

Cashing in on virus

By Loretta Waldman
Staff Writer

Bob Williams and Steve Arndt thought the mosquito repellent season was winding down when they turned on the news one Sunday night in September.



A report about a death in Queens, N.Y., from a mosquito-borne virus, thought to be St. Louis encephalitis, proved they were wrong.

Co-owners of a fledgling Milford-based company that sells repellent-soaked towelettes, they grabbed the phone and called the Office of Emergency Management in New York City. The next day, they delivered 400,000 packets of their product, Body Guard, to a command center in College Point, Queens.

"We were not in the mode," Williams said. "We had to hunker down and reorganize."

Williams and Arndt might be among the first entrepreneurs to cash in on the hysteria surrounding the virus, later identified as West Nile encephalitis. But they won't be the last.

Along with mosquitoes, one expert predicts the warmer weather will bring swarms of product and service providers feeding off the public health menace discovered in the Western Hemisphere for the first time last year.

"The most successful businesses are the ones that adapt to the world around them," said Karen File, an associate professor of marketing at the University of Connecticut in Stamford. "Come May and June, we will become inundated by this."

Consumers soon will see prominent displays of products ranging from repellent-laced sunscreen to citronella candles at drugstores, supermarkets and garden centers, File said. She predicts child care centers and summer camps, anxious to calm fretful parents, will tout measures they have taken to kill mosquitoes. Pharmaceutical and managed-care companies, though not directly involved, will produce brochures for health departments and hospitals to distribute, she said.

Kevin Rogalski and Alex Goliszewski, co-owners of the Gutter Guys, are among those who didn't wait. Fliers sent out by the Stamford gutter maintenance company last month read, "**Standing water alert! Keeping gutters clean and dry reduces the risk of mosquitoes breeding around your home.**"

Last week, the racetrack at the Meadowlands in East Rutherford, N.J., announced plans to stock four lagoons at the massive sports complex with 2,000 *Gambusia affinis*, a mosquito-eating fish.

"There was concern on our part, and we wanted to put together a program early," said John Chevalier, director of properties. "We thought this would be a great idea."

Americans are preoccupied with survival, dating to the fear of thermonuclear annihilation during the Cold War, File said. As a society, Americans are alert to threats to our families and communities, she said.

One needn't look further than the fitness boom, awareness about sexually transmitted diseases and love of anti-bacterial soap, she said.

"This would be a continuation of that boom," File said. "West Nile virus, like Lyme disease, has a very low incidence, but the risk associated with it is huge. That would explain people's reaction to it."

No cases of West Nile encephalitis were reported in Connecticut last year, but the virus killed seven people in New York and hundreds of birds, mostly crows, in the tri-state area. Williams estimates sales of Body Guard have quadrupled as a result of the outbreak.

Earlier this month, he and his partner offered free samples of their product to athletic teams at the state's 163 public high schools and 17 vocational-technical schools, of which 12 responded. In the past year, The Towelette Co. has sold cases of Body Guard to the state Department of Environmental Protection, United Illuminating, ESPN and the U.S. Navy Submarine Base at Groton.

"It's like selling umbrellas in the rain," Williams said. "I don't want to make light of the problem, but it's what's driving demand."

The Gutter Guys have integrated the West Nile angle into its regular maintenance philosophy. Rogalski talks to customers about how the improper pitch of gutters can cause water to collect and cause damage.

"Everything is about protecting your investment," he said. "This is about protecting your health, which is just as important, if not more."

Media companies will be among the biggest beneficiaries of the virus, File said.

"It's a large and scary story and people will go out of their way to read about it," said File, who expects specialized Web sites, magazines and special supplements to sprout up. "The motivation is to report things of interest to readers."

File sees the commercialization of the West Nile virus as a good thing.

"Companies are helping public health officials deal with this issue," she said. "The public will become more aware when they see a display at their market."