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## **Stinging words for county mosquito control drive Activists say use of chemical spray not worth risks**

*by Shari Rudavsky, Globe Correspondent*

On a recent frigid morning, when mosquitoes seemed as distant as warm summer air, environmental activists bestowed one of their ignoble "Dirty Dozen" awards for egregious polluters on Suffolk County Mosquito Control.

Toxics Action Center's tongue-in-cheek recognition chastised the county for continuing to spray pesticides even as public health officials have moved away from the use of chemicals in the battle against the bugs, which can carry West Nile virus.

"We want to reduce the risk of disease transmission between mosquitoes, but not at the expense of our own health and the health of the environment," said Margaret Connors, a founding member of Jamaica Plain's **Neighborhood Pesticide Action** Committee, which nominated Suffolk County Mosquito Control for the dubious distinction.

Connors, center officials, and others earlier this month paid a surprise visit to Mosquito Control's Hyde Park office next to a school bus parking lot, festooned with signs warning about hazardous materials. A small sign noted the presence of the office within, but no one responded to Connors' pounding on the locked door.

Although the award specifically names the Suffolk County board, it could as well include the eight other small offices that constitute the state's front-line defense against these tiny unwelcome residents, Toxics Action Center officials say.

None of the offices, which are under the purview of the Department of Agriculture, has any public health oversight.

"With no public health-based central authority, mosquito control activities might be causing more harm than good," said Sherry Ayres, the Toxics Action Center's state director. "This is a system that's not working."

Suffolk Mosquito Control officials shrugged off the attention, saying that in recent summers they cut back extensively in their use of pesticides, as the lack of rain has kept the skeeter population manageable.

"It's kind of silly in this particular case," said Bruce Landers, Suffolk County Mosquito Control superintendent. "Our last chance to make a difference is the residential spraying, and with any kind of luck, we don't have to do much of it."

Instead, the county has concentrated its efforts on killing the bugs in the larval stage before they menace human beings, Landers said.

The advent of West Nile virus has spotlighted mosquito control activities. When a crow with the disease showed up in Jamaica Plain two summers ago, Suffolk County Mosquito Control sprayed the entire area preventively, much to the dismay of many residents, some of whom formed the Action Committee.

The following summer the Boston Public Health Commission, charged with overseeing efforts to control West Nile, adopted a no-spray policy, adding fodder to the neighborhood committee's efforts to halt the practice.

Mosquito Control continued to spray when deemed necessary to keep the insects' numbers low, as it has done for the past two decades. While some residents decry pesticides, others who live in swampy areas welcome the trucks, Landers said.

Still, activists would like public health officials to have more control over the use of pesticides that they view as potentially harmful to the ecosystem — and humans. The European Commission just banned the use of one of the pesticides Suffolk County uses.

"Adult spraying should be a last resort when you have a high level of the disease," said Heidi Roddis Ricci, senior environmental policy specialist at the Massachusetts Audubon Society. "It's a precautionary principle: You don't use toxic chemicals in the environment when you're not sure there's a public health reason to do it and you're not sure what the impact will be."

Landers counters that spraying entails only about half an ounce per acre of a common chemical that the EPA deems safe.

"It's not much. It depends on how you feel about it," he said. "If you're anti-pesticides under any circumstances, you're not going to be happy. If you're anti-mosquitoes, you're probably not happy because you don't think we're doing enough." □