Texas Tech Mosquito Expert to Testify about Zika Before U.S. Congress

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A Texas Tech mosquito expert will be testifying before Congress about the Zika virus this week. Dr. Steven M. Presley, Ph. D. is a professor at Texas Tech and the director of TTU's Biological Threat Research Laboratory, he has been researching mosquitoes and the diseases they carry for three decades. On Tuesday he will embark for Washington, D.C. and on Wednesday at 9:15 a.m. Eastern he will present with three other experts before the United States House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology about the Zika virus which has caused major public concern in the past year.

"The request from Congressman Lamar Smith--he's the chair of the committee--in the official letter, they ask that I address what's being done in Texas and the United States from my perspective as far as educating the public about how to prevent and avoid Zika virus, how public health agencies and vector control agencies should attack Zika virus, and where it occurs int he mosquito vectors that transmit it," Presley explained.

Presley is certainly qualified to talk about mosquitoes and public education around the diseases they carry. He works with the city of Lubbock in trapping and testing mosquitoes; his lab is one of the few CDC-designated labs in the state which can test human samples for vector-borne diseases like Zika. Presley has also been working on a task force of scientists around Texas to advise the Texas Department of State Health Services when it comes to Zika. Currently, Presley is working with that group of scientists to craft do-it-yourself guidelines for the public about simple ways they can cut down the risk for Zika and other viruses at home.

He explained that he got the call from congressional staffers weeks ago and learned he would present a five minute testimony followed by a question-and-answer-session with members on the committee. After that, Presley plans to meet with other key policy-players in D.C. who are interested in talking about what Texas has done to mitigate the risk for Zika. It turns out, Texas and it's policies around Zika are of national concern.

"Texas in general is leading the way because really between Florida and Texas we are the most threatened states for active transmission-- people coming across the border and our long border with Mexico," Presley said. "Texas is really at the focal point of this whole preventing the establishment of Zika and local transmission of Zika in the United States."

In his testimony, Presley wants to drive home the point that Zika, relative to other viruses carried by mosquitoes, can be limited or spread depending on the actions of individual citizens and homeowners.

He said the keys to preventing the virus are, "personal protection and individual responsibility and accountability for rearing mosquitoes on your property. [Zika-carrying mosquitoes] they are day-biters, they are container breeding mosquitoes, they like to be in the house, they prefer to be around humans. That's what makes them such a threat with viruses and other pathogens they transmit."

Presley added that he hopes to get the message across that mosquitoes need to be treated nationwide as not just a nuisance, but as a public health issue. He believes that rebuilding and strengthening mosquito-borne disease control and surveillance will be essential to keeping the Zika virus-- and whatever other viruses arise next-- at bay.

Most of all, he's excited for the opportunity.

"It is an honor, but more than that it's an opportunity for me to represent the support from Texas Tech and the Department of State Health Services, that's enabled us to pull together all of these capabilities and have a resource that can really make a difference nationwide in preventing vectorborne disease epidemic," he said.