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NWDP: Plague in Wildlife

Last Modified:

Plague has been identified as a disease of concern to human, wildlife, and domestic animal populations within the United States. It is also considered a "Category A" disease by the Department of Homeland Security, meaning it could potentially be used as a bioterrorist agent.

In the United States, plague is almost exclusively restricted to the western half of the country (roughly west of the 100th meridian). This infectious disease is caused by the bacterium *Yersinia pestis* and is primarily vectored by fleas, although other transmission routes also exist.

Affected Species

In North America plague mostly affects rodent populations such as chipmunks, ground squirrels, and prairie dogs. These rodent populations serve as the primary reservoir for the disease. Plague can also affect other mammals, such as carnivores and scavengers that feed on rodents. Plague represents a health and safety threat to humans, especially in places where humans and rodents overlap. There are currently about a dozen human plague cases reported each year.

Feline species, such as bobcats, mountain lions, and domestic cats are particularly susceptible to plague while canine species, including coyotes, wolves, and domestic dogs, tend to be somewhat resistant to plague. Because cats are susceptible to plague and can develop the highly contagious form of the disease (pneumonic plague), they can represent a health threat to people who come in contact with them (i.e., hunters, wildlife personnel and pet owners). While canids typically do not tend to develop an active form of plague, they do readily develop antibodies.

NWDP Activities

NWDP biologists work closely with other WS personnel who conduct wildlife damage management activities to protect human health, agriculture, and natural resources. For example, collecting samples from coyotes taken during wildlife damage management activities is useful because coyotes make frequent contact with rodents through predation and scavenging. If contact is made with an infected rodent, the coyote may develop antibodies (evidence of an immune response), which indicates that plague is likely present in the area. Since 2005, the NWDP has screened nearly 50,000 wildlife samples for plague exposure.

More Information

- Plague Exposure in Mammalian Wildlife Across the Western United States

Contact Us

National Wildlife Disease Program

The National Wildlife Disease Program works with partners nationwide to conduct disease monitoring and surveillance in wild animals and is the primary emergency

response contact point within APHIS Wildlife Services. Our program coordinator is available for questions about wildlife disease monitoring and surveillance, the status of disease outbreaks and emerging disease events, and wildlife emergency response activities in natural disasters (floods, hurricanes, wildfires) or oil spills.

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