

# NEWS RELEASE



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## **Forest Service Signs One-Year Extension of Emergency Order to Close Caves and Abandoned Mines**

### ***Closure seeks to protect bat species from White-Nose Syndrome***

**DENVER, July 27, 2011**—Acting Regional Forester Jerome Thomas signed an extension to an emergency order yesterday to restrict access to all caves and abandoned mines on National Forests and Grasslands in the Rocky Mountain Region of the U.S. Forest Service (Colorado, Wyoming, South Dakota, Nebraska and Kansas). The emergency order will extend the initial closure for another 12 months beginning 26 July 2011.

“Although there has been significant progress made in science to better understand *Geomyces destructans*, the fungus that is understood to cause WNS, there is still much we do not know,” said Thomas. “An extension of the closure order will allow the agency more time to better understand how the disease is migrating across the country, under what conditions it thrives, and what measures are most effective in protecting against its spread.”

“White-nose syndrome has killed more than a million hibernating bats in eastern North America since it was discovered in a single cave near Albany, New York in 2006. The westward migration of this disease threatens to have far-reaching ecological impacts. Natural resource agencies are concerned because of the critical role that bats play in maintaining healthy ecosystems and in agricultural systems. Restricting access to caves and mines on lands managed by the U.S. Forest Service will help ensure regional bat populations continue to thrive,” said Steve Guertin, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director of the Mountain–Prairie Region.

The Forest Service does not have comprehensive information about where bats are roosting and hibernating, making it impossible to rule out specific caves that do not warrant closures. There are roughly 30,000 abandoned mines and hundreds of caves on National Forest System lands throughout the Rocky Mountain Region. In addition, National Forests in the Rocky Mountain Region support about 21 species of bats; 15 of which are hibernating bats.

Due to its geographic location, the Rocky Mountain Region of the National Forest System has a potentially key role and influence in the continued westward spread of WNS.

During the second year of the closure of caves and abandoned mines in the Rocky Mountain Region, scientists and specialists will continue their work to both monitor for signs of WNS and engage with national, regional and local efforts committed to advancing our understanding of the disease which will lead to more informed decisions for the future.

Scientists are certain transmission of WNS is occurring bat-to-bat and cave-to-bat. Scientists also suspect transmission of WNS may be facilitated by human activity in caves where bats hibernate, because of the geographically discontinuous spread of the syndrome. People may be inadvertently transporting fungal spores from cave to cave, as fungal spores have been detected on gear exposed to affected sites.

WNS is named for a white fungus that appears on the faces, ears, wings, and feet of hibernating bats. The disease causes bats to come out of hibernation severely underweight, often starving before the insects on which they feed emerge in the spring. Once a colony is infected, it spreads rapidly and can kill over 90 percent of bats within the cave in just two years.

There have been no reported human illnesses attributed to the fungus.

The Southeastern and Northeastern Cave Conservancies, National Speleological Society and many states have closed some of their caves because of WNS. In 2009, the Forest Service closed its caves and mines in the southern and eastern United States, and they remain closed today.

**For more information about WNS, visit:**

- The U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service: <http://www.fws.gov/WhiteNoseSyndrome/>
- USGS Fort Collins Science Center WNS site: <http://www.fort.usgs.gov/WNS/>
- National Speleological Society: <http://www.caves.org/>
- Bat Conservation International, Inc.: <http://www.batcon.org/>
- The U. S. Geological Survey: <http://www.fort.usgs.gov/WNS/>
- The National Wildlife Health: [http://www.nwhc.usgs.gov/disease\\_information/white-nose\\_syndrome/index.jsp](http://www.nwhc.usgs.gov/disease_information/white-nose_syndrome/index.jsp)
- Rocky Mountain Region of the U.S. Forest Service: <http://www.fs.fed.us/r2/>
- Western Bat Working Group: <http://www.wbwg.org/conservation/whitenosesyndrome/whitenose.html>

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