

Pesticide discussion highlights opposing views

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CHICO – Mosquito fogging – spraying pesticides to kill adult insects – gets opposing reactions from Paul Schramski and Matt Ball.

Schramski, state director of a nonprofit called Pesticide Watch, says fogging neighborhoods is ineffective and probably endangers human health.

Ball, manager of the Butte County Mosquito and Vector Control District, says the practice is highly effective and that study after study shows pesticides, at the concentrations used in mosquito fogging, are extremely unlikely to harm people.

Schramski, of Sacramento, spoke Tuesday night to about 40 people at the Chico Grange. He'd been invited to talk by a local group, Safety Without Added Toxins (SWAT). Its members have raised concerns about fogging, which is done at times by the district Ball runs.

Schramski said "even trace amounts" of pesticides have been shown to be harmful to human health and that "we don't understand how pesticides interact with our bodies."

He said mosquito fogging is being justified as a necessary protection against West Nile virus. However, he suggested that risk is being exaggerated by government officials and news media. Very few people die from West Nile compared to the number who die from lung cancer, he said.

He said about 3 million pounds of pesticides are applied in Butte County each year. Given the ineffectiveness of fogging and the danger of pyrethrins, he questioned the wisdom of adding those chemicals to the "soup" of pesticides already going into the county.

Rather, he said, districts ought to focus on "integrated pest management," using a variety of techniques and emphasizing prevention and public education.

Ball, in a phone interview Wednesday, said his district does employ the integrated approach Schramski recommends. Fogging to kill adult mosquitoes is the last tool the district uses against insects.

The district's first priority is trying to find and eliminate places where mosquitoes can breed, he said. Next is public education — telling people how important it is to get rid of even small amounts of standing water in their yards and to use repellent when they are outdoors in the evening and early morning. The third weapon is planting mosquito fish, which eat mosquito larvae. Fourth, the district uses pesticides to kill mosquitoes in the larva stage, which make up 90 percent of its pesticide use. Finally, the district resorts to fogging to kill adult mosquitoes.

People should realize that where farmers might use 25 to 30 pounds of pesticide per acre, in fogging just .0025 pounds per acre is used, Ball said.

Using pesticides to kill mosquitoes is like adding chlorine to drinking water, he asserted. In both cases, very small amounts of chemicals are used to protect public health.

Ball said he doesn't consider West Nile a relatively benign disease. If even a few people get the neurological form of the illness and are hospitalized or die, that is unacceptable, he said.

He said he is open to SWAT members' suggestions about improving notification of residents about when fogging will occur.

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