



NEWS RELEASE

ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH

RSA Tower 201 Monroe Street, Suite 914 Montgomery, AL 36104

Phone 334-206-5300 Fax 334-206-5534

www.adph.org

Wildlife rabies may be migrating toward Jefferson County

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

CONTACT: John Kelliher, DVM
(334) 206-5969

Even though great strides have been made in recent years, rabies continues to be a major threat to animals and people in Alabama. Rabies is a disease of all warm-blooded mammals, including man, and is generally fatal if specialized anti-rabies treatment is not obtained immediately.

Raccoons, bats, foxes and skunks are most often responsible for transmitting the virus to domesticated animals and humans. Immunization of domestic dogs and cats provides the only "buffer" between wildlife and humans.

Southeast Alabama continues to have the greatest number of confirmed, animal rabies cases in the state. The distribution of rabies cases in 2004, which totalled 64, was consistent with those confirmed in previous years. However, a disturbing development has been noted in Shelby County. Three rabid raccoons found there last year may indicate migration of wildlife rabies toward Jefferson County and the large urban population in the Birmingham area.

"Our surveys indicate that rabies vaccination rates in Alabama continue to decline," said Dr. Donald Williamson, state health officer. "We are troubled about this decline in protection of the pet population. We are especially concerned about the movement of rabies toward the largest urban area of the state."

Rabies Awareness Week in Alabama will be observed June 5-11, 2005. Public low-cost rabies clinics will be conducted in most counties throughout the state and public service announcements and education programs will be promoted.

To assist in public education about the disease and to encourage the annual vaccination of dogs and cats as required by law, a cooperative effort is being organized by the Alabama Department of Public Health, the United States Department of Agriculture, Wildlife Services; the Alabama Veterinary Medical Association; and the Alabama Cooperative Extension System.

As summer outdoor activities begin, the public is reminded to warn children to not touch, pick up, or feed wild or unfamiliar animals. Avoid sick or strange-acting animals. A wild animal that appears friendly, docile or approaches humans also should be avoided.

Nocturnal animals, such as raccoons and bats that become active in the day time, may be suspect. Stray animals pose a continuous public health threat; not only from rabies, but from bite wounds and animal attacks in general.

The 64 laboratory-confirmed animal rabies cases in Alabama during 2004 were from the following species and represented the following percentage of cases: 34 raccoons (53 percent),

23 bats (36 percent), 3 cats (4 percent), 2 dogs (3 percent), 1 fox, (2 percent), and 1 bobcat (2 percent). During 2003 there were 66 confirmed rabies cases statewide.

In Alabama, raccoons are the animals most likely infected with rabies. To help lower the incidence of rabies in the raccoon population, the Alabama Department of Public Health is cooperating in an ongoing federally funded project intended to help stop the westward movement of the raccoon rabies variant by orally vaccinating wild raccoons and other wild predators.

Vaccine-laced baits protect against rabies when raccoons eat them. Alabama has had four successful rabies bait drops since November 2003, two in Northeast Alabama and two in Central Alabama.

To demonstrate why rabies is a concern, there are approximately 7,500 animal bites investigated each year in the state, and last year rabies was found in a 9-week-old puppy and in an 8-week-old kitten.

If bitten or scratched by an animal, wash the wound with soapy water for 10 minutes and see a doctor immediately. It is recommended that experienced animal control personnel capture or kill this animal if they are available. Only attempt to catch or kill the animal if you have experience. If your pet is scratched or bitten by another animal, contact your veterinarian.

6/03/05