

Placer County man dies from West Nile virus

By Cynthia H. Craft, Sacramento Bee

Placer County has seen its first human fatality from West Nile virus this season, a reminder, officials said, of the very real danger posed by the mosquito-borne disease.

Howard Stolz, a prominent community volunteer, died Saturday after being hospitalized for 10 days with encephalitis, a severe neuroinvasive condition brought on by the virus.

At 74, Stolz fit the profile of those most likely to succumb to the disease, which tends to strike down older people. The four other fatalities in California this year were of a similar age: an 88-year-old woman in Kern County; an 86-year-old woman in Merced County; an 86-year-old man in Sacramento County; and a 76-year-old woman who died in Fresno County.

In Texas, the epicenter of the West Nile virus epidemic in the United States this year, the same pattern holds, with older people making up the bulk of fatalities.

California has had a relatively mild season this year compared with the peak in 2004, when 779 cases of West Nile virus were detected in the state. So far this season, 75 cases have been confirmed in California.

But the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention warned Wednesday that, nationwide, the country seems to be on track for its worst West Nile year ever, with Texas producing the most alarming number of outbreaks.

Meanwhile, in the Sacramento region, high-profile aerial spraying has given way to less invasive ground treatments, and public mosquito districts are focusing on the prevention

measures that people have heard about all summer.

The region is on the cusp of the season's singularly most aggressive period of West Nile virus onset – late September and October – mosquito district officials warn.

Consider the case of Stolz, a community volunteer many times over, whose daughter, Janet Stolz, points to her father's death as a signal to people to continue to guard against mosquito bites wherever they go.

"His story puts a face to that 1 percent – the 1 percent of cases where West Nile virus advances into encephalitis or meningitis," his daughter said.

"His message would be, 'Do take all the precautions necessary, especially with young children and the elderly, because they are the most vulnerable,'" she said.

The loss of Stolz is being felt in many corridors of the public safety sector where he dedicated himself to volunteering after retirement: at the Foothill K-9 Association; the Placer County Sheriff's Department; the National Night Out Movement against crime; CPR instructional units; and more.

No one knows where he contracted the disease. But many people have bemoaned the loss of a man with a "huge heart" in dozens of tributes on Foothill K-9's Facebook page.