Third Cat Plague Case This Year in Santa Fe County

(Santa Fe, NM) – The New Mexico Environment Department (NMED), with the assistance of the Department of Health, has confirmed another case of plague in a cat in Santa Fe County -- the third case of feline plague in the county this year. All three cases have occurred in the Eldorado-Arroyo Hondo area southeast of Santa Fe.

While the cat was treated with antibiotics and is recovering, the NMED is warning people in the area about plague and suggesting precautions against the potentially-fatal disease. There have been no human cases in the state this year.

Plague is a bacterial disease primarily of rodents that is transmitted by fleas. People can acquire plague by fleabite, or through direct contact with infected blood or tissues, such as through skinning a rabbit or coyote that has been infected with plague. Most cats and dogs acquire plague through eating an infected rodent or rabbit. Therefore, pets that hunt are most at risk. Human cases have also resulted from direct contact with an infected cat, such as through a bite, or face-to-face contact with a cat with pneumonic plague.
In order to assess the risk of infection to people in the immediate vicinity, the NMED is trapping rodents in the area to determine which species are involved and the rate of plague infection among them.

Symptoms of plague in people are a sudden high fever, chills, headache, muscle aches, and sometimes nausea and vomiting. In about 75 percent of plague cases, a lymph node in the groin, armpit or neck becomes tender and swollen. Dogs and cats that become ill with plague are usually lethargic and not eating. Plague is treatable with antibiotics in both people and animals when diagnosed in time.

To prevent plague, discourage rodents from around the home by eliminating junk piles and abandoned vehicles that may provide harborage. Stack wood piles at least one foot off the ground. Place animal feed in rodent-proof containers. Use flea control on your pets to prevent them from bringing possibly plague-infected fleas into the home environment. Report any unusual die-offs of rodents or rabbits to any of the 24 Environment Department offices across the state, or call the Department in Santa Fe at (800) 219-6157.

For more information, please contact Pam Reynolds, Environmental Specialist, NMED at (505) 476-8531, or Cathy Tyson, PIO, NMED at (505) 827-2855.