For Immediate Release

Another rabies-confirmed raccoon found in Monongalia County

MORGANTOWN, WV (May 24, 2019) — Another raccoon has tested positive for rabies in Monongalia County, affecting a dog and some people who came into contact with the pet.

A dog got into a fight with the raccoon on Monday and injured it. The raccoon was collected by an animal removal service. It later died and was tested for rabies; on Thursday, the results came back as positive for rabies.

“The dog is up to date on its rabies shots and has been re-vaccinated,” said Jon W. Welch, program manager of Monongalia County Health Department Environmental Health.

The dog apparently had contact with individuals following the incident, however, and they have begun rabies prophylaxis treatment.

This is the fourth reported time a dog or a pair of dogs have had an encounter with a rabid raccoon in Monongalia County this year. Adding in the results of raccoons collected through the surveillance efforts of the U.S. Department of Agriculture Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (USDA APHIS), this makes 10 raccoons that have tested positive for rabies in Monongalia County.

Dr. Lee B. Smith, MCHD executive director and county health officer, encourages residents to continue to be vigilant against rabies by monitoring their animals’ whereabouts and making sure they are up to date on their rabies vaccines.

“Rabies is present in wildlife throughout West Virginia,” he said. “Skunks, foxes, raccoons and bats are known to carry the virus. People are encouraged to keep their pets vaccinated and on leashes.”
If a pet does interact with a raccoon or other wildlife, additional precautions should be taken. “They probably need to be examined by a vet for injuries and for additional rabies vaccine,” Dr. Smith said. “If they’re bloodied from being in a fight, you want to take precautions from other family members being exposed to blood and other secretions.”

Because of the rabid raccoon activity found in Monongalia County, MCHD officials are taking additional measures. In Thursday’s regular bi-monthly Board of Health meeting, Dr. Smith requested funds to purchase oral rabies vaccinations (ORV) that would be distributed in Monongalia County to inoculate raccoons and any other mammals that would eat it. The Board of Health agreed to spending $1,500, which will purchase about 1,000 vaccines.

“This is a process that must be repeated in order to be effective,” Dr. Smith said.

In addition to surveilling raccoons in the state, USDA APHIS also participates in an Oral Rabies Vaccination distribution program. During the third week of August, the rabies baits will be distributed into targeted zones. In recent years, only the very western tip of Monongalia County has received the vaccine.

However, said John Forbes, the state director of the USDA’s West Virginia Wildlife Services, the lines are being re-drawn and he should known within a few weeks if more of Monongalia County will be covered.

“That’s a possibility,” he said. “We haven’t received final guidance. It’s not off the table.”

Rabies is a viral disease found in mammals that attacks the nervous system, ultimately causing disease in the brain and death, according to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (cdc.gov).

“Vaccinating pets not only protects them but also then protects you and your family from being exposed to rabies,” said Dr. Diane K. Gross, MCHD’s regional epidemiologist.

In conjunction with Cheat Lake Animal Hospital, MCHD held a rabies vaccination clinic earlier this month. Sixty-six dogs and 43 cats, a total of 109 pets, were vaccinated.

Even if an animal is up to date on its rabies vaccine, it must be re-vaccinated and observed after an encounter with a rabid animal. Unvaccinated pets that encounter a rabid animal might have to be quarantined and observed, or euthanized, depending on the circumstances.

In 2018, Monongalia County Health Department had four confirmed cases of rabies: two in raccoons that had encounters with pets and two involving cats. USDA APHIS
confirmed another five cases of rabid animals, none of which had contact with any humans or domesticated animals. That was a total of nine cases for 2018.

Raccoons are creatures of habit and live in all areas of the county, including in downtown areas. Once they make a home, they will return. Evidence of raccoon activity includes garbage cans tipped over, garbage scattered all over and raccoon droppings. Raccoons can cause damage to attics or roofs when they try to enter a home.

The best deterrent to raccoon activity is prevention. Raccoons will look for homes where food is easy to find. MCHD urges residents to take the following measures to deter raccoons and avoid rabies, which is transmitted via saliva through a bite or scratch:

**Keep pets’ rabies vaccinations up to date.** If a domesticated animal becomes infected with rabies, the animal may expose any human with whom it comes into contact. The affected animal must be put down and humans who have had contact with the animal would need to seek immediate medical treatment.

**Seal garbage cans tight.** Raccoons have opposable thumbs and can remove any loose or broken lids. The best garbage cans have lids that lock into place with handles or clamps. If necessary, keep garbage cans inside a secure building.

**Don’t feed raccoons.** Feed outside pets during the day and don’t leave food or water dishes outside after dark when raccoons are likely to be looking for food and water. Raccoons have been known to fight cats and dogs—which should be vaccinated for rabies—for their food.

**Control access to the home.** Blocking off access to a home is the best raccoon deterrent. Inspect houses thoroughly to find any holes or crevices where raccoons could enter. They can get through surprisingly small spaces. This includes chimneys, attic vents and seams along roofs and baseboards. Block any spaces with sheet metal or heavy screening. Consider hiring a professional to look for and cover these spaces.

**Watch out for raccoons or other strange animals that are active** during the day, move erratically and/or are not afraid of humans. They may have rabies. If you suspect there is a rabid raccoon on your property, contact a licensed animal control specialist.

**Scare tactics don’t work.** Banging pots and pans may be a temporary raccoon deterrent, but raccoons are persistent. They will come back long after you’ve given up. Water-sprayer raccoon deterrents are also widely available. They hook up to your hose and use a motion detector to scare off raccoons. They will work for as long as it takes raccoons to find a way around them.
Although there are no approved repellents, toxicants or fumigants for raccoon problems, some chemical raccoon deterrents are commercially available. These include mixtures of coyote urine and other natural repellents. Also, some research shows that mothballs may keep raccoons out of enclosed spaces in a home.

Catching a baby raccoon and keeping it as a pet is against the law. The DNR stopped issuing pet permits for raccoons in 2006 because of the potential risk of rabies.

Early symptoms of rabies in people are similar to other illnesses, such as fever, headache and general weakness and discomfort. As the disease progresses, more specific symptoms include insomnia, anxiety, confusion, slight or partial paralysis, excitation, hallucinations, agitation, hypersalivation (an increase in saliva), difficulty swallowing and fear of water. Death usually occurs within days of the onset of these symptoms.

For additional information about rabies, visit MCHD’s website, monchd.org, or contact MCHD’s Environmental Health program at 304-598-5131. Specific information on who to contact for those who encounter wildlife can be found at monchd.org/rabies-control.html.

For more information on MCHD, check out monchd.org and follow us on Facebook and Twitter @WVMCHD and on Instagram at wvmchd for up-to-date information on health and safety.

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