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Danger virus warning to North Coast tourists

By JIM O'ROURKE

A RECORD outbreak of the debilitating Ross River virus in holiday meccas on the NSW Far North Coast has prompted a call for tourists to be warned they may be endangering their health if they visit.

Byron Shire deputy mayor Jan Barham, herself battling the mosquito-borne virus, said tourist operators and local government must tell visitors of the risks of holidaying in places such as Byron Bay and Tweed Heads.

Her stand comes as health authorities reveal cases of Ross River and the similar Barmah Forest viruses have reached alarming levels in the region.

Northern Rivers Area Health Service has released figures showing 370 cases of the two viruses are being treated in the worst affected areas: Byron, Tweed and Lismore shires.

One of Byron Bay's best-known residents, former *Sale Of The Century* co-host Delvene Delaney, is trying to shrug off the symptoms of Ross River fever.

People close to Ms Delaney, who is married to property tycoon, movie producer and hotelier John Cornell, told *The Sun-Herald* she had been ill for some weeks.

"Delvene and John have a beautiful home in the hills outside Byron, but it is a haven for mozzies," a former neighbour said.

"It sits in a valley that collects the run-off. The mosquitoes love it."

While not fatal, the fevers can hit sufferers with symptoms similar to chronic fatigue syndrome, leaving them listless, constantly tired and with ever-present aches and pains in the joints. Mosquitoes spread the viruses after feeding on an infected animal or person before moving on to another human.

Councillor Barham, a member of the Greens party, said those who encouraged visitors to the region, including the local tourist industry and local government, had a duty of care to make sure tourists were not put at risk.

"People come here for a great sub-tropical experience, but they can be left with a serious illness simply because they did not know they were at risk of catching it," she said.

Councillor Barham said there was some resistance from the industry to talking about the dangers because op-



'MORE MOSQUITOES THAN EVER': Jo-Ann Allchin rides through the flooded grounds of Seahorses Riding School, Byron Bay.

Picture: DANIELLE SMITH

ROSS RIVER FEVER FACTS



- A virus, not fatal. Infections peak in summer, autumn. Flu-like symptoms include fever, headache, muscle and joint aches. Rash may occur. Symptoms show a week after bite.
 - Virus spread by female mosquitoes. Passed on when mosquito feeds again.
 - Recovery could take weeks or up to three months. In rare cases, a year.
 - No specific treatment. Doctors advise rest, healthy eating.
 - Avoid being outside later afternoon. Wear loose clothing covering arms and legs; use quality insect repellent.
- Source: NSW Health Department



WARNING: Jan Barham.

erators feared it would drastically affect visitor numbers.

But, she said, if tourists were advised of the simple ways to prevent infection, the industry and the region's economy did not have to suffer.

Councillor Barham has been on leave of absence from her duties since May due to the Ross River infection.

She foreshadowed draft council regulations making it compulsory for residential developments to have a

buffer zone if they are built near wetlands or flood-prone land.

Sein Lowry, managing director of the popular Byron Bay Arts Factory Backpackers Lodge, said his staff provided insect repellent, mosquito coils and incense sticks to keep the insects at bay.

Another tourism operator, Jo-Ann Allchin of the Seahorses Riding Centre at Byron Bay, said all her clients were given insect repellent and were asked to wear long-sleeved tops and long pants.

Ms Allchin, whose property was recently flooded, said she had noticed more mosquitoes than ever.

"I've been reading about Ross River and it's pretty worrying, so I'll have a check-up," she said. "But we make sure we protect all our clients."

Justine Waters, Director of Population Health at the area health service, said the North Coast regularly recorded more than one-third of the Ross River fever cases in NSW.