

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## **RABIES CASES ARE UP IN THE NEW RIVER HEALTH DISTRICT**

(CHRISTIANSBURG, Va.) – The New River Health District has had 15 animals confirmed with rabies so far in 2011, compared with 15 confirmed cases through all of 2010. At this time last year, the district had only six confirmed. This year's infected species are diverse, and include two cows and a bobcat, in addition to the more common raccoons, skunks and cats.

“Rabies is endemic in the New River Valley and across most of Virginia. We are experiencing an upward trend this year in the District, and a cluster of positive cases in Giles County,” said Molly O'Dell, M.D., director of the New River Health District. “Vaccination of pet cats and dogs is the best protection against human exposure. It's also important to be on the lookout for wildlife behaving suspiciously, unusually tame and approachable or staggering and uncoordinated.”

Rabies is a deadly disease caused by a virus that attacks the nervous system. It kills almost any mammal or human that gets sick from it. The rabies virus is in the saliva and the brain of infected animals. It can be transmitted through a bite or by getting saliva or brain tissue in the eyes, nose, mouth or in an open wound. Only mammals get rabies; birds, fish, reptiles and amphibians do not. Wild animals frequently diagnosed with rabies are raccoons, skunks and foxes. Cats are the most common domestic animal diagnosed with rabies.

Rabies can be prevented in cats, dogs, ferrets and some livestock with rabies vaccination. For most wild and exotic animals, there are no rabies vaccines available that have been shown to protect them. Because of improved rabies vaccination programs for pets and better treatment for people who are bitten, rabies cases among humans in this country are rare. The best way to prevent the spread of rabies to humans is by keeping pets properly vaccinated.

“Any animal bite should be taken seriously,” stresses Dr. O'Dell. “If an animal bites you, wash the wound immediately. Call your physician, local health department or animal control agency immediately.” Likewise, if your pet is bitten by a wild animal, contact your veterinarian or local health department immediately.

The New River Health District strongly advises that people take the following steps to prevent families and pets from being exposed to rabies:

- Vaccinate all cats, dogs and ferrets against rabies and keep them up to date!
- Avoid contact with wild animals or stray cats and dogs. A rabid animal sometimes acts tame. If you see an animal acting strangely, report it to your local animal control department and do not go near it yourself.

*(More)*

- Do not feed wild animals or stray cats and dogs.
- Report stray animals to your local animal control agency.
- Eliminate outdoor food sources (garbage, pet food, water) around the home.
- Keep pets confined to your property or walk them on a leash.

For more information on rabies, contact your local health department or visit the Virginia Department of Health's Web site at [www.vdh.virginia.gov/Epidemiology/DEE/Rabies](http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/Epidemiology/DEE/Rabies) or the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Web site at [www.cdc.gov/rabies](http://www.cdc.gov/rabies).

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