



WILDLIFE: Bat-killing fungus found in N.C.

Phil Taylor, E&E reporter

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A fungus that has killed at least 1 million bats over the past five years has been discovered in North Carolina, marking the continued spread of a disease that threatens several hibernating species, including some that are already endangered.

The disease was confirmed earlier this month in five bats taken from an Avery County, N.C., mine to the Southeastern Cooperative Wildlife Disease Study unit at the University of Georgia for testing. A single bat taken from a cave at Grandfather Mountain also tested positive for the disease.

“The discovery does not bode well for the future of many species of bats in western North Carolina,” said Sue Cameron, of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, in a statement. “Although researchers are working hard to learn more about the disease, right now so little is known.”

North Carolina is home to three federally endangered bats -- the Virginia big-eared, Indiana and gray. Virginia big-eared bats are known to use the Grandfather Mountain cave and have been observed in the Avery mine, though not recently, FWS said.

While research is ongoing, the disease appears to be caused by the newly discovered fungus *Geomyces destructans*, which grows on the muzzles of infected bats. Bats are most vulnerable in the winter months, when many have been observed to awaken early from hibernation and freeze or starve to death due to a lack of food.

“White-nose syndrome is confirmed in Virginia and Tennessee, so we expected we would be one of the next states to see the disease,” said Gabrielle Graeter, a biologist with the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission. “This discovery marks the arrival of one of the most devastating threats to bat conservation in our time.”

The fungus was first discovered in 2006 in New York state but has spread as far west as Oklahoma. Scientists still are not sure how the fungus will affect migrating bat species and those that roost in Western caves.

Mollie Matteson, conservation advocate for the Center for Biological Diversity, said the recent discovery -- which follows last month’s discovery of the fungus in

Indiana -- should be a wake-up call to federal agencies to take action to stop the disease’s spread.

FWS should request additional funding to conduct research into the disease, and federal land management agencies must close more caves in order to stop humans from potentially transmitting the fungus on their clothing or equipment, she said.

“This disease has shown a terrifying ability to move quickly into new territories, but federal agencies have yet to mount a response that matches this unprecedented wildlife epidemic,” Matteson said in a statement.

The Bureau of Land Management recently closed certain caves in New Mexico, and the Forest Service last summer issued a blanket one-year closure of all caves on national forest and grasslands in Colorado, Nebraska, Kansas, and most of Wyoming and South Dakota.

CBD last month issued a report criticizing the federal government for failing to close more caves in the West and calling for \$10 million in federal support for white-nose syndrome research.