The discovery of two rabid skunks and the pending test results on two more have local veterinarians and health officials concerned.

The Northeast Colorado Health Department recently confirmed that two rabid skunks have been found in rural Phillips and Logan counties. Local health officials urge area residents to continue to be vigilant and to make sure their pets are vaccinated against rabies, and to be aware that since skunks do not hibernate through the winter, the possibility of exposure exists even as temperatures fall.

NCHD has been working with Dr. Adam Tempel from Tempel Veterinary Service in Phillips County with these recent cases. According to his reports, the first positive skunk was found chasing horses in a pasture north of Haxtun in early December; no contact was suspected, but the horses were all given rabies boosters and are under six months of home quarantine.

The second positive skunk was found a few days later north of Dailey in the yard of a country residence, acting lethargic. There was no pet interaction. Tempel has also submitted two additional skunk specimens to the state laboratory; both are still pending results. The locations of the two pending specimens are in the same area, and in both instances there was interaction with up to four unvaccinated family pets.

“It’s very concerning when family pets come in contact with rabid animals because they risk not only acquiring the disease but also passing it on to other animals and their human family members,” said Carmen Vandenbark, NCHD’s director of environmental health. “How high that risk is depends upon their vaccination status.”

The recommended course of action when unvaccinated pets come into contact with a rabid animal is euthanasia. While state statute does allow for pet owners to bypass that recommendation, it comes at a hefty expense. A mandatory 180-day quarantine is required, the first 90 days of which the animal must be isolated at a secured facility, at the expense of the owner.

“We’re very concerned that we continue to see wild animals coming into contact with

unvaccinated family pets involved," said Vandenbark. "In every one of these situations, pet owners are faced with difficult emotional or financial consequences. Our hope is that the vaccination message is getting out, but that doesn't appear to be the case by how many unvaccinated pets we're seeing put down."

Tempel went on to say that the risk to family pets isn't the only thing to be concerned about.

"Rabies is a disease of all mammals," said Tempel. "Cattle, horses, sheep, goats, pigs and people are susceptible. I urge producers to keep that in mind as you tend your livestock. The calf you find down in the pasture that is depressed, weak, slobbering and breathing hard may or may not have a choke.

"Please think twice before you stick your hand into its mouth to clear the choke or give it electrolytes. Additionally, the bellering ewe or goat that attacks you when you come in the pen to feed it may not just be having a moody day. Rabies is a deadly matter. If a person gets infected and does not get treatment, it will kill you."

According to Vandenbark, the agency started educating the public about the skunk strain of rabies in 2007. Since that time there have been more than 20 wild animals, mostly skunks, that have tested positive for rabies in the northeast region.

In order to raise awareness about how dangerous this strain of rabies is and the importance of getting pets vaccinated, NCHD has put out more than a dozen news releases, provided information through several radio talk shows and public service announcements, created a mass education campaign that was located in local post offices, feed, grocery and pet stores, as well as online, and has enlisted the help of their county commissioners in spreading the word through their weekly comments in meetings.

In addition, NCHD orchestrated a very comprehensive stakeholder process in early 2012 to rewrite and update the Northeast Colorado Health Department Rabies Prevention and Control Regulations.

That process had input from NCHD, local law enforcement, the Logan and Morgan County Humane Societies, the Colorado Department of Agriculture, the Colorado Division of Wildlife, Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, the United States Department of Agriculture Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service and several local veterinarians.

“We can only do so much public notification,” said Dr. Tony Cappello, NCHD’s district public health administrator. “Much of the responsibility lies in the hands of the pet owner to make sure their pet and family members are adequately protected.”

If anyone witnesses a suspected rabid skunk or other wild animal, they should contact the Division of Wildlife in their area.

To prevent possible exposure to rabies, health experts warn residents to keep their pets’ vaccinations up to date, leave wildlife alone and, if they suspect a family member or pet has been bitten or scratched, contact a medical provider or local veterinarian immediately. It is also recommended that individuals stay away from feral cats, as they can also be a risk for rabies transmission, especially in rural areas.

For more information on rabies, contact NCHD at 970-522-3741 or visit the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment’s website at www.cdphe.state.co.us . For information on vaccinations, contact local veterinarians.

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