

Pet owners urged to vaccinate for rabies

Written by Dr. Tony Cappello, Northeast Colorado Health Department public health director

One of our greatest fears is that we will see a human case of rabies in northeast Colorado. We have had too many instances where people have been exposed, not understood the consequences and just happened to mention something to the right person in time to get treatment.

Rabies is nearly 100 percent fatal for humans without post-exposure prophylaxis treatment (there is no treatment for animals), and it's literally in our own backyards.

A strain of skunk rabies has been popping up in the more rural areas of our region since 2007, but in 2013, we saw those rabid skunks migrating into populated cities and towns including Haxtun, Fort Morgan and Sterling.

This new development heightened our concerns because when skunk rabies gets into populated areas, the risk for transmission escalates, especially in feral cat populations as they are similar in size and share similar habitats with skunks.

In 2009, we saw 14 rabid animals in our region, which was the most we had ever seen; in 2013 that number grew to 34. There comes a time when surveillance testing becomes limited to direct exposure incidents as the disease is known to be present and established in the community. That's the situation we found ourselves in this past summer.

Otherwise, the number of rabid animals would be much higher. The trend is very clear—rabies cases are escalating in northeast Colorado and are spilling over into other animals, which have included skunks, feral cats, cattle, a horse and even a muskrat.

Please know that we are sympathetic when your pets are involved in attacks. Nobody, including our staff, wants to see pets, who we know are many times members of your family, unnecessarily put down. Nor do we want to see our community members struggle to make that decision because of the financial burden of a lengthy, supervised strict quarantine.

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Holyoke Enterprise January 30, 2014