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Caves may close to protect bats from white nose syndrome

By Stephanie Steinberg

A fatal bat disease is flying through caves in the USA.

In response, the U.S. Forest Service may announce plans to shut down bat caves located in federal forests and grasslands in Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska, Wyoming and South Dakota, says Mollie Matteson of the Center for Biological Diversity in Richmond, Vt.

Caves will close within the next few weeks, Matteson suggests, following discussions with a Forest Service biologist, and not reopen for at least one year.

However, Richard Rhinehart, the editor of Rocky Mountain Caving, disputes the pending closure, calling the notion premature. "My ongoing conversations with US Forest Service personnel in Colorado, and with other regional media, indicate the US Forest Service has yet to make a decision. They are considering a blanket closure of one year, as the Center states in their release, and they are also considering other options, such as targeted, limited closures of caves that contain significant bat colonies that could be at risk if the White Nose Syndrome pathogen arrives in the Rocky Mountain West," he says, by email.

The disease, called white-nose syndrome, emerged in Albany, N.Y. in 2006. Since then, it has spread to 14 states, killing more than a million bats on the East Coast.



Likely White Noise Syndrome symptoms at Breathing Cave, Bath County, Virginia, late February 2009. (Wil Orndorff, Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation - Division of Natural Heritage)

At least six bat species, some endangered, are suffering from white-nose syndrome, according to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

The syndrome -- which is transmitted from bat to bat -- was most recently spotted in Western Oklahoma, and there is concern that it will reach caves in the Rocky Mountains, Matteson says.

Researchers believe people are transporting a fungus that causes the disease. The fungus may enter caves if it is attached to clothing, boots, and caving gear. While bats are easily infected, humans are not susceptible.

Matteson says scientists do not have a solution for stopping the disease, but hope the cave closures will help.

"The best thing we can be doing right now is to take precautionary action and limit the human transmission of the fungus to new locations," she says.

CORRECTION: This cave closure is still pending and has not been announced, as was first reported.