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TRI-STATE AREA

Scientists Tackle Connecticut's Tick Problem

CDC funding sparks new statewide study into tiny pests and their pathogens



The blacklegged tick, or deer tick, is Connecticut's most common tick species. PHOTO: HANDOUT/REUTERS

By Charity L. Scott

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A team of scientists is trying to get a better grasp of Connecticut's tick population.

With funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, researchers at the Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station are for the first time actively collecting ticks statewide to test for organisms that cause human diseases, including Lyme disease.

The new program, which started this month, is targeting 40 locations across Connecticut, mainly in state parks, forests and land trusts. Nearly 60% of the state is forested, making it a

prime habitat for ticks.

Connecticut reported more than 35,000 cases of diseases contracted through tick bites from 2004 to 2016, according to the CDC. That makes it the state with the fifth most cases, behind Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey and Massachusetts.

Dr. Theodore Andreadis, director of the CAES, said since 1990 residents have been mailing ticks to the station for identification and testing. But that program only tests the state's most common tick species, the blacklegged tick, for three pathogens. As a result, researchers have robust data on tick-infection rates for those pathogens, which includes the bacterium that causes Lyme disease.

"Nearly 50% of the ticks that are brought to us by the public that do have blood in them test positive for one of three of these different pathogens, so the infection rates are quite high," Dr. Andreadis said.

The new program will test both native and invasive tick species, like the Asian longhorned tick, and determine infection rates for several more pathogens, including Powassan virus, an emerging tick-borne disease that can lead to swelling in and around the brain.

The CDC received reports of nearly 60,000 cases of tick-borne diseases nationwide in 2017. Overall, the number of U.S. cases from tick, mosquito and flea bites tripled from 2004 to 2016.

The Connecticut State Department of Public Health secured funding from the CDC and allocated it to the CAES, a health department spokeswoman said. The CDPH will request more funding for the program in an application due in May.

Tick season stretches from April to October. Although Lyme disease infections peak during the summer months, cases are reported year-round because adult ticks don't hibernate, said Dr. Kirby Stafford, chief scientist at the CAES who will be overseeing the new program.

"You can pick up a tick in January, on a nice beautiful day, and come down with Lyme disease," he said.

The state health department says it is too early to know how bad this year will be for tick-borne diseases.

"Everyone always asks us how bad is it going to be, and we say it's always bad," Dr. Andreadis said.