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JOINT RELEASE

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Rabies detected in new area of state

People are asked to report abnormal wildlife behavior near Chandalar and the Mat-Su region

ANCHORAGE — A wolf killed in late March this year after it closely approached a trapper around the Chandalar Lakes area has tested positive for rabies. Rabies had not previously been documented in this area south of the Brooks Range.

The Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) is asking the public to report any wolves, wolverines, foxes or other wildlife acting abnormally to the nearest ADF&G office, and by sending an email to dfg.dwc.vet@alaska.gov. Animals with rabies might be fearless in approaching people, attack inanimate moving objects, or be unable to run or move normally, said Dr. Kimberlee Beckmen, wildlife veterinarian with the department.

The department would like to collect a sample of tissue from the head of any wolf, wolverine, fox or coyote taken in the Chandalar Lakes or Fortymile area to determine whether this was an isolated incident or an actual outbreak of rabies. Heads must have been frozen and can be brought to the Fairbanks ADF&G office where a sample can be taken without damaging the skull.

In addition, the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services, Section of Epidemiology will be expanding the range of its lay vaccinator program as a result of this incident.

Lay vaccinators are not veterinarians, but trained civilians who are permitted to vaccinate dogs and cats to protect pets and humans in areas where rabies has been documented. Given the detection of rabies in the Chandalar area and taking into account the potential range of wolves, the program will be expanded to cover most villages in the Yukon-Koyukuk census area to achieve an approximately 100-mile buffer from the Chandalar area.

“There is always a risk of rabies when you have direct contact with rabid wildlife, but the greater risk is that domestic pets will bring rabies into the home,” said Dr. Robert Gerlach, state veterinarian with the Department of Environmental Conservation. “State regulations require vaccinating dogs, cats and ferrets for rabies, and this is a timely reminder to make sure your pet is up-to-date.”

For the past two years, ADF&G has expanded its rabies surveillance program by using a recently developed field test to detect the disease. Staff have tested more than 1,000 specimens collected from around the state; documenting the first case of rabies in a wolverine last summer near Umiat (North Slope). The tests also determined that three percent of red foxes trapped in the area around Bethel were positive for rabies. Confirmed rabies testing is conducted through the Alaska State Virology Laboratory in Fairbanks, or by ADF&G sending samples to the U. S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, Ga.

There has always been a risk of rabies exposure to trappers who are injured while skinning rabid foxes, but documenting rabies in a wolf in Chandalar has extended that the risk to more species and in more areas of the state, said Beckmen.

To protect against acquiring disease from animals, trappers and hunters are urged to:

- always wear gloves when skinning animals;
- wash any wounds thoroughly with soap and water;
- avoid cutting into the brain and spinal cord as much as possible; and
- wash knives with soap and water immediately after severing the head.

Injuries sustained while skinning an animal should be reported to a health care provider and that animal saved for possible rabies testing to determine if a rabies vaccine is needed.

Although leaving skinned-out animals in the field is common practice, trapped/hunted animals transported to a different region of the state could spread or introduce diseases and parasites into those regions if carcasses are left for scavenging in the environment.

In this incident, the wolf’s carcass had been brought from Chandalar to the Mat-Su region and discarded in the woods. Once rabies was confirmed, the carcass was retrieved for appropriate disposal. Wildlife acting unusually in the Mat-Su Valley region be reported to the Palmer ADF&G office at 746-6300 and via email to dfg.dwc.vet@alaska.gov to determine the necessary actions.

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