

Mosquitoes could mutate beyond pesticides' reach

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From: Carlos Trevino (carlostoremove_at_bigfoot.com)

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Mosquitoes could mutate beyond pesticides' reach
County predicts most potent weapon will be obsolete
By ERIC BERGER
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Pesticides, long the weapon of choice against the nettlesome and sometimes deadly mosquito, are losing their bite.

Harris County's chief mosquito fighter has recommended rotating the spraying of a handful of still-effective pesticides next year to maximize their usefulness. But even with this plan, it's probably a matter of when, not if, mosquitoes mutate beyond the control of pesticides.

"I think, probably within 5 to 10 years, we will see resistance to every pesticide," said Ray Parsons, director of Harris County's Mosquito Control Division. "I'll say this: I'm glad I'm retiring after the first of the year."

Much as bacterial infections have become more difficult to treat because of the overuse and misuse of antibiotics, so too have mosquitoes become resistant to insecticides.

Mosquito control officials note government programs to control mosquitoes have contributed to this resistance, but Parsons said private companies – spraying at the behest of community and civic associations – also share a part of the blame.

Unlike the county, which sprays only at specific times to dampen mosquito-borne viruses such as West Nile, private companies spray on a more regular basis to control nuisance mosquitoes, which pose no imminent health threat. And the more exposure mosquitoes endure, the tougher they get.

Parsons and others also maintain that some companies, to save money, dilute their pesticide, which not only doesn't kill mosquitoes,

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it promotes resistance in the offspring of survivors.

"Oh, I have no question that this is happening," said Raleigh Jenkins, owner of ABC Pest, Pool & Lawn Services, one of the largest pesticide companies in Houston. Jenkins said his trucks spray at the rate recommended by label pesticide labels.

He says, however, that some of his competitors are not. Some private bids to municipalities and communities are lower than the actual cost of the pesticides, Jenkins said. To make money on these cheap bids, he said, the product has to be diluted.

"I've heard rumors of this, but I have never heard of anyone being found doing it," said Ken Myers, executive director of the Texas Pest Control Association.

Weekly spraying common

Private spraying is common in Houston. Of the more than 100 residential communities that CIA Services manages in the greater Houston area, about 20 percent choose to regularly fog for mosquitoes, said the company's presid