For Immediate Release
April 2, 2014

Rabid Skunks in Yell Co.
Residents Reminded to Vaccinate Pets

Dardanelle – A skunk found in Yell County has tested positive for rabies. There were no human or animal exposures, but residents are reminded to keep pets up-to-date on rabies vaccinations. This is the fourth rabid skunk found in Yell Co. so far this year.

The best way to protect your pets and your family from rabies is to ensure all cats and dogs are up-to-date on their rabies vaccine. All dogs and cats in Arkansas are required by state law to be vaccinated against rabies by a licensed veterinarian. In addition, avoid contact with wild animals.

The first sign of rabies in an animal is usually a change in behavior. Rabid animals may attack people or other animals for no reason, or they may lose their fear of people and seem unnaturally friendly. Staggering, convulsions, choking, frothing at the mouth and paralysis are often present. Skunks may be seen out in daylight, which is an unusual behavior for them, or they may get into a dog pen or under a house. Many animals have a marked change in voice pitch, such as a muted or off-key tone. An animal usually dies within one week of demonstrating signs of rabies. Not all rabid animals act in these ways, however, so you should avoid all wild animals—especially skunks, bats and stray cats and dogs.

The public health laboratory of the Arkansas Department of Health does all the animal rabies testing for the state. Skunks or bats that are found dead near a residence may be submitted for testing. Skunks or other wild animals that are found dead on the road or wandering in the wild, away from domestic animals or people, should be left alone and not be submitted for testing. In order for an animal to be tested for rabies, its brain must be undamaged and not be decomposed.

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ADH – Rabies in Yell Co.

"While we can’t control the skunk population, the one thing we can control is making sure pets and livestock are up-to-date on their rabies vaccinations,” Susan Weinstein, DVM, state public health veterinarian at ADH said. “Making sure your pets are vaccinated is the single most important thing you can do to control rabies in your area.”

So far in 2014, the state has had 40 rabid animals (33 skunks, 4 bats, 1 cow, 1 cat and 1 dog) test positive for rabies. Last year, 152 animals tested positive for rabies in Arkansas, which is triple the yearly average.

The rabies virus attacks the brain and spinal cord and is a fatal disease. The virus lives in the saliva (spit) and nervous tissues of infected animals and is spread when they bite or scratch. The virus also may be spread if saliva from an infected animal touches broken skin, open wounds or the lining of the mouth, eyes or nose. It is most often seen in animals such as skunks and bats. Any skunk seen out during the day, or getting into a fenced yard or pen with a dog, is very likely rabid and should be avoided and reported to local authorities. Cats, dogs, ferrets and livestock can also develop rabies, especially if they are not vaccinated.

Keeping animals up-to-date on their rabies vaccines protects the animal, and acts as a barrier between the wildlife exposures of rabies and people since pets are more likely to be exposed to a rabid skunk directly than people. Any rabies vaccine given by an owner with an over-the-counter product cannot be counted as vaccinated as there is no assurance it was stored or given properly. There is also usually no documentation of a date when the vaccine was given.

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If you think you have become exposed to an animal with rabies, wash your wound thoroughly with soap and water and seek medical attention immediately. Contact your physician immediately and report the incident. The animal in question should be captured, if possible, without damaging its head or risking further exposure.

If an apparently healthy, domesticated dog or cat bites a person, it must be captured, confined and observed daily for 10 days following the bite. If the animal remains healthy during this period of time, it did not transmit rabies at the time of the bite. The brain tissue of all wild animals must be tested for rabies if human exposure has occurred.

How can you protect yourself from rabies?

- Be sure dogs, cats and ferrets are up-to-date on their rabies vaccinations
- Do not feed, touch or adopt wild animals
- Keep family pets indoors at night
ADH – Rabies in Yell Co.
- Bat-proof your home or summer camp in the fall or winter (The majority of human rabies cases are caused by bat bites.)
- Encourage children to immediately tell an adult if any animal bites them
- Teach children to avoid wildlife, strays and all other animals they do not know well

Report all animal bites or contact with wild animals to the nearest local health unit. Do not let any animal escape that has possibly exposed someone to rabies. Depending on the species, an animal can be observed or tested for rabies in order to avoid the need for rabies treatment. For more information, call the Yell Co. Health Unit at Danville, 479-495-2741 or Dardanelle, 479-229-3509.

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