

**County of Santa Cruz  
Health Services Agency**

**Risk Communication Plan  
West Nile Virus  
December 2023**



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## 1. Purpose

The purpose of this plan is to recommend procedures for handling the risk communications effort in response to a confirmed presence of West Nile Virus (WNV) in California and/or in Santa Cruz County. This plan does not cover operational response efforts.

This plan is designed to be used by staff familiar with the threat and in conjunction with existing programs and plans including the Arbovirus Surveillance and Response Plan. This plan may be updated as needed.

## 2. Planning Assumptions

- A. West Nile Virus has reached California and will result in increasing infections in humans and animals.
- B. The confirmed presence of West Nile Virus in Santa Cruz County will result in significant media coverage and public concern.
- C. Information about West Nile Virus has been disseminated in Santa Cruz County. During the initial period of increased attention, a unique opportunity exists to further educate the public about WNV including prevention and treatment.
- D. There is a danger of inaccurate information and/or rumor supplanting facts.
- E. There is a danger of some inappropriate use of mosquito repellent – especially for children.
- F. West Nile Virus presents unique issues for horse owners.

## 3. Key Messages

- **WNV illness is transmitted to humans and animals by mosquitoes and is not transmitted by casual person-to-person contact.** Although it can be spread through blood transfusions and organ donations, new blood bank procedures as of July 1, 2003, are screening all blood donations for WNV to prevent spread via these routes.
- **Most individuals who are infected with WNV will not experience any illness.** Up to 20% of those infected will develop a mild flu-like illness called “West Nile Fever”, which may last 3-6 days. Of those infected, less than 1% will develop severe neurological disease requiring hospitalization. About 10% of severe illnesses will be fatal.
- **For most people, the risk of becoming infected is low. Simply being bitten by a mosquito is not a reason to seek medical attention.** Less than 1% of people who are bitten by mosquitoes develop any symptoms of the disease, and relatively few mosquitoes carry WNV. People who spend a lot of time outdoors are more likely to be bitten by an infected mosquito. People over the age of 50 are more likely to develop serious symptoms of WNV if they do get sick and should take special care to avoid mosquito bites.
- **Effective mosquito prevention and control programs are in place in California, and, in Santa Cruz County, through the Mosquito and Vector Control Program.** The Mosquito Abatement Program serves the entire County. Key elements of WNV prevention and control are surveillance, control of mosquito populations, and inter-agency and public cooperation with residential source reduction. The methods and materials used by the

Mosquito Abatement District are based on Integrated Pest Management techniques, which significantly reduces the amount and risk level of any pesticides used.

- **There are some simple personal and environmental measures people can take to reduce the chance of becoming infected.** Residents can avoid being outside at dawn and dusk when mosquitoes are most active. When outside at these times, wear long-sleeved and long-legged clothing. Use mosquito repellents that contain DEET, IR3535, or Picaridin on uncovered skin surfaces. Drain any standing water around your home and repair screens and gutters. Contact local vector control if you need assistance in controlling mosquito populations.
- **DEET-containing repellents are safe for humans when used according to label instructions.** According to the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), “Insect repellents containing DEET with a concentration of 10% appear to be as safe as products with a concentration of 30% when used according to the directions on the product labels. DEET is not recommended for use on infants less than 2 months of age.” The AAP and other experts suggest that it is acceptable to apply repellent with low concentrations of DEET to infants over 2 months old. Strength used depends on how long one is outdoors. Products with 10% DEET are effective for about two hours; with 24% DEET, about 5 hours. Parents may wish to consult with their pediatricians.
- **To help with WNV surveillance, anyone finding a dead bird can contact 1-877-WNV-BIRD.**
- **More information can be found via phone and the Internet.** For phone information, residents can call the State # at 1-877-WNV-BIRD and the CDC# at 1-888-246-2675 for English and 1-888-246-2857 for Spanish, or 1-888-874-2646 for TTY. On the Internet, the state site is at [www.westnile.ca.gov/](http://www.westnile.ca.gov/), the CDC site is at [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov) and the County of Santa Cruz site is at [www.santacruzhealth.org](http://www.santacruzhealth.org) under “Health Alerts”. For mosquito control information go to [www.agdept.com/mvc.html](http://www.agdept.com/mvc.html).

#### 4. Roles/Responsibilities

##### All Agencies and Jurisdictions

- Review suggested Protective Measures and determine necessary resources
- Evaluate staffing levels and review staff availability
- Evaluate staff training and informational materials
- Designate one primary point of contact for the media
- Coordinate release of information to the media
- Reprioritize work activities to address potential critical needs

##### County of Santa Cruz Health Services Administration (HSA)

- Serve as lead for the Risk Communication effort.
- Develop detailed threat information, including translations in Spanish.
- Be prepared to increase medical reporting activities
- Coordinate communications with state and federal health agencies
- Coordinate communications with medical and health care providers
- Appoint key spokespersons by specialty and alternates

##### Santa Cruz County Health Officer and Chief of Public Health (HSA)

Serve as lead spokespersons for public health and medical issues. Disseminate guidance to clinicians. Develop content for posting on county WNV website.

#### Santa Cruz County Planning and Evaluation

Provide surveillance, reporting, and situation tracking data to Health Officer. Be prepared to map impacted areas.

#### Santa Cruz County Disease Control Unit (HSA)

Receive reports from medical providers. Provide victim information to Health Officer and Chief of Public Health. Respond to the public's inquiries, consulting with and referring to the Health Officer as needed. Refer all media inquiries to the Public Health Officer and/or Chief of Public Health.

#### Santa Cruz County Public Health Laboratory (HSA)

Facilitate testing or test appropriate specimens submitted by health care providers. Be prepared to support field operations. Provide victim information and relevant technical information to Health Officer and Chief of Public Health. Refer all media inquiries to the Health Officer and/or Chief of Public Health

#### Santa Cruz County Environmental Health Services

Be prepared to accept and process reports from the public regarding suspect situations where mosquitoes may be breeding (pools, septic systems, etc.). Help surveillance efforts and enforce environmental mosquito control measures. Be prepared to respond to media inquiries or develop content related to these issues.

#### Santa Cruz County Office of Emergency Services (OES)

Coordinate communications with local, state, and federal emergency management agencies. Appoint key spokesperson and alternate by specialty. Manage EOC, if activated.

#### Mosquito and Vector Control District

Appoint key spokesperson and alternate by specialty. Address abatement issues. Map impacted areas. Conduct surveillance and control measures and maintain effective communication with HSA.

#### Hospitals

Appoint key spokesperson and alternate by specialty. Coordinate release of information with Health Officer and Chief of Public Health. Maintain communications with EMS and EOC, if activated.

#### Agriculture Commissioner

Appoint key spokesperson and alternate by specialty. Address impacts on livestock. Oversee use of pesticides if needed and provide spokesperson to address pesticide issues with media.

#### Animal Control Services

Appoint key spokesperson and alternate by specialty. Assist in dead bird surveillance and report mosquito control breeding. Address preparedness, prevention, and medical issues concerning animals.

#### Parks and Open Space

Appoint key spokesperson and alternate. Assist in mosquito source reduction efforts.

## 5. Plan Activation

Upon notification of a laboratory confirmed presence of West Nile Virus in California and/or Santa Cruz County, the Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) will meet in the Solarium at 1060 Emeline Ave. The chair of the TAC will set the time and agenda. The TAC will review this Risk Communication Plan in light of actual circumstances and develop a consensus on implementing all or parts of this plan. TAC members will notify their respective clients and leadership.

## 6. Potential Actions

Conduct TAC meeting.

- Select actions to be accomplished
- Set media briefing date/time and location
- Confirm spokespersons

Issue Media Advisory.

- Provide brief status summary
- Invite media to briefing

Prepare key spokespersons.

- Review and rehearse key talking points.

Assemble Media Briefing Packets

- Overview of West Nile Virus
- CDC prevention and preparedness tips
- Frequently Asked Questions
- Press releases
- Research on WNV
- Mosquito Abatement District Map

Conduct Media Briefing (see “Media Briefings” section)

- Distribute media packets
- Provide general background on WNV
- Provide specifics on current situation
- Address rumors and inaccurate information

Issue Press Releases as necessary (see “Press Release” section)

- Level I – for no presence of WNV of any type in Santa Cruz County, OR can be adapted for the first IMPORTED human case in Santa Cruz County.
- Level II – for confirmed presence of WNV in mosquito, bird or other animal in Santa Cruz County or human case in neighboring county.
- Level III – for confirmed presence of locally acquired WNV in human in Santa Cruz County. Note: Before being confirmed by laboratory testing, the case is likely to be considered “probable” based on surveillance data, clinical picture and preliminary lab testing. “Probable” but unconfirmed case(s) will also require a press release. Scenario will be reviewed, and any media actions coordinated with CDHS.

Submit Op-Ed article to local newspaper(s).

Hold community meetings as necessary (see “Public meeting” section )

Enhance Public Education Outreach Program

- Distribute literature
- Target specific geographic areas or populations
- Seek media articles, interviews
- Update county website and reference it

## 7. Press Releases

Press releases are designed to quickly convey basic facts to the media in a direct, concise manner. Press releases regarding WNV will be typed on the Health Officer’s letterhead. See Attachment A (level I,II and III Press releases) and Attachment B (letterhead).

### Production Tips

- Quickly develop a draft and gain approval for release.
- Include quote from a senior official if possible.
- Spell check.
- Always have a second person review the release before sending it out.
- Don’t be trivial- make sure information is newsworthy.
- Get the release out as soon as possible – respect media deadlines.
- Use a pre-programmed fax machine with broadcast capability or an email media distribution list.
- Maintain a complete file of all releases.
- Update media contact names and numbers.
- Do not call newsroom to check on releases.
- Be prepared for immediate follow-up calls – keep relevant information handy.
- In follow-up releases, use new information as your lead.
- Monitor coverage and compare to press releases.

### Format

Press releases are written in the “Inverted Pyramid” style: Crucial information up front followed by less important information. A factual lead sentence must be followed by prioritized information.

Format guidelines:

- Double space
- Two-inch margins (for editors to make notes)
- One side of 8 ½ x 11 paper
- Not to exceed two pages
- Letterhead at the top
- Identified contact person, title and phone number
- Headline
- Dateline (city from which release is originating) followed by two dashes

- At the bottom of the first page, center the term “-30-“ to indicate the end of the release or “MORE” to indicate additional page.

## **8. Media Briefings**

News Conferences and Media Briefings are designed to quickly communicate directly with the media. The emergency or announcement should be of sufficient interest to make individual interviews impractical. A news conference or media briefing is appropriate when the disaster has considerable community impact, involves numerous agencies, and when you want to ensure that all media hear the same thing at the same time.

### Key Concepts

- One designated lead Public Information Officer (PIO) serves as facilitator/mediator
- To provide specific information and/or answer questions
- Statements should be made by senior officials
- Generally involves more than one participant
- Lead official gives opening statement and responds to questions
- Delegate answers to appropriate representative
- Relatively informal

### Preparation

- Identify key speakers (must have at least one senior official)
- Confirm spelling of names
- Identify the message you want to convey – no message, no conference
- Inform media of time and location (by phone or faxed media advisory)
- Set up the facility:
  - Podium
  - Seating
  - Camera area
  - Electrical supply
  - Backdrop
  - Noise control
  - Parking
- Provide media kits:
  - News release
  - Event background
  - Organization background
  - Photos
  - Fact sheets
  - Brief biographies of key speakers
  - Maps (as needed)
- Coach speakers
- Review desired messages
- Set speaking times – do not deviate
- Rehearse presentation and potential questions



### Conducting the Conference

- Greet media as they arrive; exchange business cards
- Take charge – set the tone
- Introduce participants by name and position/role in the event
- Review ground rules (statements then questions, available time, etc.)
- Coordinate movement of speakers to/from the podium
- Make notes of questions that need follow-up and who asked the question
- Be available afterwards for follow-up

## **9. Public Meetings**

Public meetings are a critical opportunity to share information directly with the public as well as the media. Well organized public meetings are effective in addressing public concerns and demonstrate the commitment and effectiveness of government leaders. However, a poorly prepared or managed meeting can produce just the opposite result and may be difficult to overcome.

### Preparation

- Know your audience(s)
  - Who are they? Where are they from?
  - What are their interests and concerns?
  - What are their likely perceptions and biases?
  - Will they be receptive, resistant or hostile?
- Identify key speakers (must have at least one senior official)
- Confirm spelling of names
- Prepare presentations
  - Develop a strong introduction
  - Develop a maximum of three messages
  - Assemble support data
  - Identify suitable audiovisual aids
  - Prepare for answering questions
- Set a date, time and place. Be sensitive to working hours, disrupted transportation, etc.
- Publicize the event. Give people ample time to make arrangements to attend
- Inform media of time and location (by phone or faxed media advisory)
- Set up the facility:
  - Podium
  - Seating
  - Camera area
  - Electrical supply
  - Backdrop
  - Microphone system
  - Microphones for questioners
  - A/V set-up
  - Direction signs
  - Parking

- Prepare audiovisual aids:
  - Self-explanatory
  - Illustrate key concepts or info
  - Support only one major idea
  - Use pictures/graphics
  - Six words per line maximum
  - Ten lines for visual maximum
  - Appropriate for the location
  - Can be seen from all areas
  - Have impact – if not, don't use
  - Don't distract
- Coach speakers:
  - Dress as audience would expect
  - Avoid repetitive gestures
  - Speak distinctly and clearly
  - Make eye contact; don't fidget
  - Use gestures as appropriate
  - Vary speaking tempo
  - Stand up straight, don't slouch
  - Adjust speaking volume as needed
- Set speaking times – do not deviate
- Rehearse presentation and potential questions

#### Conducting the Meeting

- Refer to “Conducting the Media Briefing”

### **10. References**

This document is taken in whole and in part from the **Marin County** WNV Risk Communication Plan – August 2003

## Preparing for West Nile Virus in Santa Cruz County *Public Urged to Take Precautions*

**For Immediate Release**

Contact:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Title:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Phone:

*Santa Cruz*– [If announcing first IMPORTED human case in Santa Cruz, first paragraph describes situation and case]. Then: “Santa Cruz County citizens should be aware of West Nile Virus and how to take some simple steps to protect themselves against mosquito bites,” said [spokesperson here].

“Arrival of the West Nile virus seems likely here in Santa Cruz County, so the best way to avoid the disease is to reduce exposure to and eliminate breeding grounds for mosquitoes.”

Typically, West Nile Virus appears in a community’s bird and horse populations before it appears in human beings.

Santa Cruz County citizens can protect themselves against mosquito bites by avoiding outdoor activities during mosquito-prone times (dawn, dusk, and early evening), wearing long sleeves and long pants when outdoors especially at night, and using a repellent containing DEET on exposed skin. Follow the label directions when using any repellent.

Be sure to look around your home, property and neighborhood and empty any standing water from containers such as flowerpots, tires, and gutters. Regularly change animal water bowls and troughs to prevent mosquito breeding. Plant mosquito-eating fish in ponds, fountains, birdbaths and other standing water around your home. Screens on porches and windows will keep mosquitoes from getting into your home, and therefore should be well maintained.

West Nile Virus is spread by mosquitoes to birds, animals and humans. There is no evidence that the virus can be transmitted from birds to humans and is not spread from person to person by casual contact. Although rarely spread from person to person via blood transfusions or organ transplantation, new blood bank procedures are now screening for WNV.

West Nile Virus was first identified in the United States in 1999 in the New York City area and by 2002 had spread to all but 6 western states. It is not easy to contract West Nile Virus. Relatively few mosquitoes carry the virus. The chance of becoming ill from a mosquito bite is very low. Most people bitten by infected mosquitoes have no symptoms at all. Others may get mild or flu-like symptoms (West Nile Fever) such as a fever, headache, body aches, nausea and vomiting and sometimes swollen lymph glands and a rash. These symptoms generally resolve in three to six days.

The virus can, in rare cases, cause a form of encephalitis (infection of the brain) or meningitis (infection of the tissue layers covering the brain and spinal cord). It is important to note that only about one in 150 people infected with WNV will become severely ill.

**-MORE-**

People who are older than 50 years of age have a higher risk of becoming more severely ill from the virus.

There is no specific treatment for West Nile fever, encephalitis, or meningitis. However, the symptoms can be lessened through proper medical attention.

Surveillance and mosquito control efforts are under way in Santa Cruz County and throughout California. Residents who find freshly dead crows, blue jays, magpies, ravens, sparrow, finches, cardinals and raptors such as owls, hawks or eagles are encouraged to contact the California Department of Health Services West Nile Virus toll-free hotline at 1-877-WNV-BIRD (1-877-968-2473) or log onto [www.westnile.ca.gov](http://www.westnile.ca.gov).

For information about WNV or to report dead birds, the State phone # is 877-WNV-BIRD and their website is: [www.westnile.ca.gov/](http://www.westnile.ca.gov/). General information can also be found at the Santa Cruz County website: [www.santacruzhealth.org](http://www.santacruzhealth.org) under "Alerts".

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DRAFT \*\* DRAFT\*\* DRAFT  
Level II Press Release

**West Nile Virus Confirmed In Santa Cruz County**  
*First Confirmed Mosquito, Bird, or Animal Case in Santa Cruz*

**For Immediate Release**

Contact:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Title:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Phone:

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Santa Cruz-* Case confirmation, description details here

The diagnosis was confirmed after extensive diagnostic tests performed by (lab name here)

Condition of horse (or number of dead birds) here... has been improving since  
.....

"The West Nile virus has arrived in Santa Cruz County, so the best way to avoid the disease is to reduce exposure to and eliminate breeding grounds for mosquitoes," said [INSERT SPOKESPERSON].

Santa Cruz County residents can protect themselves from mosquito bites by avoiding outdoor activities during mosquito-prone times (e.g. between dusk and dawn), wearing long sleeves and long pants when outdoors, and using a repellent containing DEET. Follow the label directions when using any repellent. Also it is important to wear gloves when handling any dead bird or mammal.

"Be sure to look around your home and property and empty any standing water from containers such as flower pots, tires, gutters and birdbaths," [spokesperson] said.

There is no evidence of horses and birds transmitting West Nile virus directly to humans and it is not typically spread from person to person. Rarely, it can be transmitted via blood transfusions or organ transplantation. New blood bank procedures are now screening for WNV. Most animals will recover from the virus. Some animals will show symptoms from mild illness to death when infected with the virus.

Horses will show symptoms of listlessness, staggering, fever and weakness when infected. If you think your animal(s) has the West Nile Virus contact your veterinarian. There is a licensed vaccine available for horses; data to date indicate that this vaccine is safe and shows some effectiveness. Horse owners

should consult with their veterinarian to get more information about this vaccine. There is no vaccine for any other type of animal or for humans.

**-MORE-**

West Nile virus was first identified in the United States in 1999 in the New York City area and by 2002 had spread to most states. So far this year the virus has been found in [INSERT NUMBER of horses and/or birds from number of states, etc....]

For information about WNV or to report dead birds, the State phone # is 877-WNV-BIRD and their website is: [www.westnile.ca.gov/](http://www.westnile.ca.gov/). General information can also be found at the Santa Cruz County website: [www.santacruzhealth.org](http://www.santacruzhealth.org) under "Alerts". For more information about the County's preparedness efforts, you may also contact [INSERT CONTACT].....

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DRAFT \*\* DRAFT\*\* DRAFT  
Level III Press Release

**West Nile Virus In Santa Cruz County**  
*First Probable or Confirmed Human Case in Santa Cruz County*

**For Immediate Release**

Contact:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Title:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Phone:

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
San Rafael – [NOTE: IF THIS IS ALSO THE FIRST CASE IN CALIFORNIA, IT IS AN EVEN BIGGER STORY. ADJUST FIRST PARAGRAPH ACCORDINGLY]. A (AGE) (COUNTY NAME) (GENDER) has been diagnosed with (DISEASE) caused by West Nile Virus (WNV), making (HIM/HER) the county’s [state’s?] first reported case this year of the mosquito-borne illness. The diagnosis was confirmed after extensive testing performed by (LAB NAME HERE). The (MAN/WOMAN) is (DESCRIBE CONDITION).

“The appearance of West Nile Virus in (COUNTY NAME) is not a surprise,” said (NAME OF LOCAL HEALTH OFFICER).” “As the virus has moved westward across the United States, we have been preparing for its arrival.” “It is important that people be aware of WNV, and know that there are measures they can take to minimize exposure to mosquitoes and reduce the chance of becoming infected, said (NAME OF LOCAL HEALTH OFFICER)

Individuals can reduce their risk of mosquito-borne diseases by taking these precautions:

- Avoid spending time outside when mosquitoes are most active, especially at dawn and dusk.
- When outdoors, wear long pants and long-sleeved shirts.
- Use mosquito repellent with DEET according to label instructions. Products with 10-35% DEET will provide adequate protection under most conditions. For children over the age of two months, use repellent with up to 30% DEET, depending on how long they will be outdoors, as recommended by the Academy of Pediatrics. Products with 10% are effective for about two hours; with 24%, about 5 hours.
- Make sure that doors and windows have tight fitting screens. Repair or replace screens that have tears or holes.

- Eliminate all sources of standing water on your property that can support mosquito breeding.
- Contact the Santa Cruz County Mosquito and Vector Control District if there is a significant mosquito problem where you live or work.

So far this year, WNV has been diagnosed in [NUMBER] people nationwide, with [NUMBER] of those in California. Last year, California's first reported human case of WNV was recorded in Los Angeles County. The woman fully recovered. Further WNV

**-MORE-**

activity was not detected despite extensive monitoring for the virus. In the United States in 2002, more than 4,000 human cases of West Nile infection were reported, including 277 deaths. Since it was first detected in the United States in New York in 1999, WNV has been found in [INSERT NUMBER TO DATE] states and the District of Columbia.

Most individuals who are infected with WNV will not experience any illness. Up to 20 percent will have only mild symptoms (West Nile Fever), such as fever, headaches, body aches, nausea, vomiting, and sometimes, swollen lymph glands, or skin rash, 3 to 14 days after a mosquito bite. Symptoms usually last three to six days.

About one in 150 people infected with WNV will develop severe illness such as brain infection (encephalitis) or infection of the tissue layers covering the brain and spinal cord (meningitis). Symptoms of viral meningitis or encephalitis (from any cause) may include: severe headache, high fever, stiff neck, disorientation (confusion), coma, tremors (the shakes), muscle weakness, and paralysis (unable to move certain parts of the body). Severe illness and fatality are more commonly seen in the elderly.

Individuals experiencing any of the symptoms of viral meningitis or encephalitis should seek medical attention immediately.

WNV is transmitted to humans and animals through a mosquito bite. Mosquitoes become infected when they feed on infected birds. Human-to-human transmission of WNV generally does not occur. There is no evidence that the virus is spread through casual contact. Human WNV infection was associated with blood transfusions and organ transplants in 2002, and blood banks are now screening for WNV.

For information about WNV, the State website is: [www.westnile.ca.gov](http://www.westnile.ca.gov). General information can also be found at the Santa Cruz County website: [www.santacruzhealth.org](http://www.santacruzhealth.org) under "Alerts". For more information about the County's activities, you may also contact [INSERT CONTACT or HOTLINE# IF WE ESTABLISH ONE].....

**ADDITIONAL BACKGROUND INFORMATION:**

A comprehensive surveillance program to monitor for WNV in California has been established by the California Department of Health Services (CDHS) in collaboration with the University of California, Davis, California Department of Food and Agriculture, local mosquito and vector control districts and other state and local agencies. The program includes testing suspect cases in humans and horses, capturing and testing mosquitoes, testing sentinel chickens and evaluating dead birds. Approximately 200 flocks of sentinel chickens at sites throughout the state are tested every two weeks for the presence of the virus.



The public can become part of the state's monitoring effort for WNV by reporting any crows, ravens, magpies, jays, sparrows, finches, and raptors (e.g. owls, hawks, eagles) that may have been dead for less than 48 hours to a special CDHS toll-free line: 877-WNV-BIRD. Individuals should take note of the bird's location and its condition before calling for further instructions, including assistance with identifying the type of bird found. The bird should show no signs of decomposition or maggot infestation.

**-MORE-**

The tissue of dead birds is tested for the presence of WNV. The virus was most often identified first in dead birds, especially crows, in other regions of the country. While there is no evidence that people can get the virus from handling live or dead infected birds, individuals should not attempt to catch or handle them.

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