



## *Media Statement*

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6 October 2009

### **Ross River virus risk in South-West of WA**

The Department of Health today reminded people living and holidaying in the South-West of WA to take extra care against mosquito bites following evidence of Ross River virus (RRV) activity in the Peel region.

Department of Health Acting Medical Entomologist Ms Sue Harrington said there had been an increase in the number of cases of RRV disease reported to the Department from the Peel region.

Doctors are diagnosing RRV infections in people exposed to mosquito bites in the Peel region and a few cases have also been reported in Perth and other areas of the South-West.

“Monitoring programs in coastal areas of the South-West have shown substantial breeding of mosquito species capable of carrying RRV after high tides and rainfall during September,” she said.

“The early occurrence of RRV cases suggests that there is the potential for higher than normal RRV activity this year. Seasonal increases in temperature and other environmental conditions will continue to favour mosquito breeding and virus activity.

“There have also been cases reported of another similar mosquito-borne virus, Barmah Forest virus (BFV), from South-West regions.”

Ms Harrington said mosquito management programs by local governments and the Department of Health were already underway in several regions that have a recognised RRV risk.

“However, it is not realistic to rely on these programs to keep mosquitoes below safe levels and people need to take their own precautions to avoid biting mosquitoes,” he said.

“At the moment, coastal communities in the South-West within three kilometres of tidal saltmarshes and seasonal brackish and freshwater wetlands are likely to be at greatest risk.

“However, the risk may spread further inland and to more Perth suburbs if environmental conditions continue to favour mosquito breeding into the warmer months.”

Most of the types of mosquito that carry RRV and BFV in the South-West breed in natural or rural environments but they can also breed in water-holding containers around houses and other buildings.

People can help reduce RRV and BFV risks in their community by ensuring they are not breeding mosquitoes around their home or work place.

RRV and BFV cause painful or swollen joints, sore muscles, skin rashes, fever, fatigue and headaches.

Symptoms can last for weeks or months and the only way to properly diagnose the viruses is by having a specific blood test.

There are no cures or vaccines for these viruses so it is very important that people take care to prevent being bitten by mosquitoes.

People do not need to alter their plans to visit the South-West as a result of this warning, but it is important to avoid mosquito bites by taking a few simple steps, such as:

- avoiding areas of high mosquito activity, especially around dawn and dusk;
- wearing protective (long, loose-fitting) clothing when outdoors;
- using a personal repellent containing diethyl toluamide (DEET) or picaridin. The most effective and long-lasting formulations are lotions or gels. Most natural or organic repellents are not as effective as DEET or picaridin;
- ensuring insect screens are installed and completely mosquito-proof: use mosquito nets and mosquito-proof tents;
- ensuring infants and children are adequately protected against mosquito bites, preferably with suitable clothing, bed nets or other forms of insect screening. Only infant-strength repellents should be used on small children.

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