

STATE VET LAB ANNOUNCES NEW WEST NILE REPORTING POLICY

September 8, 2003 - Following a new round of discussions with the Wyoming Department of Health, the Wyoming State Veterinary Laboratory (WSVL) will begin reporting to the state and to county health departments the location of West Nile virus cases in animals by identifying areas with a one mile radius within which the animal is located.

Previously, the state Department of Health had requested reporting by county, and then by the nearest town within a county. With the recent death of a horse within Sweetwater County, local public health officials have asked for greater reporting specificity.

"Nationwide, West Nile virus has become a serious public health concern," says WSVL director Donal O'Toole, "and four human deaths within the state of Wyoming has heightened those concerns. While there is no demonstrable correlation between instances of West Nile virus in horses and a threat to human health, we want to take appropriate action to ensure that the Wyoming public health community has the information it believes is necessary to protect local residents from this virus. We appreciate the Department of Health's willingness to develop reporting parameters that seem to meet the needs of Wyoming communities while removing the ambiguity within which we have found ourselves working."

According to O'Toole, while an instance of equine West Nile virus may or may not indicate the continuing presence of virus-carrying mosquitoes, an equine case of West Nile virus infection does not represent a threat to humans as the horse is a dead-end host, incapable of passing the virus through casual contact.

While details of the one-mile radius area reporting policy need to be finalized, the WSVL hopes to begin working soon with the Wyoming Geographic Information Science Center (WyGISC) to prepare reporting maps based on geographic information system data. According to O'Toole, he envisions the report designating a circle with a one-mile radius, within which the incident of equine West Nile virus has occurred.

"According to the Wyoming Department of Health," a one-mile area is sufficiently detailed for use by counties and local communities in planning their spraying operations," says O'Toole. "Any greater detail could have the unfortunate results of stigmatizing horse owner operations with an unwarranted perception of owning an infected herd.

"One of the most important roles of a state vet lab is to track and quantify the occurrence of veterinary diseases," continues O'Toole. "If people decide to avoid using the WSVL because their herds' health status will readily become public knowledge, the state of Wyoming will lose an essential diagnostic tool. The reporting policy announced today should provide the information state and local governments need while allaying these very real concerns of horse owners."

4 September 2003