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For Immediate Release

Release: #028-14
March 24, 2014
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Bat Outside Blanchard Springs Caverns Tests Positive for White-nose Syndrome
Caverns to Remain Open with Revised Protocols

MOUNTAIN VIEW, Ark. – A bat found dead outside an entrance to Blanchard Springs Caverns has tested positive for white-nose syndrome, a fungal disease deadly to bats. The tri-colored bat was sent to the Southeast Cooperative Wildlife Disease Study at the University of Georgia and confirmed to have the disease.

“This is devastating and sad, but it’s not surprising,” said District Ranger Jim McCoy. “In spite of all efforts, nothing has been able to stop the spread of this disease since it was discovered in the United States eight years ago.”

The fatal fungus was confirmed in Arkansas bats earlier this year, but had not been confirmed in the national forests until this week. White-nose syndrome was discovered in a cave in New York in 2006. Since then it has been confirmed in five Canadian provinces and 23 states. That number now includes the Natural State. The disease is also suspected in three additional states.

“It’s important to remember that this disease is not known to affect humans,” said McCoy. “The same can’t be said for bats, and that’s why we’re now changing our decontamination protocols to minimize the possibility of the disease spreading to other caves by our visitors while keeping the cavern open to the public.”

Caves on the Ozark National Forest have been closed to human use since 2009, with the exception of the guided cave tours at Blanchard Springs Caverns, where decontamination protocols are in place. The protocols in this case refer to how visitors going through Blanchard Springs Caverns are decontaminated.

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Prior to this week's confirmation of the disease, caverns managers screened tour participants to determine if they had been in another cave in a state with a positive confirmation of the disease. If they had, their shoes would be decontaminated with a solution recommended by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. This solution killed spores which could potentially be carried in on visitor's shoes without harming the shoe. Wheelchairs and baby stroller wheels were also treated.

According to McCoy, the new protocol also adheres to U.S. Fish and Wildlife guidelines for caves testing positive for white-nose syndrome. "With confirmation that a bat found outside a Blanchard entrance is positive for the disease, it is highly likely that fungal spores are present inside the cavern," he said. "Now the priority is keeping them from being spread to any other areas. It may be a bit inconvenient for our visitors, but I really think people won't mind when they understand why we're doing it."

Decontamination procedures will now focus on visitor's leaving the caverns. Upon exiting the guided tours, shoes will be treated with a Lysol-like solution to kill the white-nose spores. This process is expected to take approximately 10 minutes and will not damage footwear. New and more expedient protocols may be available in the near future.

White-nose syndrome is believed to cause bats to use up their fat reserves rapidly during hibernation. Affected bats fly out of caves during winter in an attempt to find food. Since the insects bats eat are seasonally dormant, the bats die of starvation. While the night creatures are often portrayed in a negative light, bats play a key role in keeping insects, including agricultural pests, mosquitoes, and forest pests under control. Millions of pounds of insects could have been consumed by the nearly 7 million bats killed by white-nose syndrome since it became active in North America.

As with any wild animal, do not approach or touch dead or dying bats. Contact the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission as soon as possible at www.agfc.com to report your observations. More information about white-nose syndrome can be found at www.whitenosesyndrome.org or www.fws.gov.

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