

PROACTIVE RABIES SURVEILLANCE TO BENEFIT WYOMING

The Wyoming State Veterinary Laboratory (WSVL) has begun testing wildlife specimens for rabies in an effort to help state officials monitor hotspots and prevent outbreaks of rabies in livestock, pet, and human populations.

The tests are part of a surveillance program initiated by the Wyoming Animal Damage Management Board (ADMB) as part of a newly implemented Rabies Management Plan.

The surveillance program is one of few of its kind. According to Professor Ken Mills of the University of Wyoming Department of Veterinary Sciences, who says most states perform rabies testing on an as-needed basis.

The recently implemented Wyoming plan allocates funding for random testing of about 400 animals, mainly skunks, trapped by wildlife services each year. Testing these specimens will provide officials information about the presence and density of the disease in Wyoming.

Brent Sherard the Wyoming State Health Officer says a proactive approach is important. “Rabies is rarely found in humans, but it is still significant and important to ascertain the intensity of rabies in animal populations.” With education and disease awareness, he adds, “citizens will have an idea of where it is, and in what animals rabies is found”

While “skunks aren’t the problem or main concern” Mills reports, the disease must be managed in them to prevent exposure to domestic animals and humans. The virus is at the “tail end of one (epidemic), at a 20 year low” Mills says, explaining that the data collected in the next few years will most likely show increased occurrence of the

disease as it functions in cycles of dormancy and outbreak and can manifest itself quite quickly.

Because of the aggressive plan established by the ADMB Mills believes that Wyoming is likely to be approved for the trial of a new oral bait vaccine. Similar bait is available and in use in eastern states where raccoon rabies is prevalent. If implemented here, the bait program would help form a barrier to prevent the spread of the virus.

The ADMB's rabies project is funded by a legislature biennium appropriation of \$180,000. This money will cover the costs of surveillance, and rabies education as well as administrative expenses. Hank Uhden of the ADMB says that a portion of the money will be saved and used only in the event of a rabies outbreak.

The ADMB was formed in 1999 to mitigate damage to livestock, wildlife and crops by predatory animals, predacious birds and depredating animals for the protection of human health and safety. A more recent amendment mandated that the board develop a rabies management plan for public education and prevention, surveillance, vaccination procedure, and post-exposure and quarantine protocol.

Uhden says the ADMB "has been delegated the state lead organization, but relies on the cooperation and input of the Wyoming Livestock Board, the Wyoming Department of Health, the Wyoming State Vet Lab and other local agencies" to improve procedures in case of an epidemic.

In addition to the surveillance project ADMB officials have administered a "Code Rabies" brochure which is an important tool in the education campaign. It explains the risks of the disease and procedures to follow in case of exposure. Persons in Wyoming

bitten by a suspected rabies positive animal should seek medical attention immediately and call the Wyoming Health Department at (888) 996-9104.

“In drought situations, animals and humans have increased contact,” warns Dr. Carl Musgrave State of Wyoming Epidemiologist. He suggests that people be aware of erratic wildlife behavior. Symptoms might include foaming at the mouth, aggressive behavior and nocturnal animals being out in midday.

Even though there have not been any human cases of rabies for several years, Sherard notes, “It’s important to realize rabies is a serious and deadly disease.”