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Raccoon Rabies Found in Western Wise County

-- First Confirmed Raccoon Rabies in Wise County; Residents Asked to Report Possible Cases --

(WISE, Va.) – This week, a raccoon in western Wise County was confirmed to have rabies. Although many areas of Virginia commonly report rabies in wildlife, especially in raccoons, skunks and foxes, this is the first reported and confirmed case of raccoon rabies in in Wise County and represents the farthest west that raccoon rabies has been documented in Virginia. State and federal wildlife and health officials ask area residents to watch for possible rabid animals, to avoid contact with any such animals and to report them to the Wise County Health Department (276-328-8000), Wise County Animal Control (276-679-6750) or Wise County Dispatch (276-328-3756).

Rabies can infect any mammal. It is most commonly found in Virginia in raccoons, skunks and foxes. Rabid raccoons are of particular concern because raccoons are more commonly seen, often seem more tame and more likely to interact with pets, livestock and people. Rabies symptoms in wildlife can include unusually aggressive, calm or tame behavior, difficulty eating or drinking, balance problems, circling, seizures, coma and death. Please avoid and report any animal, particularly a raccoon, with these symptoms.

Rabies is caused by a virus that infects the central nervous system and is a serious public health concern. Rabies infection is almost always fatal to people if not treated before symptoms appear. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, approximately 90 percent of animal rabies cases are in wildlife. Because rabies is found in the saliva of infected animals and is often transmitted by a bite, rabid wild animals can infect pets, and pets can infect humans.

“Vaccinating your pets and keeping vaccinations current are important steps in protecting your pets and your family,” said Sue Cantrell, M.D., health director for the Lenowisco Health District. “Vaccinations help limit the spread of rabies among wildlife, pets, livestock and people.”

To prevent the spread of rabies:

- Vaccinate pets and keep vaccinations current.
- Keep your animals on your property. Don't let pets roam free.
- Do not leave garbage, water or pet food outside. It may attract wild or stray animals.
- Enjoy wild animals from a distance, even if they seem friendly. A rabid animal sometimes acts tame.
- Avoid animals unfamiliar to you or those acting strangely, and report them to animal control.
- If your pet is attacked or bitten by a wild animal, report it to animal control.
- Do not keep wild animals as pets.

Since 2002, as part of the federal National Rabies Management Program, wildlife and health officials have distributed oral rabies vaccine baits, small cubes or packets of fish meal containing vaccine. Wild animals eat the baits and become vaccinated against rabies. This helps prevent the westward spread of rabies in raccoons and other wildlife in southwestern Virginia and border states. The rabid raccoon in Wise County was west of the vaccine "border," where the unique form of rabies in raccoons was not believed to exist. It represents a breach of the border and a concern for the further spread of rabies.

For more information, contact the Wise County Health Department at 276-328-8000 or visit www.vdh.virginia.gov/lenowisco.

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