FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Health Officials Preparing for West Nile virus

Local health officials are beginning to sound the trumpet to alert the public of West Nile virus.

Last year, no human cases were confirmed in the Appalachian District Health Department, which includes the counties of Alleghany, Ashe and Watauga Counties, and local health officials want to keep it that way. Although we have found a crow from the Stone Mountain Area in Alleghany County that tested positive for West Nile virus on August 26, 2003.

"We found the virus in this one crow and know it is in Alleghany County, we want to maintain our surveillance and response abilities to keep our citizens safe and free from infection by the virus." Once the virus has been detected in a county, further surveillance including the testing of additional birds, will be discontinued per North Carolina State testing protocol.

West Nile virus is a virus of birds that is spread to other birds, animals and humans by mosquitoes; mosquitoes bite the infected birds and then transfer the disease. Because the virus must enter the bloodstream to cause an infection it is not likely to be caught by having casual contact with infected birds, animals or people.

Symptoms are flu-like and may take up to 15 days after an infected mosquito bite to be present. In more extreme cases, death can occur. Those most likely to be affected are the elderly and anyone with a weakened immune system.

"West Nile virus hit us hard last year, and all signs point to earlier and more widespread outbreaks this year," said Dr. Nolan Newton Public Health Pest Management Chief with the state Division of Environmental Health. "State and local officials have already begun active surveillance and control programs, but citizens can be a tremendous help in our efforts to prevent the spread of West Nile Virus and other mosquito-borne illnesses."

Some ways to avoid mosquito bites are:

- Wear long-sleeved shirts and long-legged pants
- Avoid being outdoors when there are a lot of mosquitoes out
- Use repellents to prevent mosquito bites

Health officials also offer these tips to stop mosquito breeding:

- Empty, destroy, recycle or cover containers like tires, tin cans, buckets and bottles
- Change water in pet bowls and bird baths frequently
- Remove or empty dishes under plants and flowerpots
- Stock ponds and ditches with fish
- Screen or cover rain barrels
- Cover unused pools
- Clean leaf-clogged rain gutters
- Repair leaky faucets

- Put special "donuts" made with mosquito-killing bacteria in water where mosquito eggs may hatch

"The best way to stop the virus is to stop or prevent the breeding of mosquitoes," Daniel Staley, Health Director, adds.

For more information on West Nile virus, contact Barry Irwin, Environmental Specialist or Eva Wooten, RN Supervisor at the Alleghany County Health Department. Additional resources are available at www.ncwnv.com (North Carolina West Nile Virus.com)

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