News Release

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For Immediate Release

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TWRA Confirms First Cases of White Nose Syndrome in Tennessee Bats

NASHVILLE – The Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency (TWRA) has received confirmation that two bats have tested positive for White Nose Syndrome (WNS), a white fungus that is responsible for the deaths of thousands of bats in the Eastern United States.

This is one of two Tri-colored bats collected last week showing signs of White Nose Syndrome. ***Photo*** *by Sterling Daniels, TWRA*

This is the first record of White Nose Syndrome in Tennessee. The bats were hibernating in Worley's Cave in Sullivan County. Three Tri-colored bats were collected by

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the TWRA and submitted to the National Wildlife Health Center (NWHC) in Madison, Wisconsin for testing last week.

Last spring the state of Tennessee, National Park Service, and USDA Forest Service and Tennessee Valley Authority closed caves on public lands in Tennessee in an attempt to slow the spread of the fungus. The Nature Conservancy also closed caves located on their lands in Tennessee.

Scientists are trying to determine the cause of WNS and its effects. Once a colony is affected, the fungus spreads rapidly and has killed at least 95 percent of bats at one New York hibernation site in two years. Other northeastern U.S. monitored bat colonies affected by WNS are experiencing similar large fatalities. There have been no reported human illnesses attributed to WNS and there is currently no evidence to suggest that WNS is harmful to humans or other organisms.

Preliminary research results recently released by the United States Geological Survey indicates that the potential exists for WNS to be transmitted between bat hibernation caves as an unwanted hitch-hiker upon humans, their clothing, or other caving gear.

"Temporarily staying out of caves and mines is the one thing we can do right now to slow the transmission of White Nose Syndrome. We knew the bat deaths in the Eastern United States were large. Here in Tennessee we stand to lose the last stronghold of bats like the endangered Indiana and grays. We have hundreds of thousands of bats hibernating in our caves each winter. With a 95 percent mortality rate the loss is catastrophic," said Cory Holliday, Cave and Karst Manager for The Nature Conservancy in Tennessee.

Biologists are concerned that WNS could devastate populations of endangered Indiana and gray bats. Bats play a key role in keeping insects such as agricultural pests, mosquitoes and forest pests under control. “Bats provide a tremendous public service in terms of pest control. If we lose 500,000 bats, we’ll lose the benefits from that service and millions of pounds of insects will still be flying around our neighborhoods, agricultural fields and forests,” said Richard Kirk, Nongame and Endangered Species Coordinator for the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency.

The disease causes bats to use up their fat reserves rapidly during hibernation. This causes the bats to fly out of caves during the winter in a desperate attempt to find food, but since the insects they eat are also seasonally dormant, the bats soon die of starvation.

State and federal agency biologists and non-governmental organizations are currently surveying caves in east Tennessee and other portions of the state. These surveys are being conducted as annual bat population surveys and to monitor for WNS.

Links to more information -http://www.fws.gov/northeast/white_nose.html

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