



County tightens rules about disease-carrying organisms

Joe Naiman

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San Diego County supervisors have unanimously approved several changes to the county's vector abatement and control ordinance.

The changes will take effect Nov. 20 and will streamline enforcement procedures, give the county the right to inspect a property and to abate a public nuisance, and allow the county to collect costs for non-compliance.

The primary goal of the county's vector control program, administered by the county Department of Environmental Health, is to prevent organisms—typically biting insects or ticks that transmits a disease or parasite from one animal or plant to another—from reaching public nuisance or disease thresholds by managing vector habitat while protecting habitat values for vector predators and other beneficial species.

Control program functions include early detection of public health threats through comprehensive surveillance, protection of public health by controlling vectors and exposure to vectors, and timely responses to customer service requests

The California Health and Safety Code defines a vector as any animal capable of transmitting an agent of human disease or producing human discomfort or injury. This includes rodents, bats and other small vertebrates along with insects such as mosquitoes, flies, mites and ticks. The county program identifies vector species, recommends techniques for their prevention and control, and anticipates and minimizes any new interactions between vectors and humans.

The county program is funded by a vector control district that levies a fee. Including a \$5.92 voter-approved vector control assessment, the charge for a single-family home is \$8.92 for the coastal region and \$8.20 for the suburban and rural regions. The supervisors serve as the board of the county's Vector Control District, which includes cities as well as the unincorporated portion of the county.

The program has a 2009-10 budget of \$8.7 million, which covers \$4 million in salaries and benefits for permanent staff and seasonal workers, \$2.4 million for services and supplies including larvacides and aerial applications and outreach materials, \$1.4 million for the vector habitat remediation program, \$609,377 for external overhead and other incidental costs, and \$302,666 for transportation and equipment costs.

The new ordinance gives the director of the Department of Environmental Health or a person designated by the director the authority to conduct surveillance programs and other appropriate studies of vectors and vector-borne diseases, take any necessary and lawful action to prevent the occurrence of vectors and vector-borne diseases, and take any necessary and lawful action to abate or control vectors and vector-borne diseases.

If U.S. Constitution and California Constitution limits are observed, the director of DEH or his designee may enter any property in San Diego County or any property outside the county from which disease-bearing vectors could enter San Diego County to inspect the property and determine the presence or a public nuisance likely to create a breeding ground for vectors, to abate a public nuisance directly or to give notice to the property owner to have the nuisance abated, to determine whether the property owner has complied with a notice to abate, or to control vectors and treat property with appropriate physical, chemical, or biological control measures. The DEH director or designee may request an inspection or abatement warrant to enter a property.

If the director of DEH determines that a public nuisance exists, a Notice and Order to Abate shall be served by U.S. mail to the property owner listed on the county's assessment records. The notice will also be posted in a conspicuous location in front of the property.

The notice will include the compliance deadline and the actions required. A property owner has the right to request a hearing to appeal a Notice and Order to Abate. Non-compliance carries a civil penalty of up to \$1,000 per day, and the property owner may also be liable for the county's abatement and administrative costs.