

FDA expands Zika screening to all U.S. blood centers

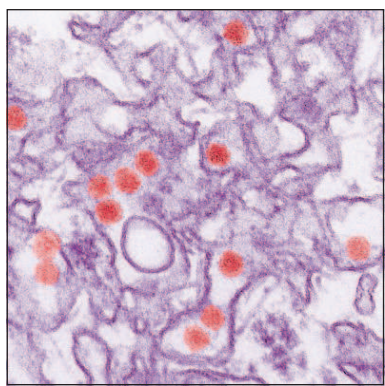
WASHINGTON (AP) — The government told all U.S. blood banks Friday to start screening for Zika, a major expansion intended to protect the nation's blood supply from the mosquito-borne virus.

Previously, blood testing was mostly limited to parts of Florida and Puerto Rico, where Zika is spreading. Screening will initially extend to states along the Gulf Coast and a few others.

"There is still much uncertainty regarding the nature and extent of Zika virus transmission," Dr. Peter Marks said in a Food and Drug Administration release. "At this time, the recommendation for testing the entire blood supply will help ensure that safe blood is available for all individuals who might need transfusion."

Blood banks already test donations for HIV, hepatitis, West Nile and other blood-borne viruses. The Zika virus stays in the blood for about one week, but is thought to remain in other bodily fluids longer.

While Zika is primarily spread through mosquito bites, there have been reports in Brazil of Zika transmission through transfusion.



Cynthia Goldsmith/CDC via AP

This 2016 colored electron microscope image made available by the CDC shows the Zika virus, in red.

No such cases have been reported in the United States. One Zika-positive blood donation, though, was recently intercepted in Florida, Marks said Friday.

"The donation was identified while the blood bag was still in quarantine, before it was released," Marks told reporters on a media call. "The system worked correctly."

Zika can also be spread through sex, and Marks said that played into the decision to expand testing.

Current evidence suggests that infected men can spread the virus for several months through sex, and women can transmit it for several weeks.

Adding to the challenge is that 4 out of 5 people infected never develop symptoms, such as fever, joint pain and rash.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on Friday reported the first U.S. case of a man spreading Zika through sex even though he never had any symptoms. The Maryland man had traveled to the Dominican Republic, one of the many countries in the Caribbean and Latin America hit with a Zika outbreak.

There have been nearly 2,500 cases of Zika in the U.S. linked to travel to outbreak areas. Since February, blood banks have turned away people who had recently visited those regions, under a previous FDA directive.

While the virus causes only a mild illness in most people, infection during pregnancy can lead to severe brain-related birth defects.

Blood testing began last month in parts of Florida after the first

cases of homegrown Zika occurred in Miami. So far, there have been about 40 cases of Zika caused by mosquito bites in Florida. Health officials, however, don't expect widespread outbreaks to occur in the U.S.

The FDA has authorized use of two experimental blood screening tests for Zika, one made by Roche and another from Hologic Inc. and Grifols. Several testing sites are already voluntarily using the technology, including blood centers in Texas.

The cost of adding Zika testing to the screening process is less than \$10 per blood donation, according to officials at South Texas Blood and Tissue Center.

FDA officials said they do not anticipate any problems supplying the tests throughout the U.S.

The tropical mosquito that spreads Zika and other viruses is found along the southern U.S. Friday's directive lists 11 states that will need to begin screening blood in the next month because of their location or because of the influx of travelers from Zika outbreak countries.

On the list: Alabama, Arizona, California, Georgia, Hawaii, Louisiana, Mississippi, New Mexico, New York, South Carolina and Texas.

All other U.S. states and territories will have three months to comply.

An executive for America's Blood Centers, which has more than 600 locations in the U.S. and Canada, warned that the amount of work needed to comply with the FDA's timeline is "titanic."

"Testing labs and the test vendors are working feverishly to allow testing to start on time in the areas subject to the 12 week timeline," said Dr. Louis Katz, in an email.

The FDA works with other federal agencies to set standards for screening, testing and handling blood donations. Blood banks and donation centers adhere to those guidelines.

Friday's announcement follows recent pressure from members of Congress to expand Zika screening. The move is "a strong step forward in protecting our nation's blood supply," Rep. Rosa DeLauro, D-Conn., said in a statement.

U.S. wants to force lower speeds on truck and bus drivers

DETROIT (AP) — The U.S. is seeking to forcibly limit how fast trucks, buses and other large vehicles can travel on the nation's highways.

A new proposal Friday would impose a nationwide limit by electronically capping speeds with a device on newly made U.S. vehicles that weigh more than 26,000 pounds. Regulators are considering a cap of 60, 65 or 68 mph, though that could change. Whatever the speed limit, drivers would be physically prevented from exceeding it. The proposal, which comes from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration, does not force older heavy vehicles to add the speed-limiting technology, but the regulators are still considering it.

The government said capping speeds for new large vehicles will reduce the 1,115 fatal crashes involving heavy trucks that occur each year and save \$1 billion in fuel costs.

While the news is being welcomed by some safety advocates and non-professional drivers, many truckers said that such changes could lead to dangerous scenarios where they are traveling at much lower speeds than everyone else.

The rule has been ensnared in a regulatory maze in the decade since the nonprofit group RoadSafe America issued its first petition in 2006. The group was founded by Atlanta financial adviser Steve Owings and his wife Susan, whose son Cullum was killed by a speeding tractor-trailer during a trip back to school in Virginia after Thanksgiving in 2002. The nonprofit was later joined by the American Trucking Associations, the nation's largest trucking industry group.

Owings said he will continue to push NHTSA to force older heavy vehicles to limit their speeds.

"We are dismayed and outraged to learn the proposed rule will be for newly manufactured trucks and will not apply to the millions of trucks with which we continue to share the roads today," he said.

NHTSA said retrofitting vehicles made after 1990 with the speed-limiting technology could be too costly, and it is still seeking comments and additional information. NHTSA said it could cost anywhere from \$100 to \$2,000 per vehicle, depending on when the vehicle was made. Changes to some engines could also be required, increasing the costs, NHTSA said. Heavy vehicles made before 1990 don't have the capacity to add the technology.

The government agencies involved will take public comment for 60 days, then determine the final limit and decide if the regulation should be put in place.

To James Chapman, a big rig driver from Spartanburg, South Carolina, 68 mph would be the best option and



AP Photo/Ted S. Warren

In this Wednesday photo, truck and automobile traffic mix on Interstate 5, headed north through Fife, Wash., near the Port of Tacoma.

he'd accept 65. But 60 would be too big of a difference from cars that go 75 or more.

"To me it would be a safety hazard unless it slowed everybody else down," he said while refueling his truck Friday along interstate 75 near Findlay, Ohio.

The agencies said that limiting the speed of heavy vehicles to 60 mph could save as many as 498 lives annually. Limiting it to 65 mph could save as many as 214 lives, and limiting it to 68 mph could save as many as 96 lives. There are 3.6 million big rigs on U.S. roads.

The agencies said the proposal is based on available safety data and the additional benefit of better fuel economy.

But Norita Taylor, spokeswoman for the 157,000-member Owner Independent Drivers Association, said her group has opposed the speed limiters because they create dangerous interactions between vehicles as faster cars slow down for trucks. "Differentials in speed increase interactions between vehicles, which increases the

likelihood of crashes," Taylor said.

Yet there is another compelling reason to limit truck speeds. An investigation last year by The Associated Press found that 14 states have speed limits for big trucks that are equal to or higher than their tires were designed to handle. Most truck tires aren't designed to go faster than 75 mph, and tire manufacturers say traveling faster than that can cause tires to fail and blow out, creating safety issues.

Most of the states with the higher speed limits are west of the Mississippi River. Of the 14, five have speed limits of 80 mph or more and allow trucks to exceed the capability of their tires. NHTSA has said the speed limiters should take care of the discrepancy between state speed limits and truck tire capabilities.

Most of the states with speed limits of 80 or above either didn't know about the truck tire speed ratings or didn't consider them. States set their own speed limits, having been given sole authority to do so by Congress in the mid-1990s.

BRIEFLY

Lawmakers call Maine governor unhinged after obscene tirade

PORTLAND, Maine (AP) — Maine's bombastic Republican governor's obscene tirade unleashed on a liberal lawmaker prompted Democratic lawmakers Friday to warn that the governor was coming unhinged and to call for a political intervention.

Gov. Paul LePage apologized to "the people of Maine" — but not to the legislator — after he left a voicemail message for Democratic Rep. Drew Gattine that said "I am after you" and then told reporters he wished he could challenge Gattine to a duel and point a gun "right between his eyes."

LePage said the angry outburst was justified because Gattine had called him racist — something Gattine denied.

The voicemail followed

a controversy that bubbled up Wednesday when LePage, who is white, said at a town hall in North Berwick that photos he has collected in a binder of drug dealers arrested in the state showed that 90 percent of them "are black and Hispanic people" He displayed the binder at a Friday news conference.

"I want you to prove that I'm a racist," LePage told Gattine in the voicemail Thursday, adding that he had spent his life helping black people and calling Gattine a vulgar name related to oral sex. "I want you to record this and make it public because I am after you."

After leaving the voicemail, LePage invited reporters to the governor's mansion, where he said he wished he could turn back the clock so he and Gattine could face off in a duel.

"When a snot-nosed little guy from Westbrook calls me a racist, now I'd like him to come up here because, tell you right

now, I wish it were 1825," LePage said, according to the *Portland Press Herald*. "And we would have a duel, that's how angry I am, and I would not put my gun in the air, I guarantee you, I would not be (Alexander) Hamilton. I would point it right between his eyes."

Central Texas man stung to death by bees

WACO, Texas (AP) — A 68-year-old Central Texas man is dead after he was attacked by a swarm of bees while riding a lawn mower on his rural property.

Authorities say Donald Williams was mowing grass late Friday morning when he was attacked at his rural property about 8 miles northwest of Waco. McLennan County Sheriff Parnell McNamara says when the man's wife looked outside when the lawn mower motor stopped, she saw her husband lying on the ground covered in bees.

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