

NEWS RELEASE
St. Mary's County Health Department

www.smchd.org

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**RABIES RATE FOR FIRST SIX MONTHS IN 2008
NEARS PREVIOUS YEARLY TOTALS**

(LEONARDTOWN, MD) June 10, 2008 – A recent spike in rabies cases, coupled with a high rate of activity earlier this year is raising concern among health department officials. This year's number of rabies cases to date stands at 13 positives for the year compared to 14 positives in 2005, the highest one year total previously recorded in the County.

St. Mary's County Health Department warns residents about the dangers of rabies, and encourages pet owners in particular to take immediate measures that will protect their animals from exposure to this potentially deadly disease. The number one thing we are emphasizing is checking your pet's vaccination records and making sure their immunization against rabies is up to date," said Ann Rose, environmental health sanitarian for the health department.

"One recent rabies case involved a skunk, which came in contact with four dogs that were not current on their rabies vaccine status," said Rose, who is still shaking her head at the aggressiveness of the skunk. "Despite the fact that the dogs were enclosed in a fenced area, the skunk managed to gain access to their area. All of the dogs are now restricted to a strict double enclosure isolation for six months, due to the potential they face for developing

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symptoms of the fatal disease.”

Pets provide a line of defense for humans because pets are most likely to be in contact with a wild animal carrying the disease. According to Rose, a vaccinated pet will still have to be quarantined for 45 days if they have contact with an animal positively identified with or even suspected of having rabies.

Unvaccinated pets that come in contact with a suspected or positively identified rabid animal are subject to a strict double-enclosure isolation for 6 months. According to the health department, many pet owners choose to have the pet euthanized rather than face the longer isolation.

Rabies is spread through the saliva of an infected animal.

Allowing pets to roam unsupervised, and approaching unknown animals, including domesticated pets, increases the likelihood of coming into contact with saliva that could spread the disease. Owners caring for their pet after contact with a possibly rabid animal are warned that the rabies virus may persist in traces of saliva for up to two hours. As a precaution, pet owners should avoid direct contact with saliva from a possibly rabid animal which may be found on a pet's fur.

Animals that display unusual or aggressive behavior may pose the threat of rabies and should be reported immediately to animal control. In addition, health department officials advise that reporting a bite or scratch by any animal is a wise and necessary move to protect the health and

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safety of not only your pet and family, but your neighbors as well.

Four positive cases of rabies were confirmed in St. Mary's County since May. One case was located in Great Mills off Chancellors Run Rd., one on Burnt Mill Rd. in Hollywood, one near Rt. 235 in Hollywood, and another near Rt. 235 in Mechanicsville. In all cases either a skunk or raccoon was involved.

"Regardless of the circumstances, the decision by an owner to euthanize a pet may be difficult but sometimes necessary in the interests of the health of the pet and pet owners," Rose said.

"These recent cases show again the significance of keeping animals currently vaccinated against rabies."

Through a partnership with the St. Mary's Animal Welfare League, low cost vaccination clinics are held the second Monday of each month from 6 – 8 p.m. through November 2008 near the 4-H Building at the St. Mary's County Fairgrounds in Leonardtown. The cost is \$10 per shot. For more information call 301-373-5659 or visit the website at www.smawl.org.

If you spot an animal that is exhibiting symptoms of rabies call Animal Control at 301-475-8018. Bites and scratches by any animal on a human should be reported immediately to the St. Mary's County Sheriff's Office at 301-475-8008.

For more information about rabies and rabies prevention, please visit our website at www.smchd.org or call the health department at 301-475-4321.

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