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Department of Health Confirms Plague in Dog from Santa Fe State Urges Precautions to Protect Pets and Their Owners

(Santa Fe) – The New Mexico Department of Health’s Scientific Laboratory confirmed plague in a dog from Santa Fe this week. The dog was found chewing on a dead rodent while hiking with its owner on a trail in the Sun Mountain area. The dog became ill with fever, lethargy and vomiting a few days later, and has recovered. This is the first indication of plague activity in New Mexico this year.

In New Mexico, there were six human cases of plague in 2009 with three of them in Santa Fe County. One of the Santa Fe County cases was an 8-year-old boy who died.

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.

“The Santa Fe area has had rabbits and rodents infected with plague in the past, so this is a good reminder to take precautions with your pets and your children,” said Dr. Paul Ettestad, the Department’s public health veterinarian. “Most pets infected with plague are hunters who have eaten an infected rodent or been bitten by a rodent’s fleas prior to getting ill. The pets can also transport the fleas back into the home where they can infect people.”

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.

To prevent plague:

- Avoid sick or dead rodents and rabbits, and their nests and burrows.
- Treat pets regularly with an effective flea control product, and prevent them from roaming and hunting.
- 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.

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