild winter such as the last one, followed by a dry spring and summer.

While these vectors endanger public health, the Public Health Department or the Office of Emergency Services become active only in response to an emergency or epidemic. Prior to that, prevention is the best line of defense. In its 2003 Operational Plan for Emergency Response to Mosquito-Borne Disease Outbreaks, the California Department of Public Health writes, “Mosquito control is the only practical method of protecting people and animals.... Preventive measure means abatement, correction, removal, or any other protective step that may be taken against any public health hazard that is caused by a disease outbreak that affects the public health.”

In Santa Barbara County there is one agency that helps manage and control animal or insect-borne diseases: the Santa Barbara Coastal Vector Control District (VCD). The District advises homeowners how to eliminate or reduce mosquitoes. Private pest control companies do not handle mosquitoes.

As a public service, the District provides information to everyone in the county. All phone calls are answered. To protect and educate the public, it has a website (www.sbcvdc.org), distributes brochures to public agencies, and writes press releases and public service announcements.

VCD has covered Goleta (Zone 1), Carpinteria (Zone 2), Hope Ranch, Isla Vista, as well as certain government properties which are under contract. In a recent vote, properties owners of Santa Barbara City became part of Zone 1. Are the residents of North County cities - Buellton, Lompoc, and Santa Maria - ready for a similar annexation? North County residents may have the option to vote for the District's annexation and assessment if they believe VCD can provide more complete coverage in controlling vectors at their residences or in their communities.

Methods of Inquiry

This is the first Grand Jury to visit Santa Barbara Coastal Vector Control District. The Jury members attended Board of Directors' meetings and interviewed the manager of VCD, a Deputy Director of the County Public Works Department, and the city managers of Santa Maria, Buellton, Lompoc, and Santa Barbara. One North County Supervisor was also interviewed. The Jury also talked to the Public Health Department, the Office of Emergency Services, and exterminator companies.

Background

VCD's offices are located in Summerland. VCD has a staff of one manager and three trained technicians. Another technician will be added for the zone extended in Santa Barbara. The employees are cross-trained to be entomologists, vector ecologists, and biologists. Fiscal responsibility is essential, as the District operates on a budget of under \$400,000. VCD is separate from city or county government, but it works closely with local governmental agencies.

Property owners within the two zones receive a number of enhanced services. The technicians make house calls - between 300 and 400 a year - within the two zones. They will help locate a problem and decide the safest way to solve it, whether that be removing wasp hives, baiting roof rats, trapping insects, spraying on occasion, or providing mosquito fish to eat mosquito larvae in any standing water a home may

have. It does so at a parcel assessment of just over \$6 or \$7 per household per year, or \$12 per apartment building.

Most of VCD's efforts in disease surveillance are behind the scenes, however. For early warning signs of any disease, it traps and tests ticks for Lyme Disease, mosquitoes for West Nile Virus, squirrels for fleas with Bubonic Plague, and deer mice for Hantavirus. For West Nile Virus, it also checks blood samples from five flocks (soon to be nine) of sentinel chickens that it maintains around the county. These chickens do not die from West Nile virus, but blood samples drawn will indicate its presence. Dead crows are the first indicator of WNV.

In 2002, the Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) initiated the annexation of all unincorporated areas in the entire county by the Vector Control District. It did so to assure a standardized level of service in the County. The only money available to the VCD from the annexation is a small portion of the basic 1% property tax paid by all landowners. This portion first appeared on the December 2003 tax rolls. The Board of Supervisors allocated approximately 0.17% of this 1% to Vector Control, a percentage determined by the amount necessary to provide the basic surveillance services. This money can do little more than maintain the flocks of chickens and do some trapping and testing.

Areas outside the two zones can enter into a contractual agreement with Vector Control. Public entities such as the Santa Barbara Airport, Lake Los Carneros, the Gas Company, Isla Vista Parks, and the University of California, Santa Barbara, contract with the district for monitoring and control of mosquitoes and other pests. These contracts account for 25% of the district's budget.

Observations

The City of Santa Barbara was the only South Coast community not within the special district's assessment area. In December of 2003, the LAFCO panel voted to annex the city. Santa Barbara City Council granted \$20,000 for a household survey to find out if city property owners were willing to join the District and accept the extra tax surcharge (assessment). An in-house ballot was then mailed to parcel owners.

The City Administrator of Santa Barbara detailed the advantages of joining the District:

- The city's numerous creeks, ponds, and lush vegetation invite mosquito breeding.
- VCD uses more environmentally protective chemicals such as larvicides that prevent mosquitoes from maturing, meeting recent public concern regarding pesticides.
- City employees cannot go on private property, but VCD has the authority to help private households as part of the Public Health and Safety Act.

- VCD can better shoulder the financial burden of any outbreak, since the annual assessment for services goes directly to the District, and not through the city budget.
- The annual cost of \$7.17 per single household is nominal.
- The Santa Barbara community has often expressed that it wants its civic leaders to take a role in environmental issues, especially those that concern general welfare and public health.
- Overall, a governmental agency with expertise in the field, broader coverage and greater economy of operations would better serve the public.

Cities in North County have declined joining the Vector Control District in the past. Public response to ballot measures and surveys by LAFCO has been negative. North County officials believe that their situation is unlike Santa Barbara's and no extra coverage is necessary. For the job of monitoring and controlling vectors in public areas, the city managers of Buellton, Lompoc and Santa Maria expressed confidence in their local Fire, Public Works and Parks Departments. Visits by the Grand Jury to the three cities began a process of awareness that could provide beneficial preparation as the summer - the height of mosquito breeding season - arrives.

North County city managers cited the following reasons for not joining the District:

- There is no perceived need for extra vector control by members of their communities.
- The approach of West Nile Virus in California is not such a threat in the drier areas of North County, with fewer creeks and bodies of water.
- Insects in general are not a big problem with the windy conditions that blow them away and dry up standing pools of water.
- Surrounding agricultural fields are treated with pesticides, discouraging the breeding of many insects.
- North County landowners value their independence and do not want government officials entering private property.
- Any benefits from an added tax would be insignificant.
- In-house ballots mailed to property owners may not get the voters' full attention, which would be detrimental to the process, especially if adding taxes were the issue.

Further North County objections to VCD's annexation and assessment invite discussion. For example:

- West Nile Virus is primarily an urban problem. North County sees itself as rural, but standing water can be a problem in private back yards, public gardens and city parks.
- The fees collected go directly to the Vector Control District and do not fall into County coffers, countering fears that taxation of North County property owners would only help South County.

- Fees would support full services and a satellite office in North County, not an office and staff in South County only.
- VCD already exists as an independent special district and its handling of any future health hazards would mean that North County cities would not have to add staff or another layer of bureaucracy to deal with them.
- Any increases in assessed tax surcharge (except for a possible Consumer Price Index increase) would have to be voted on.
- If an outbreak occurs, the North County cities said that they could rely on Public Health and the Office of Emergency Services. Yet these two agencies in turn will rely on the Vector Control District to inform them and help manage any crisis. North County cities could just as easily deal directly with the District.

Residents of North County receive the regional benefit from the testing of sentinel chickens in their area, but they must hire private companies for problems related to vectors on their property or, in the case of mosquitoes, handle the problem themselves. VCD's full services require the lengthy process of balloting, and this cannot be done in time to get on the tax rolls for the year 2004 or 2005. However, if the threat of health hazards becomes overpowering or if the citizenry shows interest in coverage in the immediate future, the cities still have the option of contracting with VCD. In such an event, VCD would charge only for time and materials.

To increase its presence in North County, VCD is preparing a survey tailored for each of the three cities to again check property owners' interest in joining the District and what level of services they would welcome. VCD acknowledges that it needs to step up its public relations and education efforts in order to set the stage for governmental actions. Indeed, the city managers claimed that VCD's educational promotion was inadequate in the past. District staff's previous attitude was that they did not want to "pester" North County city councils. Given the reluctance of North County cities to entertain annexation, VCD must be more proactive in stating its case before each city council.

VCD previously faltered in preparation and communication with the County of Santa Barbara. The Public Works Department of Santa Barbara has been in a negotiation process for fair and equitable charges for certain County-owned properties that are in the same area as private properties within the District's two zones. It has not been an easy process, and the District's lack of communication has often been blamed. This almost derailed the District's annexation of the City of Santa Barbara at the LAFCO meeting in December, 2003. LAFCO members had not been adequately informed of the nature of VCD's services and assessment. These difficulties potentially forecast the problems VCD could face as it approaches North County city councils and managers.

Conclusion

Health scares of the present day require vigilance. With the Santa Barbara Coastal Vector Control District, the cost is minimal and the benefits are optimal. But to fully understand the advantages of the VCD, the emphasis must remain on prevention. Private companies will not be displaced as they are still needed for structural infestations and for follow-up care. Public Health and the Office of Emergency Services would have major roles as a last resort. VCD meets with these agencies to coordinate services, and in doing so, it is contributing a public service that we may need to rely on in the future.

Enlisting VCD's services is the first step. It is not only preventative; it is also protective. The Santa Barbara Coastal Vector Control District, the County and the cities working together can open doors for true cooperation among the public entities that hold our health in their hands.

Findings and Recommendations

Finding 1

Santa Barbara Coastal Vector Control District has not always provided enough information to public agencies in its efforts to enhance its role in local communities.

Recommendation 1

VCD needs to make a dedicated effort to provide timely information about their services to the public and public agencies.

Finding 2

Cities in the North County have chosen to remain independent, relying on their own departments to face any health hazard. They do not see West Nile Virus as a threat.

Recommendation 2

Before any summer outbreak, the cities of Buellton, Lompoc and Santa Maria need to reassure their citizens that they have a mechanism in place to safeguard the public welfare, and monitor and control disease-carrying vectors, even on private properties.

Affected Agencies

Santa Barbara Coastal Vector Control District

Findings 1, 2

Recommendations 1, 2

The City of Buellton

Finding 2

Recommendation 2

The City of Lompoc

Finding 2

Recommendation 2

The City of Santa Maria

Finding 2

Recommendation 2