For Immediate Release

Rabies-confirmed raccoon found in Monongalia County; take precautions

MORGANTOWN, WV (Feb. 14, 2019) — A raccoon collected Thursday, Feb. 7 on property in the Cheat Lake area has tested positive for rabies, the first confirmed rabies case of 2019. Monongalia County Health Department officials received confirmation Tuesday.

Two dogs killed a raccoon that was behaving oddly on their owners’ property on Tyrone Avery Road. The owner cleaned up her dogs, which had been vaccinated for rabies, and bagged up the raccoon and took it to the Monongalia County Canine Adoption Center.

From there, it was sent away to the state lab for testing. The dogs were re-vaccinated and will be confined and observed for 45 days. The owner, who was possibly exposed to rabies, is undergoing rabies post-exposure prophylaxis treatment.

“We have not had a positive rabies case in the Cheat Lake area in a long time but we know there is rabies in all parts of Monongalia County,” said Jon W. Welch, a registered sanitarian and program manager of MCHD Environmental Health.

MCHD urges everyone to avoid animals they do not know, including raccoons and bats. These are wild animals that can carry rabies. This warning applies year-round. While more encounters tend to happen in warmer months, this one occurred in the middle of winter. Area residents also can take precautions to help keep raccoons and other pests out of their homes and away from their property.

Also, pet owners who have not gotten their dogs and cats vaccinated for rabies should do so immediately. It is the law, and also, humans are more likely to interact with an unvaccinated dog or cat that has been bitten or scratched by a rabid animal than a raccoon or bat.
In 2018, Monongalia County had four confirmed cases of rabies: two in raccoons that had encounters with pets and two involving cats. Three of the incidents took place in the National area and one occurred on Grafton Road.

Although they may look harmless, raccoons can be a nuisance and, in some cases, downright dangerous. This is especially true if they are infected with rabies, a viral disease found in mammals that attacks the nervous system, ultimately causing disease in the brain and death, according to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (cdc.gov).

Raccoons are creatures of habit and live in all areas of the county, including in downtown areas. Once they make a home, they will return. Evidence of raccoon activity includes garbage cans tipped over, garbage scattered all over and raccoon droppings. Raccoons can cause damage to attics or roofs when they try to enter a home.

The best deterrent to raccoon activity is prevention. Raccoons will look for homes where food is easy to find. MCHD urges residents to take the following measures to deter raccoons and avoid rabies, which is transmitted via saliva through a bite or scratch:

**Keep pets’ rabies vaccinations up to date.** If a domesticated animal becomes infected with rabies, the animal may expose any human with whom it comes into contact. The affected animal must be put down and humans who have had contact with the animal would need to seek immediate medical treatment.

**Seal garbage cans tight.** Raccoons have opposable thumbs and can remove any loose or broken lids. The best garbage cans have lids that lock into place with handles or clamps. If necessary, keep garbage cans inside a secure building.

**Don’t feed raccoons.** Feed outside pets during the day and don’t leave food or water dishes outside after dark when raccoons are likely to be looking for food and water. Raccoons have been known to fight cats and dogs—which should be vaccinated for rabies—for their food.

**Control access to the home.** Blocking off access to a home is the best raccoon deterrent. Inspect houses thoroughly to find any holes or crevices where raccoons could enter. They can get through surprisingly small spaces. This includes chimneys, attic vents and seams along roofs and baseboards. Block any spaces with sheet metal or heavy screening. Consider hiring a professional to look for and cover these spaces.

**Watch out for raccoons or other strange animals that are active** during the day, move erratically and/or are not afraid of humans. They may have rabies. If you suspect there is a rabid raccoon on your property, contact a licensed animal control specialist.
Scare tactics don’t work. Banging pots and pans may be a temporary raccoon deterrent, but raccoons are persistent. They will come back long after you’ve given up. Water-sprayer raccoon deterrents are also widely available. They hook up to your hose and use a motion detector to scare off raccoons. They will work for as long as it takes raccoons to find a way around them.

Although there are no approved repellents, toxicants or fumigants for raccoon problems, some chemical raccoon deterrents are commercially available. These include mixtures of coyote urine and other natural repellents. Also, some research shows that mothballs may keep raccoons out of enclosed spaces in a home.

In extreme cases, traps may be used. There are three ways a landowner can legally trap a raccoon and properly release it. The first and most recommended option is to contact a licensed animal removal specialist. They have the most knowledge and training to properly and humanely remove wild animals. Second is to have a person with a West Virginia hunting license trap the animal during raccoon hunting season. The last option would be for landowners to contact their local West Virginia Department of Natural Resources (DNR) officer and apply for a Wildlife Damage Permit to trap the animal themselves.

Usually, traps must be of the “humane” variety—cages that trap the animal without harming it. Trapping a raccoon humanely is important to prevent injury to the raccoon. Getting rid of a raccoon should be carried out with proper planning and procedures. Releasing the raccoon back into its environment properly is important.

Catching a baby raccoon and keeping it as a pet is against the law. The DNR stopped issuing pet permits for raccoons in 2006 because of the potential risk of rabies.

Early symptoms of rabies in people are similar to other illnesses, such as fever, headache and general weakness and discomfort. As the disease progresses, more specific symptoms include insomnia, anxiety, confusion, slight or partial paralysis, excitation, hallucinations, agitation, hypersalivation (an increase in saliva), difficulty swallowing and fear of water. Death usually occurs within days of the onset of these symptoms.

For additional information about rabies, visit MCHD’s website, monchd.org, or contact MCHD’s Environmental Health program at 304-598-5131.

For more information on MCHD, check out monchd.org and follow us on Facebook and Twitter @WVMCHD for up-to-date information on health and safety.