



NEWS RELEASE

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HEALTH DISTRICT STILL NEEDS RESIDENTS' HELP ON RACCOON RABIES SURVEILLANCE IN SOUTHERN GEAUGA COUNTY

Chardon, Ohio June 17, 2005 – In the wake of last year's extensive outbreak of raccoon rabies in the northern part of the county, the Geauga County General Health District wants to remind residents that there have been new cases this year, and the surveillance of dead and sick-acting raccoons which resumed in February is ongoing. The surveillance must be continued to check on whether the disease has spread further south - - - and citizen help is still very much needed, District officials said. The Health District is targeting the southern half of Geauga County this year in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture-Wildlife, the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, Division of Wildlife, and the Ohio Department of Health, and needs the cooperation of both residents and law enforcement agencies in getting the job done.

Gauga Health Commissioner Robert K. Weisdack said citizen referrals of road kills and strange-acting raccoons have fallen off sharply since late April when raccoon oral vaccine baiting was conducted throughout the county. "Some people seem to think the vaccine baiting took care of everything and that the rabies problem is over," Weisdack said, "but they couldn't be more wrong. The vaccine may help, but the raccoon rabies problem is still very much with us and it isn't going away anytime soon. We really need people to get involved and help us on raccoon surveillance this summer and fall because, obviously, our staff is limited and we can't be everywhere."

Anyone spotting ill, mean or strange-acting raccoons, especially in the daytime, in the area generally south of Fairmount, Butternut and Burton Windsor roads in Geauga County is asked to promptly call their local police or sheriff and ask them to dispatch the animal, and then call the Geauga County Health Department at (440) 285-2222, Extension 6578. Call the police only if the animal is confined, or so sick it probably can't wander away. Fresh road kills and raccoons dead for no apparent reason (not over 24 hrs. old) in this area should also be reported to the Health Department. Please be as accurate as you can about the location of the animal. The raccoon's head must be left undamaged. Call the Health Department to report and, if possible bring the carcass to the Health Department office in Chardon, or a Health Department sanitarian will pick it up from your property. Surveillance animals will be tested for rabies at a USDA laboratory. There is no charge for such rabies testing.

The Health District cannot remove healthy wildlife that are merely a nuisance. For this purpose a nuisance trapper must be engaged, for a fee, to remove raccoons, skunks, etc.

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Raccoons that appear ill, unsteady, wandering aimlessly, going around in circles, acting mean or deliberately approaching or picking fights with pets or livestock fit into the “strange-acting” category.

Surveillance is not the same as ordinary reportage of animal bites and other human and pet exposures to possible rabies—any and all bites and exposures will continue to be reported to the Health Department over the entire county as usual. Surveillance means the targeted-area collection and laboratory examination of dead and strangely-behaving raccoons that have **not** bitten or otherwise exposed a human or a pet -- in order to find incidence of rabies and to get information needed to plan countermeasures.

Geauga County saw 22 cases of raccoon rabies last year, all in the northern half of the county, and there have been seven (7) new cases so far this year...more than any other county in Ohio. Two cases have been as far south as Burton and Middlefield Townships.

Rabid raccoons can transmit the disease by biting pets or livestock which in turn transmit the disease to humans, or by biting humans directly. Transmission to humans can occur anytime saliva or other mucous secretions of an infected animal comes in contact with a cut or skin abrasion. The public health significance of rabies lies not in the total number of human cases, but in its lethality. Unless post-exposure treatment is begun in time, the disease is virtually 100 percent fatal.

The Health Department will be interested in examining all ill, strange-acting and mysteriously deceased raccoons and, up to a point, fresh road-killed raccoons in the *southern half* of the county in the effort to detect rabies cases. If raccoons are euthanized, safety should be the main concern, and the animal's head must be left intact since an undamaged brain is needed for laboratory analysis. In populated areas, a law enforcement officer should be called to euthanize the animal, in most cases, for reasons of safety.

Last year, Geauga County had an unusually high eight (8) human exposures to rabies and twenty-seven (27) pet or livestock exposures that required either observation or treatment. The seven (7) cases so far this year included four pet contacts, including a dog which died as a direct result of injuries suffered in a fight with a rabid raccoon.

The Health Department lists six ways to protect yourself and your family from rabies:

- Do not feed, touch or adopt wild animals, and be cautious of stray dogs and cats. Rabid animals do not always appear vicious!
- Teach children to leave wildlife alone. Be sure your child knows to tell you if an animal bites or scratches them.
- * Have your veterinarian vaccinate your dogs, cats or ferrets against rabies. Keep their vaccinations up-to-date. Don't let your pets run loose.
- Tightly close garbage cans. Open trash attracts wild or stray animals to your home or yard.
- Feed your pets indoors; never leave pet food outside as this attracts wildlife.
- * Call your doctor for advice if an animal bites you. Report all animal bites to the Geauga County Health Department at (440) 285-2222, Ext. 6578.