Trade and Consumer Protection

Still cold but not too early to vaccinate horses against mosquito-borne illness

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MADISON – Even though it's still cold outside, mosquitoes will be here soon enough spreading two diseases among horses that can be eliminated by vaccination, Eastern equine encephalitis (EEE) and West Nile virus (WNV).

"Before we see our first mosquito it's easy to forget about vaccinations against mosquito-borne diseases," says State Veterinarian Dr. Paul McGraw of the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection. "We've already seen the sun emerge to warm things up and the mosquito population will multiply before you know it."

Horses require two doses of the vaccinations initially, and then boosters at least annually.

"Work with your veterinarian on your horse's vaccination program, so you get the best formulation for your horse and advice about additional boosters later in the season," McGraw says.

Both WNV and EEE are caused by viruses transmitted by mosquitoes, and both may cause encephalitis, or inflammation of the brain. Both viruses can be fatal to horses. Symptoms are similar for both diseases: depression, appetite loss, drooping eyelids and lower lip, fever, weakness, twitching, paralysis or lack of coordination, aimless wandering, circling and blindness.

Neither of the viruses is contagious between horses. While humans may also be infected by both WNV and EEE, it does not pass between people and horses. Mosquitos biting warm-blooded animals is the only route of transmission.

Besides vaccination, McGraw recommends taking other steps to limit horses' exposure to mosquitoes once the weather warms up:

- Remove items from surrounding property that could collect stagnant water such as old tires, tin cans, plastic containers.
- Keep rain gutters clean and draining properly.
- Clean and chlorinate swimming pools, outdoor saunas and hot tubs, and drain water from pool covers.
- Turn wading pools and wheelbarrows upside down when not in use.
- Empty and replace water in birdbaths at least once a week.
- Consider keeping horses in the barn from dusk to dawn, when mosquitoes are most active.

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