

Potentially dangerous species of Asian mosquito discovered in El Monte

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The Asian tiger mosquito, which is known to carry several diseases such as dengue fever, was discovered in El Monte last week. (Photo courtesy of the Centers for Disease Control)

EL MONTE - An aggressive and invasive species of Asian mosquito known to transmit several dangerous diseases has been discovered in the San Gabriel Valley, pest control officials said Tuesday.

Officials with the San Gabriel Valley Mosquito & Vector Control District said mosquitoes found in the 11000 block of Dodson Street last week have been identified as Asian tiger mosquitoes, which have the potential to carry dengue fever, yellow fever and several encephalitis-causing viruses.

The tiny mosquitoes are marked with black and white stripes and are distinguished from other species of mosquitoes by actively feeding during

the day.

A campaign to spread information about the insect and eliminate the infestation

is scheduled to begin this week, according to the Vector Control District.

Crews will be going door-to-door today in the neighborhood where the mosquitoes were discovered.

Control operations, which include the use of pesticide fogs, are expected to begin Friday. Residents will be given 24-hour notice before pesticide is used, district officials said.

Kelly Middleton, Vector Control District spokeswoman, said the El Monte infestation was discovered while an inspector was responding to a routine call.

"We had a typical report of someone who was having problems with mosquito bites," she said.

While out in the field, the inspector swatted one of the insects and realized it was an Asian tiger mosquito,

Middleton said.

Middleton said none of the mosquitoes in El Monte have been found to carry dengue or yellow fever. She said the mosquitoes have also been known to carry West Nile Virus, but it's not clear whether they can transmit the disease to humans.

"At this point we haven't identified any of these diseases we're concerned about in L.A. County," Middleton said.

But having the mosquitoes around increases the chances of disease outbreaks, especially in an area such as Los Angeles that sees a lot of travelers from foreign countries, said Steve Stoddard, an assistant projects scientist in UC Davis' Department of Entomology.

Stoddard said the mosquitoes can pick up a disease and spread it if they bite someone who was infected while visiting another country.

"There's always that potential if you have a local (mosquito) population and people (who) travel a lot," he said.

The mosquito was first introduced to the U.S. in 1985 and has firmly established itself in the Southeast and Hawaii, where it has caused several outbreaks of dengue, Middleton said.

This is the first time the mosquitoes have been seen in Southern California since 2001, when they were accidentally introduced in imported "Lucky Bamboo" plants.

Middleton said it is not yet clear if the mosquitoes found in El Monte were reintroduced, or if they escaped efforts to eradicate the 2001 infestation.

She said the insects are often spread by plant importers or tire recyclers.

Stoddard said Southern California's cool winters would likely slow the spread of the mosquitoes here and keep their populations down, but he

warned that the mosquitoes are an "extremely effective invasive species."

"I would be surprised if it couldn't become established in L.A.," he said.

To help with eradication efforts, officials recommend residents take steps to reduce the places where the mosquitoes can live and breed. Such measures include dumping out containers with standing water, disposing of unused tires that may collect water, and drilling drain holes in the bottom of tire swings and other play equipment that may collect water.

Anyone who believes they have seen or were bitten by an Asian tiger mosquito is asked to report it to vector control officials by calling 626-814-9466. For more information, visit www.sgvmosquito.org

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