

Funds approved to manage bat disease

By TOM MITCHELL
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The \$1.9 million approved recently in Congress to manage a mystery disease that's killed high numbers of bats in Vermont and New York likely will be spent to implement priorities of a national plan being written to help find a solution to white-nose syndrome as it continues to spread.

The emergency money, contained in the 2010 Interior and Environment Appropriations bill, was approved in conference committee recently and is expected to be awarded to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

"It is going to be up to (the service) to decide on spending," said Jeremy Coleman, national white nose coordinator for the service, at his office Thursday in Cortland, N.Y.

Funding obtained by Sen. Patrick Leahy D-Vt., in an amendment doubled the \$500,000 previously earmarked to monitor the problem, officials said. "My concern is for when we can expect the money, because that might affect the priorities for how we may use it," Coleman said.

"We are still struggling on many levels," he said, noting efforts to study bat population impacts over huge areas of the country.

Once officials have a timeline for receiving the money, they will fine tuning where it will best be spent, Coleman said. "The (overall) game plan could change quickly as it has done all along," as the disease progresses, he said.

The money is critical for studying what the disease is and how to stop it, according to Mylea Bayless, a conservation biologist for Bat Conservation International, a nonprofit group based in Austin, Texas. The group works to protect bats and educate people about their ecological importance. "We can't do much without having these research questions answered," Bayless said.

"We are excited about the \$1.9 million, (but) we are concerned the need is going to be far greater," Bayless said. As white-nose moves to other states, the cost of managing it is expected to be far greater than the money allocated.

About 1 million bats in the Northeast have died of white-nose syndrome, Bayless said.

"The loss of our bat population threatens significant disruption of the ecological balance," Leahy said recently. "The ripple effects are difficult to predict, and the damage could be extraordinary."

He described Vermont as an "epicenter" of the epidemic and said that "it's easy to under-appreciate and misunderstand the crucial role that bats play in the ecosystem."

Up to 95 percent of the little brown bats in Vermont have died, and Indiana bats have also been affected. At one cave in Dorset, 23,000 bats had hibernated previously, one of the largest winter homes for bats in New England. Survivors in the Northeast have returned to their caves this fall.

The syndrome has hurt bats by waking them from hibernation, triggering their immune system and speeding their metabolism, apparently depleting their fat reserves, Bayless said.

Bats pollinate plants and crops, help control insects like mosquitoes that carry West Nile virus and eat insects that damage farm crops, Leahy pointed out in arguing for the money.

"Bats are an incredibly important component of our nation's ecosystem, and the loss of even one species could be disastrous for wildlife, agriculture and people," said Jane Lyder, the Interior Department's deputy assistant secretary for U.S. Fish and Wildlife.

As federal officials develop a plan, Vermont will be able to contribute its knowledge about the disease since it's one of the earlier states to be affected, said Scott Darling, a biologist with the Vermont Department of Fish and Wildlife. State officials hope the money will be used to implement the highest priorities of the national plan, Darling said.

Mollie Matteson, a biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity, in Richmond, welcomed the federal move to get a response plan in place starting in late summer, calling it an "enormous step forward."

Having spread through New England, Pennsylvania and Virginia, white-nose syndrome likely will be heading toward the Great Lakes region over the next one or two years if current trends continue, Bayless said. "We do think white-nose is going to move west rapidly."