

News Release



U.S. Department of Agriculture
Forest Service
Southern Region

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FOREST SERVICE CLOSES CAVES AND MINES TO PROTECT BATS IN SOUTHEAST

ATLANTA – Most caves and mines on National Forests in the southeastern United States are being closed for one year in an effort to protect bats, according to Regional Forester Liz Agpaoa.

“We are working to stop the uncontrolled spread of White Nose Syndrome (WNS) among bat species,” she said. “The closures will allow scientists and land managers time to work together and study the fungus, learn how it spreads and how to best address it.”

Under the 12-month closure order signed by Agpaoa on May 21, 2009, all caves and abandoned mines on national forests and units in 13 Southeastern states from Oklahoma to Virginia and Florida will be closed unless posted as open. All uses would be prohibited except organized rescue efforts and other actions specifically authorized by the agency.

White Nose Syndrome, or WNS, is named for a white fungus that appears on the faces, ears, wings and feet of hibernating bats. Scientists are trying to determine how WNS affects bats. The disease causes bats to come out of hibernation severely underweight. In a desperate attempt to avoid starving, the affected bats are often seen flying during the day. They are looking for food, but the insects they normally eat in the spring are not yet available. Once a colony is affected, the fungus spreads rapidly and may kill 90 percent of bats at the hibernation site in just two years.

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Bats are a natural and important part of forests and help control forest and agricultural insect pests.

Scientists believe the WNS fungus is spread bat-to-bat as they cluster in caves and mines, and it may be unknowingly transferred from one cave or mine to another on the footwear and gear of humans. Infected caves and mines may not show obvious signs of its presence.

No reported human illnesses have been attributed to the fungus.

"The syndrome has already affected caves in Virginia in close proximity to the George Washington and Jefferson National Forests," said Dennis Krusac, Threatened and Endangered Species Specialist for the Forest Service's Southern Region. "Staying out of caves and mines is the one thing we can do right now to slow the further spread of the fungus."

The closure order was implemented in hopes of protecting some of the largest bat populations in the country, Krusac said. Many national forests in the Southern Region are home to several species of bats, including the federally endangered Indiana bat, Virginia big-eared bat, gray bat and Ozark big-eared bats.

Nearly 500,000 bats have died as a result of WNS in the New England and Mid-Atlantic states, including almost 25,000 Indiana bats.