

For Immediate Release:
April 16, 2010

Media contact: Deborah Busemeyer
Office: 827-2619, Cell: 470-2290

Department of Health Offers Advice to Stay Safe from Plague, Hantavirus State Confirms Plague Pet Cases from Multiple Counties This Spring

(Santa Fe) – Dr. Paul Ettestad, the New Mexico Department of Health’s public health veterinarian, warned people today that plague activity is increasing this spring. He encouraged people to protect themselves from both plague and Hantavirus as increased precipitation this winter and spring can make rodent populations grow and increase people’s risk of getting sick with diseases that rodents carry.

The Department of Health’s Scientific Laboratory confirmed plague this week in a dog who lived near San Jon in Quay County. Other confirmed animal plague cases this year include a dog and cat from Santa Fe County (city of Santa Fe and Eldorado) and a dog and cat from Rio Arriba County (Alcalde and Abiquiu area). All cases have recovered. No human plague or Hantavirus cases have been confirmed so far this year.

“The increased winter and spring precipitation can stimulate increases in rodent populations and lead to increased plague and Hantavirus activity,” Ettestad said. “Plague cases in pets serve as a warning that there is plague activity in rodents and their fleas, and human cases can follow. Pets infected with plague are hunters who have eaten an infected rodent or been bitten by a rodent’s fleas prior to getting ill. Pets can transport the fleas back into the home where they can infect people.”

Plague, a bacterial disease of rodents, is generally transmitted to humans through the bites of infected fleas, but can also be transmitted by direct contact with infected animals, including rodents, rabbits, and pets.

Hantavirus is a deadly disease transmitted by infected rodents through urine, droppings or saliva. People can contract the disease when they breathe in aerosolized virus. The deer mouse is the main carrier of Hantavirus in New Mexico.

To prevent plague and Hantavirus:

- Avoid sick or dead rodents and rabbits, and their nests and burrows.
- Keep your pets from roaming and hunting and talk to your veterinarian about using an appropriate flea control product.
- Clean up areas near the house where rodents could live, such as woodpiles, brush piles, junk and abandoned vehicles.
- Sick pets should be examined promptly by a veterinarian.
- See your doctor about any unexplained illness involving a sudden and severe fever.
- Air out closed up buildings before entering.

- Seal up homes and cabins so mice can't enter.
- Trap mice until they are all gone.
- Clean up nests and droppings using a disinfectant.
- Put hay, wood, and compost piles as far as possible from your home.
- Don't leave your pet's food and water where mice can get to it.

Symptoms of plague in humans include sudden onset of fever, chills, headache, and weakness. In most cases there is a painful swelling of the lymph node in the groin, armpit or neck areas. Plague symptoms in cats and dogs are fever, lethargy and loss of appetite. There may be a swelling in the lymph node under the jaw. With prompt diagnosis and appropriate antibiotic treatment, the fatality rate in people and pets can be greatly reduced.

In New Mexico, there were six human cases of plague in 2009: three from Santa Fe County, two from Bernalillo County and one from Sandoval County. One of the Santa Fe County cases was a fatal case in an 8-year-old boy.

Four cases of Hantavirus occurred in New Mexico in 2009, one each from Rio Arriba, Taos, Santa Fe, and San Miguel counties. None were fatal. Two cases of Hantavirus occurred in New Mexico in 2008, one each from Taos and Otero counties. Both of which were fatal.

“Most people are exposed to Hantavirus in or around their homes, especially when they clean out enclosed areas that have lots of mouse droppings,” Ettestad said. “The best defense against Hantavirus is to avoid disturbing areas of rodent infestation, including nests and droppings. As warmer weather occurs, people need to air out their cabins and sheds before entering them for the first time.”

Early symptoms of Hantavirus are fever and muscle aches, possibly with chills, headache, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, abdominal pain and cough. These symptoms develop within one to six weeks after rodent exposure.

For more information, including fact sheets in English and Spanish, go to the Department's website at: <http://nmhealth.org/ERD/HealthData/zoonotic.shtml>.

###