

Bats tested for white-nose syndrome

By **Rick Steelhammer**
Staff writer

Bats found dead at a Pendleton County cave earlier this month are being tested to determine whether they may have fallen victim to white-nose syndrome, an ailment of unknown origin that has killed tens of thousands of hibernating bats in several northeastern states this winter.

Division of Natural Resources personnel found the dead bats at Trout Cave during a survey of several bat hibernation caves to check for the possible presence of white-nose syndrome. Two other caves were surveyed, but no suspicious bat deaths were found.

While the dead bats had a white, powdery substance on their faces, they didn't exhibit some of the syndrome's other common symptoms, including emaciation.

"Both of the bats had normal body weights and appeared to be otherwise healthy," said Jack Wallace, an environmental resource specialist with the DNR's Wildlife Diversity Program.

Erratic behavior, such as flying during daylight hours or burrowing in snow, has been observed among affected bats near the entrances to caves where the presence of white-nose syndrome has been confirmed.

DNR personnel monitored the entrance to Trout Cave, but found no abnormal bat activity.

It is expected to take at least one month until the laboratory where the bats were sent completes an analysis on their cause of death.

White-nose syndrome was first reported at several bat hibernation caves in upstate New York, where more than 8,000 bats died during the winter of 2006-07. By the winter of 2007-08, the disease had spread to at least 18 additional caves and abandoned mines in four states: New York, Massachusetts, Connecticut and Vermont. Several caves in southwestern Pennsylvania, including some near the West Virginia border, are suspected of hosting bats afflicted with white-nose syndrome.

Bat populations have declined as much as 97 percent in caves where the syndrome's presence has been confirmed. Some wildlife scientists estimate the tally of white-nose syndrome deaths this winter could reach more than 500,000.

Last week, the Friends of Blackwater joined several other conservation groups in signing a letter of intent to sue seven federal agencies if they don't restrict potentially harmful activities near habitat for four endangered bat species, in light of the new threat of white-nose syndrome.



A large part of the known population of the endangered Virginia big-eared bat hibernates in a Pendleton County cave.

Activities cited included timbering, road construction and prescribed burning on public lands.

"The law and common sense require federal agencies to re-examine their activities in light of this horrific threat to bats," said Mollie Matteson, of the Center for Biological Diversity, the group that drafted the letter.

"Logging and road-building have pushed these bats closer to extinction for decades. White-nose syndrome could be the final blow, which is why action is needed now to prevent the loss of these important species."

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Federal Highway Administration, Army Corps of Engineers, Department of Defense, Tennessee Valley Authority, National Park Service and U.S. Forest Service

were the agencies named in the letter.

Judy Rodd, director of the Friends of Blackwater, said a recent draft environmental impact statement by the U.S. Forest Service on the planned co-use of Blackwater Canyon Trail as an access road for a lumber company “is woefully inadequate” in light of the white-nose syndrome threat.

Rodd said the environmental impact statement should be “withdrawn and revised to take into account this proven threat to endangered species in the canyon.”

She said Fish and Wildlife’s biological opinion and incidental take permit for the Blackwater Canyon Trail project should also be withdrawn.

The endangered Indiana bat is known to live in caves in Blackwater Canyon and numerous other locations in West Virginia. Ninety-five percent of the known population of the endangered Virginia big-eared bat hibernates in a single cave in Pendleton County.

The bats found at Trout Cave were little brown bats, one of the region’s more common species of bats.

In February, more than 40 West Virginia bat hibernation caves were closed to guard against the possible spread of white-nose syndrome via spelunking clothes and caving gear.

In March, six bat caves in the Monongahela National Forest were closed for similar reasons.

For more information on white-nose syndrome, visit the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s white-nose syndrome Web site at www.fws.gov/northeast/white_nose.html.