Battle of the bugs

SCIENTISTS are about to go into battle with the dengue mosquito in Cairns in a series of trials designed to stop the deadly virus being passed on to humans.

An international research team led by the University of Queensland will hold field trials in Yorkeys Knob, Gordonvale and Vietnam – introducing strains of the bacterium Wolbachia into the mosquito population to block virus transmission.

Project leader Professor Scott O’Neill from the University of Queensland, who has been working on the control method since the 1990s, said the team had received regulatory approval to start field trials by the Federal Government’s Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority.

“Wolbachia occurs naturally in up to 70 per cent of all insect species and our studies have satisfied the government’s requirements demonstrating safety to people and the environment,” Prof O’Neill said.

“This approval is a significant milestone for everyone who has been working on the project and represents an important step in the search for a self-sustaining solution to dengue fever,” he said.

He said the objective of the 2011 field trial was to determine how well the Wolbachia method establishes within the wild mosquito population.

“The project is the first of its kind in the search for a permanent solution to dengue fever and is unique in that the method will be self-sustaining once established,” Prof O’Neill said.

There are currently 11 confirmed cases of Type 2 dengue in Cairns after an outbreak was declared in Parramatta Park last month.