

# Expert: Threat of West Nile virus high from proposed wetlands

By Preston McConkie

Uintah County was home to Utah's first human case of West Nile illness in 2003, and this year five cases have been detected in the area served by the TriCounty Health Department.

Still despite the arrival of the deadly mosquito-borne disease in North America, a small federal agency is moving forward with plans to expand mosquito habitat in Uintah and Duchesne counties.

Those plans are being made without any scientific analysis of the likely consequences; without proper preparations for lowering the threat to public health; and with no workable plan to pay for mosquito abatement services, according to scientists and officials with roots in the two counties.

"We have not been treated fairly whatsoever, and there is no science involved with the people who have been doing the planning," said Dr. Steven Romney, who holds a doctorate in mosquito biology and medical entomology.

As director of Uintah County Mosquito Abatement District,

Romney is critical of plans by the federal Utah Reclamation, Mitigation and Conservation Commission to add thousands of acres of formerly drained swamps to western Uintah and eastern Duchesne counties.

Romney, who has run the abatement district since it was founded in 1975, said he was never consulted by the mitigation commission during the eight years it spent preparing its original plans. He only learned of those plans in late 2003 when the commission held mandatory public meetings.

Since then Romney has had time to read the commission's 370-page environmental impact statement, and he says he isn't impressed.

"I don't think the mosquito problem has been thoroughly researched by people who are knowing in that theater of expertise," Romney said. "I don't think anyone is being malicious, but the problem is far more immense than their simple solutions would provide for."

Earlier criticism was lobbed at the project by Daniel Uresk, a federally-employed research

biologist who also owns 40 acres of land in the wetlands project's planning zone.

"Techniques for monitoring mosquitoes for public health as presented in the document are inadequate," Uresk wrote in a 2004 letter to Ron Groves, wetlands project coordinator for the Ute Indian Tribe. "Human lives will be highly impacted by disease with inadequate monitoring as proposed...Current write-ups for monitoring and control will not provide high-quality, accurate information required to detect of stop mosquitoes from transmitting diseases."

Romney said the impact statement proposed arbitrary rules for when and how mosquito abatement could be performed. For instance, the commission's proposal says aggressive spraying would only be allowed in the project area if diseased mosquitoes are trapped in those areas. Romney said such rules are written by people who don't understand mosquito control, and would hamper health protection efforts by responsible experts.

"We do things legally and responsibly, not based on what someone tells us we should do,

but based on what we need to do to get it right," Romney said.

Kay Weight, director of the Duchesne County Mosquito Abatement District, said his district has always treated reservation lands as well as private property in the county, because it is the only way to protect the county as a whole.

"In the initial draft, (mitigation commissioners) were talking about issuing permits to go on [the project land]," Weight said. "But you can't wait for someone's permission to get onto land to treat mosquito larvae. When you need it you need it."

Nevertheless, Weight said, his district receives no money from the tribe, and operates on a budget of about \$250,000 drawn from taxes on private property.

And while the commission's revised plans call for using several thousand acres less property, it will simultaneously reduce the amount of taxable land in the counties while increasing mosquito habitat by as much as 30 percent.

Some confusion seems to exist among mitigation commission officials and even tribal members about whether mosquito districts

have been getting money from the tribe to pay for abatement services. Romney said the mitigation commission's plans seemed to be initially based on the idea that the tribe was already channeling large amounts of money to the counties.

"There was a claim that we're already getting money from the tribe, but not a nickel has come in recent history," Romney said. "Our district is tax-based, and there are no monies coming out of this project for mosquito control. If they're going to create a possible mosquito problem, why should the taxpayers be responsible for taking care of it?"

On Oct. 19 Mike Weland, executive director for the mitigation commission, refused to say if there were any new plans for providing mosquito mitigation. Inquiries were met with an official "no comment" and protests that federal law allowed him to make no statement about the commission's incomplete plans.

But Weight says two months ago he was invited to a meeting between mitigation commission officials and the Duchesne County Commission. There,

Weight said, mitigation commission representatives indicated that federal money had been added to the project, which would be paid to the Ute Indian Tribe to perform its own mitigation work.

Word of the arrangement has been passed among government officials and ranchers in both counties, and reactions are the same nearly everywhere. People in and out of government say they worry about how well the arrangement would work, and whether all the money will go where it's intended.

Another worry is whether the money itself can be depended on, or whether it might disappear according to Congressional whim, leaving the tribe with responsibilities but without funds.

Romney said he hopes the mitigation commission will retreat from the position that it wants no more public input and is only putting the finishing polish on a draft environmental impact statement before announcing its final plans.

"If we're lucky, probably they will sit back and study the issue for 20 years," Romney said.