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Forest Service considers closing bat caves

Agency worried that humans helping transmit deadly fungus.

By Bob Moen

Associated Press Writer

CHEYENNE, Wyo. - U.S. Forest Service regional offices in the West are considering whether to bar humans from bat caves to help prevent the spread of a disease that is fatal to the animals.

Officials with the agency's Rocky Mountain and Southwest region offices say they have been discussing the matter with other federal and state agencies.

Rocky Mountain region spokesman Dave Steinke said the office in Denver hopes to have a decision about the bat caves within a couple of weeks.

"The bats moved very quickly from the East to the Midwest and a lot faster than most people thought would happen, so we do feel a need to make a decision soon," Steinke said.

Forest Service regions in the East and South have already imposed bat cave closures, he said.

More than a million hibernating bats have died since white-nose syndrome was first documented in upstate New York in 2006. It has spread around the Northeast and has been detected as far west as Missouri.

The Rocky Mountain regional office consists of Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota and most

of Wyoming. The Southwest Region includes New Mexico and Arizona.

Karen Carter, a spokeswoman for the Forest Service's Southwest Region, said forest officials are working with other federal and state agencies to address concerns about the spread of white-nose syndrome.

"We want to make sure every agency doesn't do something different," she said. "We're trying to quickly develop what the next step will be. We don't want to be slow, but we don't want to overreact. We do want to do the right thing."

The Bureau of Land Management in New Mexico has already implemented procedures for visitors of caves under the agency's jurisdiction, including requirements that equipment, clothing and shoes be clean before entering caves.

The fungus linked to the syndrome appears to thrive in cold, moist caves and affects hibernating bats. It is transmitted bat-to-bat and it's believed it can be transported on the clothing and gear of people visiting or exploring caves. There have been no cases of the fungus affecting humans.

The fungus forms a white covering that irritates the bats' faces and wings, burns up the mammals' fat reserves and awakens them early from hibernation. Stricken bats exhibit unusual behavior, such as flying during the day, and eventually starve or freeze.

Multiple bat species have been infected so far.

Associated Press Writer Susan Montoya Bryan in Albuquerque, N.M., contributed to this report.



Bat that died of White Nose Syndrome.

AP