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Department of Health Confirms Plague in Los Alamos Cat Urges Precautions to Protect Pets and their Owners

(Santa Fe) – The New Mexico Department of Health encourages people to continue to take precautions against the plague, such as preventing your pet from hunting. The Department of Health’s Scientific Laboratory confirmed plague in a cat from Los Alamos this week.

So far this year, the Department has confirmed plague in five cats, four dogs and a rock squirrel from Santa Fe County, two cats from Rio Arriba County, and one dog from Bernalillo County. One cat developed pneumonic plague and died; the remaining pets recovered with antibiotic treatment. Eight people required antibiotics to prevent them from getting plague after being exposed to the cat with plague pneumonia.

There has been one human case of plague in 2008 in an Eddy County man who got the disease in January from hunting rabbits. In 2007, New Mexico had five human plague cases with one fatality.

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 canyons in and around Los Alamos have had 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 of Health’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 www.nmhealth.org/epi/plague.html.

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