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## **Health, Education, and Human Services Committee urges Diné citizens: Take proactive prevention measures against Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever**

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. – The latest results from blood serology studies conducted over the summer to check for the presence of Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever antibodies in dogs across Navajo Nation, along with recent news of two suspected cases of RMSF in adult Navajos, is prompting the Foreign Animal Disease Task Force to elevate its efforts to educate Diné communities on RMSF prevention measures, said Navajo Veterinary and Livestock Program manager, Glenda Davis.

In her Sept 5 status update report to the Health, Education, and Human Services Committee, Davis unveiled preliminary results from the federal Centers for Disease Control indicating that of the 20 communities where canine blood draws were conducted, 15 communities were found to have dogs with positive titers against the RMSF bacteria.

A positive titer indicates that at some point in the dog's life it was bit by a tick carrying the disease, but has since recovered and is now healthy, says Davis.

When dogs with positive blood titers were first bit by a disease-carrying tick, their bodies initiated a response to fight the bacteria, and "so everything that is fighting against the bacteria of the tick is built up in the dog's blood, and that's what we're testing," Davis added.

A total of 54 dogs with positive blood titers were found in the 15 communities – half were from NHA communities and the other half were found in rural Navajo community homes.

The FAD task force will be partnering with the NHA to enforce compliance with NHA regulations on animal ownership, such as ensuring that dogs have updated vaccinations and are fenced in or leashed.

Of the 15 positive Navajo communities, six have been designated as high risk for RMSF.

The CDC has expressed that there is a geographic variation in risk across the Navajo Nation, meaning that some communities are at higher risk depending on the part of the reservation in which they are located.

The six communities at high risk for RMSF have been identified as Crownpoint, Tohatchi, Shiprock, Jeddito, Ojo Amarillo, and Wide Ruins.

These communities either have a high number of dogs with positive titers, dogs with high positive titers against RMSF, or both, and residents need to check their animals for ticks and implement tick control.

The FAD Task Force will be increasing prevention measures across the Navajo Nation, focusing on reducing the number of roaming dogs and making spay and neuter services more accessible to chapters.

In a memorandum dated Sept 7, Dr. Gayle Diné Chacon, chief medical director for the Navajo Division of Health, alerted all Navajo Nation health care providers of two suspected cases of RMSF in Navajo adults that had been identified “in the Arizona portion of the Navajo Nation within the last 3 months.”

It was not until Sept 6 that this information was made known to officials from NDOH and the Navajo Area Indian Health Service, Dr. Diné Chacon wrote. The individuals were treated.

In light of the news of suspected RMSF cases in humans on the Navajo Nation, the FAD Task Force will be concentrating on providing educational support to health care providers on the Navajo Nation to recognize the signs and symptoms of RMSF and to get treatment started early if a diagnosis is made.

It is optimal to get treatment started by day 5 of infection.

“Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever is a curable disease. Treatment is done with antibiotics, but recognition of signs and symptoms is crucial,” Davis said.

Common signs and symptoms can include: fever, headache, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, muscle ache, lack of appetite, red eyes, and a rash that occurs 2-5 days after a fever. The first symptoms of RMSF usually begin 2-14 days after the bite of an infected tick.

“The tick is the problem, not the dogs,” says Davis. “The dogs are like buses that carry the ticks around.”

It is important for pet owners to make sure their dogs are dewormed and have a tick collar placed on them.

Because dogs are the vehicles by which the ticks get around, the FAD task force is urging Diné people to spay or neuter their dogs to control the dog population.

To prevent ticks from being mobile and jumping from dog to dog, pet owners are highly advised to keep their dogs fenced in the yard. Fences not only keep a dog from roaming but also keep other dogs coming into the yard and spreading ticks to the family dog.

While homeowners can hire a certified pesticide applicator to apply pesticides to target ticks, it will not be as effective if integrated pest management practices are not implemented around the home.

Diné citizens are advised to remove debris and trash around the house, discard old furniture and old vehicles sitting outside, clean up weeds and bushes around the home’s perimeter, and remove standing water.

As the weather cools, ticks will be looking for refuge.

“Continually assess your home, your dogs, your family members, and yourself for ticks,” says Davis, who asks the public to use the fall and winter seasons to clean up around their homes so ticks do not have a place to hide.

The Health, Education, and Human Services Committee encourages Diné citizens to be proactive and to contact the Navajo Division of Health’s Health Education Program at (928) 871-6562, or the Navajo Veterinary and Livestock Program at (928) 871-6615, for more information on RMSF and prevention measures to protect family members and pets against the threat of RMSF.

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