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Vice President Nez Coordinates Hantavirus Public Awareness Campaign



Navajo Nation Vice President Jonathan Nez met with officials from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on public outreach for hantavirus awareness on Feb. 10 in Atlanta. The CDC will work with the Navajo Nation on prevention efforts for hantavirus and *O. lupi*.

ATLANTA—Prevention of Hantavirus Pulmonary Syndrome on the Navajo Nation was the purpose of the Feb. 10 meeting between Navajo Nation Vice President Jonathan Nez and subject matter experts from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Vice President Nez said the Navajo Nation must be proactive in prevention efforts after a Tuba City resident died from complications of HPS on Jan. 13.

“We want to be proactive in this partnership. We got the family relocated out of their home and into an NHA home,” he said. “Once it’s time for spring cleaning, we must disclose full information on prevention of hantavirus and educate our Navajo people.”

Del Yazzie, an epidemiologist with the Navajo Epidemiology Center, said the Navajo Nation is

partnering with the counties and state of Arizona, including the federal government.

The partnership is to prevent hantavirus, but also for *O. lupi*, an emerging threat to the Navajo Nation that infects dogs and humans.

There have been two cases of *O. lupi* on the Navajo Nation in Chinle, Ariz. and two cases in Farmington, N.M. *O. lupi* involves infection of a parasitic worm that is transmitted by black flies.

A 22-month-old Navajo girl developed spinal lesions on her spinal cord and required emergency surgery to remove the nodule. Once removed, doctors found the *O. lupi* worm.

Other diseases are also of concern to residents on the Navajo Nation.

“Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever could still be a problem. If we’re going to have a lot of rain because of El Nino,

I think a lot of animals are going to be able to grow in a large quantity. Rocky Mountain should be on the radar, just in case,” said Dr. Pierre Rollin, deputy branch chief for the Viral Special Pathogens Branch of the National Center for Emerging and Zoonotic Infectious Diseases.

With regard to hantavirus, Rollin cited the Ramah Project from the mid-1990s, which provided rodent-proofing education to residents of the Navajo community.

“At the time, we trained some local people to inspect houses and helped them to rodent-proof them. People can do this. There are things they can do to protect themselves,” he said.

Vice President Nez is requesting assistance from the CDC for hantavirus and *O. lupi* prevention efforts.

Dr. Barbara Knust, epidemiology team lead for the CDC Viral Special Pathogens Branch, emphasized rodent-proofing homes and making food sources like dog food inaccessible to rodents.

“We can provide direct assistance with creating public information materials and tailoring those messages in the best way that will reach the people most effectively,” she said.

She said an Epi-Aid is a possibility, including working with area hospitals to provide awareness on hantavirus symptoms to ensure advanced care is provided to patients that may have signs of infection.

An Epi-Aid allows rapid response by the CDC’s Epidemic Intelligence Service officers, who assist in investigating an infectious or non-infectious disease outbreak, natural or manmade disaster, or other public health emergency.

Dr. Heather Paulin, CDC Parasitic Diseases Branch EIS Officer, said plans are underway to prevent *O. lupi* infections on the Navajo Nation by working with the tribal veterinary services.

“The idea is that we would try to collect blood samples from residents who own dogs and sample their dogs at the same time,” Paulin said.

She noted that the CDC would like to partner with spay and neuter mobile services provided by Dr. Glenda Davis with the Navajo Nation Veterinary Program.

The CDC is working with Navajo Technical University for the research project and upon approval the EIS team will begin the testing on the Navajo Nation.

“I am from western Navajo. When I say people are scared, they are scared, especially after someone has died from the hantavirus,” said Vice President Nez.

“We are working with the experts and our dialogue in Atlanta will go a long way toward these prevention efforts,” he added.

Information: www.cdc.gov/hantavirus

