

June 11, 2009

Senator Benjamin Cardin
Chairman
Subcommittee, Water and Wildlife
Committee on Environment and Public Works
509 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C., 20510

Dear Chairman Cardin:

I am writing to request that the Water and Wildlife Subcommittee conduct a hearing on White Nose Syndrome (WNS), a fungus that appears to be the cause of an extraordinary number of bat deaths in the Northeast.

Experts believe that more than one million bats have died in the Northeast over the last two winters. These deaths appear to be caused by WNS, which is spread when bats hibernate together in caves. Scientists have reported extraordinary mortality rates of 90 to even 100 percent in such caves. Since bats are very slow breeders, producing only one pup per year on average, and have life spans as long as 40 years, experts fear that WNS will lead to the extinction of many bat species.

This situation has severe economic and environmental implications. Bats play a critical ecological role by consuming vast quantities of insects, thereby protecting crops and reducing pesticide use. They prey almost exclusively on insects such as mosquitoes, which spread disease, and moths and beetles, which damage crops. Scientists believe that bats consume the same amount of insects by night that birds do during the day. A single bat can easily eat more than 3,000 insects a night, and an entire colony will consume hundreds of millions of insects per year. One scientific study determined that a colony of only 150 bats consumed enough cucumber beetles to prevent them from laying 33 million eggs, which would have hatched into corn rootworms.

White Nose Syndrome has devastated bat populations in the Northeast and is spreading rapidly to other parts of the country. The first case of WNS was documented only 2 ½ years ago in Howes Cave, New York. Since then, it has swept through New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, Vermont, Virginia and West Virginia. Experts believe that it is highly likely that WNS will spread from the Northeast into some of the largest and most diverse bat colonies in the nation, which are located in the Southeast, Mid-Atlantic, and Midwest.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Geological Survey, National Park Service, and U.S. Forest Service are working with state and local partners, scientists, and conservation organizations to better understand this deadly disease and learn how to control its spread. We must ensure that everything possible is being done to prevent an ecological disaster.

Your Water and Wildlife Subcommittee provides a powerful venue to draw attention to this problem. Thank you for your consideration of this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Frank R. Lautenberg". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underlining the name.