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For Immediate Release

Fleas Test Positive for Plague in Picture Canyon

FLAGSTAFF, Ariz. – Coconino County Public Health Services District (CCPHSD) officials confirmed that fleas collected in Picture Canyon, a popular hiking area located in northeast Flagstaff, tested positive for plague (*Yersinia pestis*). The area is located east of Highway 89 North, and north of Interstate 40 and Old Route 66.

The tests were recently conducted by the Center for Microbial Genetics and Genomics at Northern Arizona University.

CCPHSD Environmental Health staff collects and tests flea samples from locations throughout the County. The recent samples were collected from burrows located along the Picture Canyon hiking trails. Visitors to the area are asked to avoid rodent burrows and keep dogs on a leash as required by Arizona State law.

The CCPHSD and the City of Flagstaff have notified nearby residents of the situation and posted signage at the trailheads. The burrows are being treated and the area will be closely monitored to determine if further action is required.

This positive test is the first evidence of plague activity reported in the County this year. While this is the only location within the County where the plague has been confirmed, the disease is endemic to areas throughout the County and may be more widespread.

The CCPHSD is urging the public to take precautions to reduce their risk of exposure to this serious disease, which can be present in rodents, rabbits, and sometimes predators that feed upon these animals. The disease can be transmitted to humans and other animals by the bite of an infected flea or by direct contact with an infected animal.

Symptoms in humans generally appear within two to six days following exposure and include the following: fever, chills, headache, weakness, muscle pain, and swollen lymph glands (called “buboes”) in the groin, armpits, or limbs. The disease can become septicemic (spreading throughout the bloodstream) and/or pneumonic (affecting the lungs), but is curable with proper antibiotic therapy if diagnosed and treated early.

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Persons living, working, camping or visiting in areas where plague and/or rodents are known to be present are urged to take the following precautions to reduce their risk of exposure:

1. Do not handle sick or dead animals.
2. Prevent pets from roaming loose. Pets can pick up the infected fleas of wild animals, and then pass fleas on to their human owners. This is one of the common ways for humans to contract plague. Cats with plague can also pass the disease on to humans directly through respiratory droplets
3. De-flea pets routinely. Contact your veterinarian for specific recommendations.
4. Avoid rodent burrows and fleas.
5. Use insect repellents when visiting or working in areas where plague might be active or rodents might be present (campers, hikers, woodcutters and hunters).
6. Wear rubber gloves and other protection when cleaning and skinning wild animals.
7. Do not camp next to rodent burrows and avoid sleeping directly on the ground.
8. Be aware that cats are highly susceptible to this disease and while they can get sick from a variety of illnesses, a sick cat (especially one allowed to run at large outside) should receive care by a veterinarian for proper diagnosis and treatment to reduce human exposure to plague.
9. In case of illness see your physician immediately.

A sudden reduction in rodent activity, such as prairie dogs and mice, may indicate that plague is present. Persons noticing a sudden reduction of rodent or rabbit activity are urged to contact CCPHSD Environmental Services at 928-679-8750.

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