

Rabies Surveillance Project in Santa Cruz County, Arizona

Rabies is caused by a virus that infects the nervous system and brain, and causes symptoms in people that range from headache and tingling of the extremities, to difficulty swallowing, seizures, and death; once symptoms begin it is always fatal. Animals usually exhibit abnormal behavior and can appear especially docile or extremely aggressive. While there are several strains of the virus which are identified by the species of animal that is primarily responsible for maintaining the disease in the environment, all warm-blooded are susceptible to all of the strains.



In Arizona, there are at least three strains of rabies circulating in the environment. The ones that are most commonly identified are the big brown bat, Arizona grey fox, and South-central Plains skunk strains. Pima, Santa Cruz, Cochise, and Coconino counties have the highest number of animals that test positive for rabies.

Rabies is typically present at low levels in skunks and foxes in Santa Cruz County. There is generally a 10 year cycle of increased occurrence of rabies in Santa Cruz County, the last of which occurred in 2009 and 2010. Starting in November 2012 another increase in the number of positive animals has been observed, with the majority of positive animals being skunks. Santa Cruz County has been placed under rabies quarantine and proactive efforts have begun to monitor the rabies outbreak.

A trap, vaccinate, and release (TVR) program has begun in Santa Cruz and is an important and necessary tool that has the potential for local elimination of specific terrestrial variants of rabies. TVR is frequently conducted in response to rabies emergencies. Rabies vector species are captured in cage traps and hand-vaccinated against rabies prior to release. Any animals showing clinical signs of rabies will be euthanized and tested for rabies.

Objectives

1. Increased surveillance through roadkill and targeted removal of problem animals.
2. Initiate a trap, vaccinate, and release program.
3. To establish geographic extent of outbreak as well as monitor changing trends.

This project is being conducted with the collaboration of the United States Department of Agriculture-Wildlife Services, Santa Cruz and Pima County, and the Arizona Department of Health Services.

Project contacts

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