

Vaccine Airdrops Return to Control Rabies in Texas

The Texas Department of State Health Services this week re-launches its aerial assault on rabies through the annual airdrop of millions of edible doses of rabies vaccine on wildlife habitat.

The Oral Rabies Vaccination Program, launched in 1995, has eliminated the coyote strain of rabies from Texas and virtually eliminated the Texas gray fox strain of rabies. The program is now focused on maintaining a vaccinated zone along the Rio Grande, so those strains won't be reintroduced, and studying whether a similar approach can fight rabies in skunks.

“It makes sense to turn our attention to skunks since they're now the most likely terrestrial animal in Texas to have rabies,” said Dr. Laura Robinson, ORVP director. “We'll be distributing vaccine baits generally between Austin and Houston to test the strategy in reducing the number of skunk rabies cases there. If effective, the same strategy can be used elsewhere.”

Planes will take off from the Brenham airport Wednesday afternoon to begin flights over the skunk study area, covering portions of 17 counties from Madison and Walker in the north, southwest to Bastrop, then southeast to Wharton and Fort Bend. Operations at Brenham will take about a week, after which crews will move to the border area for flights out of Del Rio, Alpine and Zapata and to Brady, around an area where a single case of the gray fox strain of rabies was found in 2013.

DSHS will host a media availability at Brenham Municipal Airport from 10 a.m. to noon Thursday, Jan. 15. Media can obtain images of planes being loaded, taking off and landing and interviews with key program staff.

The program will drop approximately 2.7 million doses of vaccine this year. The vaccine is contained in a small plastic packet coated with fishmeal crumbles to make it attractive for wildlife to eat. The vaccine has proven safe in more than 60 species of animals and is not a danger to humans, but people should avoid handling the vaccine baits because human contact makes it less likely wild animals will eat them. Dogs, cats and livestock that eat the vaccine baits are not considered vaccinated against rabies.

Rabies is a deadly virus spread through the saliva of infected animals, usually by a bite. Preventing rabies is critical because once a person or animal displays clinical signs, the disease is almost always fatal.

While the aerial vaccination program has been successful in eliminating some strains of rabies, there were more than 1,000 animal rabies cases in 2014. Immunizing domestic animals is crucial to stopping the spread of rabies; DSHS urges everyone to have their pets vaccinated as required by law.

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