Members of the Northeast Colorado Board of Health were brought up-to-date on the current skunk rabies situation in parts of northeast Colorado during their May 27 meeting.

Julie McCaleb, the Northeast Colorado Health Department's environmental health director, told board members that the current number of positive rabid skunks found in the area since April has reached five; three from Yuma County and two in Morgan County.

"If you add these latest numbers to the two rabid skunks found in Washington County in 2007, in addition to the rabid skunks found in other eastern Colorado counties over the past couple of years, it looks like this strain of rabies is establishing itself throughout this region," said McCaleb. "I'm sure there is more out there and in different locations that we don't know about which is a real concern."

According to McCaleb the main cause for concern is due to the fact that this new strain of rabies is a skunk strain, rather than the normal bat strain of rabies usually found in Colorado. While bat strains of rabies virus have limited risk of becoming established in other animal species and spreading to other wildlife and pets, skunk strains of rabies are different. The dynamics of where skunks live and how they behave and interact with other animals increases the risk of spillover infection to other wildlife, including family pets that spend time outdoors. Exposure to family pets can in turn lead to exposure of humans.

"Rabies is a very serious virus that causes death 100 percent of the time in both animal and humans," said McCaleb. "The best form of protection is to have your pets vaccinated against the disease because that offers a layer of protection to your family members. Many people know to stay away from wild animal that are behaving strangely, but when it's your family pet, the instinct to help and be near them is strong and that can lead to an exposure."

McCaleb informed board members that NCHD will be pushing out an education campaign focusing on the importance of having family pets vaccinated against the virus. The campaign will include posters and leaflets placed in affected communities, as well as news information, all of which will be available on NCHD's web site, www.nchd.org.

Rabies affects the nervous system of humans and other mammals and it's transmissible through the saliva of infected animals. People and animals get rabies from the bite of a rabid animal or contact with saliva from such an animal.

In other business the board:

—accepted the financial statements for April;

—received NCHD's 2008 annual report;

—approved a proposal to reduce the number of water tests from the Highway 36 hazardous waste facility from twice a year to once a year. McCaleb told board members the reduction would save the agency money, and with 20 years of data showing no concerns, she thought the move was a good one.

—approved the contract renewals for the House Commercial Swine Feeding Operation program, as well as the West Nile virus contract.