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Rabid Horse Dies in El Paso County

Health Officials Warn Public to Vaccinate Pets, Avoid Wildlife

Colorado Springs, CO—A rabid horse has died in El Paso County, underscoring the critical importance of vaccinating pets and livestock and avoiding wild animals, according to the El Paso County Department of Health and Environment.

“Rabies infection in horses is rare,” said Public Health Director Kandi Buckland, R.N., M.P.A. “We anticipate that the infection was caused by skunk rabies, which greatly concerns us because it would indicate that rabies is not only spreading in the county, but also crossing animal species and increasing the risk to people.”

“It is critically important for people to vaccinate their pets and their livestock against rabies and to avoid contact with wild mammals,” Buckland said. “Prevention is key because rabies is a fatal disease once symptoms begin.”

The horse, which was euthanized Friday, had lab tests to confirm it had rabies. Public health experts believe that the horse was exposed to a skunk on its home property in Black Forest area. Colorado has not recorded a horse with rabies in at least 25 years, according to officials at the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment.

In addition to the horse, El Paso County has recorded six confirmed cases of rabies in skunks this year, part of a statewide spread of rabies. Prior to this summer the last time a rabid skunk was reported in El Paso County was 1970.

The infected skunks have so far been found in northern and eastern El Paso County. “At this point, we are worried that more areas throughout El Paso County will be affected by skunk rabies,” Buckland said.

Vaccination can successfully protect your pet and livestock from rabies infection should an exposure occur. Undervaccinated pets are at significant risk for acquiring rabies from skunks, which then may bring the risk for rabies into the home.

Rabies infects the brain and other parts of the central nervous system, causing brain swelling and damage, and ultimately death. Rabies is spread primarily through the bite of rabid animals, resulting in the spread of the disease through their infected saliva. Rabies also can be spread when saliva from an infected animal gets into open wounds, cuts or enters through membranes of the eyes, nose, or mouth. No cure exists for rabies once symptoms appear. Preventive medication is available for people known or suspected to have been bitten or exposed to the saliva of a rabid animal.

In addition to ensuring that pets and livestock are vaccinated properly against rabies, the Health Department recommends these prevention steps:

- Don't feed wild animals or allow your pets around them. Be sure to teach children to stay away from wild mammals.
- Vaccinate your dogs and cats.
- Contact your veterinarian to discuss vaccinating horses and other equines, as well as other livestock.
- Contact your veterinarian if your dog or cat is bitten or scratched by a wild animal, such as skunks, bats, foxes or raccoons.
- If you suspect you've been exposed to a rabid animal, contact your physician without delay.
- If you observe a wild mammal acting strangely, especially a skunk, or if you find a dead skunk that isn't on your property, stay away from it. Strange behavior for a skunk would include being out and about during daytime hours.
- If you must remove a dead skunk on your property, wear rubber gloves or lift the carcass with a shovel or other tool, and double bag it for the trash.

For more information, visit www.elpasocountyhealth.org.