



May 6, 2010

Tod Stevenson  
New Mexico Department of Game and Fish  
P.O. Box 25115  
Santa Fe, New Mexico 87504

Dear Mr. Stevenson:

White-nose syndrome is a lethal bat disease that has been sweeping the eastern United States over the last four winters. It has devastated affected bat colonies, with mortality rates approaching 100 percent. For example, the population of the Mount Aeolus bat colony in Vermont, formerly the largest hibernaculum in New England at 23,000 bats, collapsed within two years due to this disease.

White-nose syndrome has now been documented in 13 eastern states and two Canadian provinces. Disturbingly, the disease hopscotched across the entire state of Tennessee this past winter, and has now been documented west of the Mississippi River, in northeast Missouri. Thus, in one winter the disease front shifted close to 600 miles. Populations of bats in Great Smoky Mountains National Park are now infected, and the disease is now within 100 miles of Mammoth Cave National Park, perhaps the most famous cave park in the world.

Our organization has been engaged in advocacy for protection of bats threatened by white-nose since early 2008. We have a field office in Vermont, one of the first states affected by this newly emergent wildlife epidemic. State wildlife biologists have been overwhelmed by the bat crisis, their challenges compounded by tight state budgets, and inadequate national guidance and resources from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and other federal agencies.

This crisis is spreading, and the white-nose disease could soon reach your state. It is vital that wildlife agencies in states where bats are not yet affected start preparing. **In particular, we urge you to take action now to reduce the risk of white-nose syndrome being introduced to your state by means of human transmission.** Potential actions include administratively closing all state-owned caves to non-essential human access, and instituting an education and outreach campaign to help landowners, cavers, and the general public understand the threat to bats, and why their cooperation with bat protection is so important at this time.

While there is not yet conclusive proof that human-caused spread of white-nose has occurred, biologists studying the disease believe it possible, and think humans likely transmitted the white-nose fungus (*Geomyces destructans*) to North America. Bat-to-bat and bat-to-cave transmissions of the fungus appear to be the most common ways for the disease to spread, but the recent leap of the disease over several hundred miles, such as into heavily-visited Dunbar Cave State Park in Tennessee, is increasing biologists' belief that human transmission does occur. Human transmission could be particularly significant for the rate of spread of the disease, because of our vastly greater mobility compared to migratory bats.

Given what scientists currently understand about white-nose syndrome, just one unfortunate incident involving the introduction of fungus-contaminated gear or clothing into a cave in New Mexico could create a new bat disease epicenter, no matter that the current white-nose affected zone is over a thousand miles away.

Because of the incredibly lethal effects of this disease on our native bat species, we urge you to initiate actions to improve the chances your state will remain free of white-nose syndrome for as long as possible, and to ensure that your state is well-prepared for the disease if it arrives. Proactive measures taken at the earliest opportunity will provide bats the greatest chance of surviving this unprecedented catastrophe. We recommend:

- Administratively close all state-owned bat caves to recreational access. Allow research and other essential access by permit only, with decontamination protocols required. Grant exemptions for rescues and other emergencies.
- Begin education and outreach to caving organizations, private cave owners, commercial (“show”) cave owners, conservation groups, and the general public regarding the potential for white-nose syndrome to arrive in New Mexico, the devastating threat the disease poses to bats, and the ecological and economic importance of bats.
- Develop educational materials for private cave owners regarding cave stewardship and bat protection. The materials should recommend voluntary measures for safeguarding cave bats on private property, including the following strategies (from most to least restrictive):
  - prohibit recreational cave access and tours year-round
  - allow recreational cave access and tours only for a limited period between summer maternity roosting and fall swarming, with strict requirements for decontamination
  - allow recreational access, but only if groups agree to follow decontamination protocols
- Provide assistance and support to cave owners who wish to implement year-round or seasonal closures for their caves.
- Consider using your position as state wildlife director to publicly promote a bat protection “ethic” that will set the tone for New Mexico’s response to the white-nose crisis. As the state’s top wildlife manager, you can demonstrate that New Mexico takes the threat of white-nose syndrome very seriously. While bats have long been unfairly maligned, they also engender great curiosity and enthusiasm. People appreciate the important role bats play in controlling insect populations, including crop pests and mosquitoes. You have the opportunity to encourage the citizens of New Mexico to be good stewards of bats.
- Encourage responsible cave stewardship practices by show cave owners. Provide information on the threat of white-nose to show cave owners, and educate them on the necessity of including visitor screening, decontamination, and other actions in their operations. These owners should be encouraged to protect the source of their livelihood,

be good environmental stewards, and promote a positive public image of the show cave business community.

- Consider encouraging seasonal or year-round closures for caves that pose particularly high risk of white-nose contamination and/or have particularly high ecological value (large hibernacula, rare or endemic cave species, etc.).
- Begin to develop a white-nose syndrome response plan, if you have not already done so. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has issued recommendations for state planning for areas of the country closest to the current disease-affected zone. We urge you to embark on such a plan now, even though New Mexico is outside this current buffer zone.

Some state wildlife agencies are putting off a response to white-nose syndrome until it actually shows up in their state, citing budget cutbacks, politics, and other issues. While this is understandable, the most sensible and prudent way to address this wildlife epidemic is to take precautionary measures, educate and engage the public, particularly key groups such as cavers and land owners, and to have a plan of action.

The Center for Biological Diversity appreciates your attention to our concerns and to our request for white-nose syndrome action and preparation. Please contact me if you have any questions. If your state already has a white-nose syndrome plan underway, please send us any relevant documents that are available.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mollie Matteson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Mollie Matteson, Conservation Advocate