

Decisions on cave closures over bat disease stall

- Rob Chaney

The fate of cave access in the northern Rocky Mountains must wait a few more weeks, while efforts to stop a disease killing cave bats appears stalled.

"There's no magic bullets there," said Peter Youngbaer, vice president of the Northeast Cave Conservancy who attended a national symposium in Arkansas on White Nose Syndrome, which kills hibernating bats. "The researchers there were a little depressed. There's no immediate cure in sight. It's doing its natural thing, and nobody seems to be able to do anything about it."

In Missoula, Forest Service Region 1 officials have gathered almost 90 comments on a proposed emergency closure of caves to protect bats. Region 1 spokesman Brandan Schulze said on Friday it would be at least late June before a decision can be made.

"One of the things that came through really clear, whether they were interested in going into caves or not, a lot of people really care about the bats," Schulze said. "Where you see the difference is what people see as the best way to manage that."

White Nose Syndrome is caused by a fungus, *Geomyces destructans*, which appeared suddenly in bat colonies around Albany,



Three hundred feet below the Flint Mountains, this pool chamber is more than 30 feet in diameter. "Sometimes the water is so clear you can't tell it's there," says caver Mike McEachern. "You think it's the cave floor and all of a sudden you step in a pool of water." McEachern worries that a national campaign to close public land caves to prevent the spread of White Nose Syndrome in bats could unfairly close off Montana's cave systems, which have few bats. Photo by MIKE McEACHERN

N.Y., in 2006. The fungus causes a white residue to build up around the noses of hibernating bats, killing them. In some caves that support colonies with thousands of bats, it can kill the entire community in two to three years.

Bats are important to agriculture because they eat tons of insects that otherwise would need to be controlled with pesticides. A study published in Science magazine found bats contributed between \$3.7 billion and \$57 billion a year in cost savings. The researchers estimated the 1 million bats killed so far by White Nose Syndrome are no longer eating between 660 and 1,320 metric tons of bugs a year.

Bats spread the fungus amongst themselves, and can contract the disease by entering an infected cave where another colony has died out. What's not clear is whether humans can carry the fungus from cave to cave in a way that will transfer to bats. A proposed national management plan calls for public closure of bat caves and strict decontamination procedures on the gear and clothing of anyone entering a cave.

The Center for Biological Diversity has criticized that plan as inadequate, and announced plans to sue the federal government unless it closes all caves on public lands by June 25. The center has also pushed for congressional action to

give bats protection under the Endangered Species Act and increase funding for White Nose Syndrome research.

"White-nose syndrome is a wildlife crisis of unprecedented proportions," conservation advocate Mollie Matteson said in an email statement. "Left unchecked, the loss of bats is likely to have cascading effects on both the human and natural worlds for generations to come."

The disease has been confirmed in 17 states and four Canadian provinces. Its farthest western observation has been in Oklahoma, although that report remains unconfirmed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service since it was listed in 2010.

While the Center for Biological Diversity has claimed that White Nose Syndrome appeared in the United States "possibly on the boots or gear of a cave visitor who inadvertently brought the fungus from Europe," U.S. cavers counter the disease appears to be spreading on known bat migratory paths and blaming humans for the transmission is unjustified.

Public land caves in the East, Southeast and Midwest have been closed by government order in the past two years. Caves in the Northern Rockies and Pacific Coast remain open, although federal land managers are considering closures there, too.

That has Montana cavers concerned, because the state has many caves of international sig-

nificance. In addition to Lewis and Clark Caverns State Park, the Bob Marshall Wilderness has caves that rank among the deepest in the continental United States.

But Montana also has a relatively small hibernating bat population. That's prompted local cavers to object to a blanket closure, especially considering private cavers are often the only people who know the locations and conditions of remote caves.

At Region 1, Schulze acknowledged the Forest Service has limited information about how many caves it has in the public lands under its management.

"We recognize there are areas we need to have more data," Schulze said. "It would be really difficult. We know the areas where the potential exists for caves, but it would take a significant amount of resources to know where all the bats were."

Youngbaer said that pointed to the need to keep private cavers in the picture. At the Arkansas conference, he said a Forest Service official from the Oregon/Washington region reported of 2,900 caves surveyed, only 38 had bat species and most of those colonies were tiny.

"We're your foot soldiers," Youngbaer said. "Send us out to get the baseline data you need."