



## NEWS RELEASE

### ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH

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## Make sure your pets are vaccinated for rabies; positive cases found west of the Tennessee River

### FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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The rabies virus continues to affect wildlife and domestic animals in Alabama. Raccoons are the predominant reservoir for rabies, but it can affect other animals such as dogs, cats, foxes, coyotes and skunks through exposure to raccoons shedding the virus in their saliva.

Rabies is always fatal, unless preventative treatment is given, thus the biggest risk is human exposure. Humans are most likely to be exposed to rabies by their domestic animals which have been previously exposed to a wild, rabid animal. Exposure can occur through a bite, scratch or contact with infected saliva from an animal shedding the rabies virus.

If people are exposed to a rabid animal, they should seek immediate medical attention or report it to the local health department. Five positive animal rabies cases recently in Jackson County highlight the need for people to be aware of rabies and make sure that their pets are vaccinated.

“Rabies vaccine is made for all domestic species of animals, but only dogs, cats and ferrets are required by law to be vaccinated,” according to Dr. Dee W. Jones, State Public Health Veterinarian.

The area in Jackson County where the recent positives have been found lies to the west of the Tennessee River, which has traditionally been in an area where almost no rabies has been detected in raccoons.

Two of the cases, a dog and a fox, were detected through routine rabies testing as a response following human or animal exposure. However, three additional raccoons have been detected by surveillance that the USDA Wildlife Services (WS) is performing in the area.

The USDA WS has performed an annual rabies vaccination bait drop for raccoons in parts of Jackson County for more than 10 years in an attempt to vaccinate raccoons and prevent the western movement of rabies from the southern and eastern directions.

The bait drop program in Alabama is part of a larger national objective that involves several states and is aimed at halting the spread the rabies in wildlife. The positives are cause for concern because they are in an area west of the bait zone, which could hinder the effectiveness

of future baiting and wildlife rabies reduction. The overall goal is to not only halt the movement to the west, but someday possibly eradicate the virus from raccoons.

Current surveillance and testing will continue until there is good evidence that the westernmost case has been identified and then measures, such as rabies baiting by air, truck and hand will be instituted to stop the movement.

Jackson County public health officials recommend that the recent rabid animals should further encourage pet owners to be sure their dogs, cats and ferrets are vaccinated against the fatal disease. Vaccination is very effective in reducing the risk for a pet to become infected with the virus.

Other best practices include the following:

- Avoid domestic animals that are acting in a strange or unusual manner.
- Instruct children to avoid approaching any non-domesticated animal regardless of its behavior.
- Advise children to tell an adult if they are bitten or scratched by an animal.

For additional information please contact the Alabama Department of Public Health, Bureau of Communicable Disease, Division of Epidemiology, at 1-800-338-8734 or the Jackson County Health Department at (256) 259-4161.