Unkempt areas breed disease
State epidemiologist looks for patterns, similarities in encephalitis cases

MONROE (AP) — Most of the people stricken with encephalitis live in areas with poorly maintained houses, overgrown lawns and torn window screens, the state epidemiologist says.

The grass, trees and shrubs give mosquitoes a place to hide from mosquito spray, and torn screens trap the insects inside houses, Dr. Raoul Ratard said.

Although “not the best neighborhoods,” Ratard said Tuesday, “it’s really nice. You have the feeling that you are out in the country. But that’s not very good to make mosquito control easy.”

He led a team of epidemiologists to Ouachita Parish on Monday to learn what people who contracted the disease have in common.

The state is waiting to learn whether the encephalitis is caused by the West Nile or St. Louis virus, though Ratard has said preliminary results suggest that St. Louis is the more likely cause.

Twenty cases have been confirmed, 18 in Ouachita Parish and one each in Winn and Morehouse parishes, he said Tuesday.

“We still have to ask questions — where were they; where is the most likely place they got the infection from?”

Dr. Raoul Ratard
State epidemiologist

Shelley Jones, regional medical director of the Office of Public Health.

Ratard said he plans to make a map pinpointing the cases, but medical confidentiality laws would keep him from making the map public.

Mosquito Control Inc., which contracts with the parish, is continuing its intensified spraying, but Ratard urged people to continue to avoid mosquito bites. He said people should avoid the outdoors during dawn and dusk, wear long sleeves, long pants and insect repellent.

He said people should minimize the amount of standing water near their homes and repair torn window screens.

Encephalitis means brain inflammation and can be caused by a number of viruses and bacteria. Viruses that infect wild birds are the most common cause; mosquitoes spread them from bird to bird and from bird to people.

The viruses cause similar symptoms, which include fever, dizziness and impairment of speech or balance. In a small number of cases, encephalitis can cause brain damage or death.