For Immediate Release

MCHD to distribute rabies vaccine baits in Morgantown on Friday

MORGANTOWN, WV (Sept. 3, 2019) — The nine-member Environmental Health staff from Monongalia County Health Department will go out into the city of Morgantown on Friday, Sept. 6 to distribute Oral Rabies Vaccine (ORV) baits in green areas around Morgantown.

Monongalia County Health Department spent $1,566 to buy 1,080 ORV baits for the drop, said Jon Welch, program manager of MCHD Environmental Health.

“With the influx of rabid raccoons, we’re hoping to minimize the threat of rabid raccoons,” Welch said. “It’s the first time in four years we’ve hand-baited anything in Morgantown.”

Also this week, about 49,000 ORV baits will be dropped via airplane in Monongalia County by the U.S. Department of Agriculture Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (USDA APHIS), based in Elkins. This will take place in more rural areas and less densely population areas of Monongalia County.

“It’s been close to 10 years since they’ve done any air drops,” Welch said.

Monongalia County was added back into the annual USDA APHIS ORV bait drop after 14 raccoons tested positive for rabies in the first half of the year. USDA APHIS were asked to move the line back east into Monongalia County when representatives visited MCHD in early spring. The line moves west with the goal of preventing the spread of rabies in that direction.

Areas that will be included in the Morgantown hand-baiting will be green spaces around Green Bag Road, Richwood Avenue, South Park and the rail-trail from the water plant down to University Motors.

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“It’s not going to be dropped right by the rail-trail,” Welch said. “It will be tossed into nearby culverts and ditches.”

The nine MCHD Environmental Health employees will divide up into groups of three, each covering one of three grids provided by USDA APHIS. Each grid will get one box, or 360 ORV baits. One person will drive, another will distribute the baits and a third person will use a clicker to count the baits.

The ORV and the bait are not considered to be dangerous. The bait coating is made of dog food or fishmeal and poses no danger to human or animal health.

People who might happen upon the baits should leave them alone, unless they are in an area where children or pets play. To move an ORV bait, wear gloves or use a paper towel or plastic bag, according to information released by USDA APHIS. Move baits to areas where wildlife might find them. If a pet eats a bait, it is not harmful, but eating several could cause an upset stomach. Wash your hands after touching a bait.

Dr. Lee B. Smith of Monongalia County Health Department hopes this will help reduce the incidence of rabies that has been occurring in the area, but he noted that the ORV must be dropped annually to make a real difference.

“The efforts of baiting need to be sustained in order to be effective,” said Dr. Smith, MCHD executive director and county health officer. “We are very grateful that the USDA has revamped their ORV program. To be effective, however, this ORV must be continued yearly.”

Rabies is a viral disease found in mammals that attacks the nervous system, ultimately causing disease in the brain and death, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (cdc.gov).

Of the 14 rabid raccoons found in Monongalia County this year, five were the result of a family pet interacting with raccoons that were found to be positive for rabies. The other nine raccoons that tested positive for rabies were identified thanks to the efforts of surveillance conducted by USDA APHIS.

When a raccoon with rabies gets into a fight with a family dog, cat or other pet that is a mammal, that animal must be re-vaccinated for rabies and observed, or quarantined, depending on the situation. Pets that have not been vaccinated for rabies might have to be euthanized after encountering a rabid animal.

Sometimes family members who interact with their pets and come in contact with blood and/or saliva also must undergo rabies prophylactic post-exposure treatment.
Under West Virginia law, all animal bites are to be reported and MCHD Environmental Health works to control rabies and other vector-borne diseases. MCHD also works to educate the community on the presence of rabies, the need to avoid wildlife and to take common-sense precautions with pets. These include making sure dogs, cats and ferrets are up to date on rabies vaccines and monitoring them if they are outdoors to keep them away from wildlife.

In addition to raccoons, skunks, foxes and bats are common rabies carriers in West Virginia.

“This is why we advise people to leave wildlife alone, have their animals vaccinated, and do not handle without precautions pets that may have been injured in fights with other animals,” Dr. Smith said. “Also, if there is concern, seek attention by a medical provider knowledgeable of rabies and who is equipped to begin treatment if necessary.”

For information on what to do in the case of a wildlife encounter, go to monchd.org/rabies-control.html. Check out monchd.org and follow us on Facebook and Twitter @WVMCHD and on Instagram at WVMCHD for up-to-date information on health and wellness in the community.