

Increase of Rabies In Wildlife Threatens Public Health

By: Barbara Bobzin

(904) 392-7227

GAINESVILLE — A recent increase in the spread of rabies in Florida wildlife poses a threat to public health, and efforts to control the disease in wildlife have been marginally effective at best, according to a scientist at the Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS) College of Veterinary Medicine.

Michael Burrridge, chairman of the IFAS department of infectious diseases reports that laboratory-confirmed cases of rabies in Florida wildlife increased by over 150 percent during the last decade.

“Over 85 percent of all laboratory-confirmed cases of rabies in the state are seen in wild animals,” says Burrridge. “With Florida’s rapid land development, more and more people and pets are placed in the midst of potentially rabid wild animals. In almost every case where a pet is infected with rabies, the source of virus was a wild animal. In the U.S., rabies virus is rarely spread between domestic animals,” he says.

Attempts to control rabies in wildlife have centered on reduction of their populations by shooting, poisoning or trapping, and have met with marginal success. Research, notably in France and Canada, is exploring the potential of immunizing free-ranging wildlife, as an alternative to population reduction.

Although there have been no reported human cases of rabies in Florida since 1948, the virus is still considered a threat to public health. Each year in the U.S. 20,000 to 30,000 persons are treated for exposure to rabies, according to *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*. Burrridge says that exposure typically results from animal bites, although handling sick wild or domestic animals can also result in exposure.

The risk of an exposed person developing rabies depends on many factors, such as infected animal’s species or the location and severity of the bite. For example, rabid foxes have a higher concentration of the virus in their saliva than dogs, skunks grasp hold of their victim more tenaciously than dogs and a head bite is potentially more dangerous than a bite on a leg or arm.

In Florida, raccoons have contributed to this growing threat to animal and public health more than other species. “Raccoons in particular have adapted well to the state’s increasingly urban environment,” he says. “77 percent of all rabies cases in Florida in 1985 were seen in raccoons.

“Available data suggests that about 20 percent of the state’s raccoon population has been infected with rabies,” — Burrridge says, “Yet, raccoons are not as susceptible to rabies infection as some other species, such as cattle and foxes.” ■

FLORIDA BLUEGRASS

T.M.

Spray Pattern
Indicator Dye

Gives you
efficient, precise
control of your
spray programs.



Du Cor Chemical

1011 Lancaster Road
Orlando, FL 32809
Call collect
(305) 859-4390

Specialized Chemicals for the Turf Grass Industry

ARBOR TRANSPLANTERS INC.

WPB • 732-2211

BOCA • 499-4461



OUR BIG MOUTH SPADE OPENS WIDER
TO MOVE MORE OF THE TREE!