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Re: Report Unusual Rabbit Mortalities

To Whom It May Concern:

An outbreak of rabbit hemorrhagic disease (RHD) first detected in New Mexico in March has since spread to surrounding states in the southwestern U.S., including Arizona, Nevada, Texas, Colorado and California, as well as northern Mexico. Below please find information about this disease and the current outbreak, steps to take now should this disease reach Iowa, and who to contact should you consult on or experience unusual rabbit mortalities. Thank you for being a valued partner of the Iowa Department of Natural Resources and for your continued commitment to protecting Iowa's wildlife.

### **What We Know: Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease**

The current outbreak in the southwestern U.S. is caused by a calicivirus: rabbit hemorrhagic disease virus serotype 2 (RHDV2). This is the first known disease event to involve wild lagomorphs in North America. Infected animals present with sudden death, sometimes with blood visible around the nose, but often without any signs of illness. Experimental infection trials conducted by the USDA suggest eastern cottontails are highly susceptible to infection. Therefore, we should consider both of our native lagomorph species (eastern cottontail and white-tailed jackrabbit) at risk, in addition to feral and domestic rabbit stock.

Please note: rabbit hemorrhagic disease is a viral disease unrelated to COVID-19, the cause of the current human pandemic. It does not pose a risk to people and is not known to affect other animals.

RHDV2 can be directly transmitted via close contact between individuals or indirectly through environmental contamination. Virus is readily shed in bodily fluids like saliva, blood, and feces and can persist in the environment for several weeks, and even months in the tissues of infected carcasses. It is also resistant to extreme heat and cold.

### **What You Can Do: Prevention**

- House or transition your rabbits indoors. Insects can mechanically spread disease, as can predators or scavengers via scat.
- Use dedicated footwear when entering rabbit enclosures. Should RHD spread to Iowa, this will reduce your risk of tracking in virus from outside.
- Clean and disinfect equipment and structures shared between rabbits. Dilute 10% sodium hypochlorite (household bleach) or sodium hydroxide (lye) solutions are effective disinfectants, as well as 1% Virkon S. Remember to remove organic debris prior to application, and ensure adequate contact time.
- Quarantine new intakes for at least 10 days and handle these individuals last. Infected rabbits typically die within several days of exposure to this virus.
- Take additional precautions if interacting with domestic rabbits, especially individuals of unknown status like in a shelter environment or foster network. Change clothes and wash hands frequently.

## **Who to Contact: Unusual Mortalities**

A single dead rabbit should not be a cause for alarm—common rule-outs include vehicular collision, cat attack, or other predator attack. However, please report any unusual mortality events, including clusters of dead rabbits with no obvious sign of external trauma. Contact the state wildlife veterinarian before attempting to move carcasses, and record location, species, and number affected. Rabbit hemorrhagic disease is a highly lethal disease that can be of great economic and ecological consequence- please help us remain vigilant!

## **Moving Forward**

Attached please find fact sheets produced by the USDA that provide additional information about rabbit hemorrhagic disease and appropriate decontamination procedures. Though these documents are geared toward rabbit producers, the same recommendations apply to wild rabbits under human care (i.e. rehabilitation, education).

We are actively monitoring this outbreak and will update Iowa-specific guidance as needed. If you have questions or concerns about rabbit hemorrhagic disease, please contact DNR State Wildlife Veterinarian: Dr. Rachel Ruden by phone at 515-823-8544 or by email at [Rachel.Ruden@dnr.iowa.gov](mailto:Rachel.Ruden@dnr.iowa.gov).

Stay well!



Rachel Ruden, VMD PhD  
State Wildlife Veterinarian