

Climate change brings tropical diseases closer to California

By Kitty Felde | Aug 5, 2012



James Gathany/Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

L.A. County's health department warns that the warming side effects of climate change could lead straight to an upswing in tropical disease across California.

Inside an air-conditioned hearing with the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, climate skeptics argued temperature statistics with scientists.

Dr. Jonathan Fielding, head of L.A. County's health department, told senators that when he sees a threat, it's his job to be prepared to respond. He says he's concerned that climate change is leading to warming temperatures, and that they in turn are "providing a habitat for vectors (insects particularly) that weren't here before."

Vectors are any organism that doesn't necessarily cause disease, but can transmit infection by carrying pathogens from one host to another.

He identified two tropical diseases: dengue fever, carried by mosquitos, and Chagas disease, spread by the blood-sucking **"kissing bug."** (<http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=silent-killer-chagas-disease>) Fielding said they aren't a threat to California — yet.

"But I wouldn't be surprised to see those problems emerge in the next few years," he adds.

Fielding says dengue isn't deadly, but the high fever and joint pain may make you wish you were dead. Chagas is mild if caught early, but if undetected, it can cause digestive problems 20 or 30 years later.

Dengue fever has been identified in Texas and Florida, and he said there may be one or two cases of Chagas disease in the area, though they are not "lab confirmed." Fielding said blood tests from labs around the county would likely be the first to identify the arrival of these tropical diseases.

Then information about how to spot symptoms would go out to doctors and mosquito abatement would be stepped up in affected areas.

Fielding urged lawmakers to restore funding to the Centers for Disease Control to help local public health departments prepare for insect-borne diseases and other side effects of climate change.

It's been a fairly mild summer in Southern California so far, but Fielding told members of Congress that he's preparing for the long stretches of high temperatures called "extreme heat events".

His agency has identified the people most at risk: elderly Angelenos and those with respiratory or heart conditions. Also at risk are those who can't afford air conditioning.

"We need to make sure that we can link them to necessary resources," he said, "like malls, senior centers and the like. They [need to] get a respite and not wind up in a closed-in apartment without any air conditioning."

When Los Angeles County declares a heat emergency, Fielding said it gets the word out to 88 cities (including their hospitals) via TVs, radios, social media

and reverse 911 calls. The warnings include information about staying hydrated, reducing physical activity, and the locations of county-operated cooling centers.



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It may seem like a silly conspiracy theory to anyone who has not actually seen these potentially deadly diseases in kill mode (eg. dengue, malaria).