

Hawaii declares emergency over mosquito-borne illnesses

February 13 2016, byCathy Bussewitz

Hawaii Gov. David Ige declared a state of emergency to fight mosquito borne illnesses including dengue fever and the Zika virus.

The state has been in the midst of a dengue fever outbreak on Hawaii's Big Island, where there were more than 250 confirmed cases.

There have been no locally transmitted cases of the Zika virus in Hawaii, Ige said in a news conference Friday. But there's concern that the islands could be at risk because mosquitoes that can carry [dengue fever](#) also can carry the Zika virus.

"We are doing everything we can to be prepared, to be proactive, to prevent [vector borne diseases](#) here in Hawaii," Ige said.

The emergency proclamation could help the state acquire more money to [control](#) outbreaks.

Hawaii is rushing to build up its mosquito control staff after a December report from the Centers for Disease Control highlighted deficiencies in the state's vector control department. The state slashed its mosquito control and entomology staff during the economic downturn, from 56 employees in 2009 to 25 positions in 2016. Health officials are now searching for funding to rebuild the staff, and the Department of Health plans to hire 10 new staffers with money the governor released, said Virginia Pressler, director of department, on Friday.

"We are actively hiring new staff, an entomologist that will be dedicated to Hawaii Island that will be starting next week as well as additional communications and vector control staff," Pressler said.

Officials stressed that Hawaii is still a safe place to visit. No travel advisories have been issued about Hawaii, and tourism is off to a strong start in 2016, said George Szigeti, president and CEO of the Hawaii Tourism Authority.

"There's no reason to be alarmed or to alter your traveling plans," Szigeti said.

There are active Zika outbreaks on Pacific Islands including American Samoa. Flights between American Samoa and Hawaii run several times per week.

The proclamation also will give the state more power to take preventive measures, including the ability to spray pesticides regardless of a homeowner's wishes.

"There are some who are holding out and not allowing us to be on their property," Pressler said. "One of the things that this emergency declaration from the governor will allow us to do is that we can in fact enforce that we will come and take care of mosquitoes on a property that someone is refusing, because it is a [public health emergency](#)."

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