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USDA Announces Rabies Action Plan to Protect Public, Domestic Animals and Wildlife

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Today, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service's Wildlife Services (WS) is publishing the third iteration of the United States National Plan for Wildlife Rabies Management (USNP). The USNP serves as a 5-year framework for collaborative management of wildlife rabies in the U.S. to protect human, domestic animal and wildlife health. This plan is intended to enhance coordination of wildlife rabies surveillance, management, monitoring, research and communication among government agencies, universities, and other organizations.

The current plan (2023-2027) includes objectives and strategies focused around five key themes:

- Coordination and Communication
- Rabies Surveillance
- Oral Rabies Vaccination (ORV) Management
- ORV Monitoring
- Research

More than 100 professionals from 52 agencies and organizations (e.g., federal, state, industry, university) came together at a Cooperators' Meeting hosted by the WS National Rabies Management Program (NRMP) in September 2021 to focus on developing the objectives and strategies outlined in the current USNP.

"Completion of the U.S. National Plan for Wildlife Rabies Management represents a successful collaboration with strategic partners in the fight against wildlife rabies in the United States and is a perfect example of a One Health framework," according to Janet Bucknall, Deputy Administrator for Wildlife Services.

Rabies is a viral disease of mammals, usually transmitted from the bite of a rabid animal and direct contact with saliva or brain/nervous tissue from the infected animal. It has the highest fatality rate of any known disease, with millions of people at high risk for exposure to rabies, primarily in developing countries where canine rabies has not been controlled. However, rabies is preventable in people and animals through vaccination. Prior to compulsory pet vaccination laws and mass vaccination campaigns, canine rabies was responsible for hundreds of human deaths each year in the U.S. By 1970, most human rabies cases in the U.S. were due to rabid wildlife exposures rather than dogs and by the late 1970s, enzootic canine rabies virus variant transmission had been eliminated.

Rabies can be effectively prevented by vaccination in humans and domestic animals but remains a significant wildlife management and public health challenge in the U.S. Nearly 100,000 animals are tested annually through a laboratory-based surveillance system representing 53 jurisdictions (50 states, Puerto Rico, New York City, and Washington, D.C.) across 130 public health, agriculture, and academic laboratories. Approximately 4,000 animals test positive for rabies in the U.S. each year and >90% of those are wildlife, primarily raccoons, bats, skunks, and foxes. Four million Americans report being bitten or scratched by animals each year and 60,000 receive post-exposure prophylaxis to prevent rabies by the suspect animal. The estimated cost of rabies prevention and control in the U.S. is high and growing to >\$600 million per year. Despite these staggering numbers, human rabies is rare in the U.S., averaging only three cases annually since 2000, thanks in large part to the robust nationwide One Health approach that involves a network of human, animal, and wildlife health officials working together to manage this deadly disease.

The WS NRMP was established in recognition of the changing scope of rabies in the U.S. and has been working cooperatively with local, state, federal and international governments, universities, and other partners to address this public health problem

since 1995. The goals of the program are to prevent the spread of specific terrestrial rabies variants in the U.S., and eventually eliminate those variants at the local, regional, and national level through an integrated program that involves the use of ORV targeting wild animals.

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