Recent Rabies Cases in Talbot County Brings About Increased Awareness

On June 29, 2015 the Talbot County Health Department’s Office of Environmental Health received notification from the State of Maryland’s Rabies Laboratory that a rabies specimen collected from within the town limits of St. Michaels, tested positive for the rabies virus. The specimen, a raccoon, aggressively attacked two individuals resulting in the treatment of those individuals with post exposure rabies prophylaxis. In other reported incidents, aggressive behavior in raccoons and foxes in the Bar Neck area of Tilghman Island have been observed, resulting in an additional human exposure and several pet exposures to the rabies virus.

Rabies is a deadly disease caused by a virus that attacks the nervous system. All mammals (warm-blooded, furry animals) can contract rabies; however, it occurs most often in skunks, raccoons, foxes and bats. The Rabies virus lives in the saliva of the rabid animal. It is spread through the bite or scratch from an infected animal. People can become exposed to rabies when saliva from an infected animal gets into open wounds in the skin, or in the eyes, nose or mouth (indirect exposure). Rabid animals may appear sickly. They may also exhibit signs of extreme aggression, or appear very docile (almost friendly type of behavior). These types of abnormal behaviors should be considered suspicious. The best form of prevention is avoiding and not interfering with any wild animal. If human contact does occur through a bite or scratch, or indirect exposure, the area contacted should be washed immediately with soap and water and the individual exposed to the virus should consult with their medical clinician immediately to determine if post exposure treatment is recommended.

Keeping pets vaccinated against rabies is extremely important in preventing the spread of the rabies virus. Maryland law requires that a licensed veterinarian properly vaccinate all dogs, cats and ferrets over the age of 4 months against rabies. If a pet comes in contact with a rabid animal or suspected rabid animal the pet owner should contact the Talbot County Health Department Monday through Friday between the hours of 8:00 am and 5:00 pm at 410-770-6880 to discuss the details of the incident, review the vaccination status of the pet that
has been exposed, and discuss required procedures for ensuring the pet is adequately protected from the rabies virus. If a pet has been exposed to a rabid animal or a suspected rabid animal, the pet owner should not handle, or touch the pet within two hours of the alleged contact. If the pet owner chooses to handle the pet within two hours of the suspected rabies, exposure non-porous gloves need to be worn.

If an exposure occurs to pets or humans after normal business hours, individuals may contact the Talbot County Health Department’s Office of Environmental Health by dialing: 410-822-0095. The dispatcher will then contact the Environmental Health Specialist on call who will contact the individual and provide the necessary assistance.

There are a number of additional measures that private citizens can utilize to reduce the risk of pet or human exposure to wildlife. These measures include but are not limited to:

- Making your yard unattractive to wild animals by keeping garbage in tightly closed trash cans;
- Feeding all pets inside the home will reduce or eliminate possible food sources for wild animals;
- Eliminating rodent harborage areas by capping chimneys, sealing off openings in attics, and under porches, etc;
- Eliminating the adoption of wild animals as pets;
- Restricting pets to the house or yard so they are less likely to roam;
- Walking pets on a leash.

For information regarding the control of nuisance wildlife, citizens may contact the Maryland Department of Natural Resources from Monday through Friday 8:00 to 4:30 at 1-877-463-6497. If a citizen is concerned about an eminent public health danger associated with wildlife that is suspected of being rabid, they should contact their local law enforcement agency, or the local Talbot County Department of Emergency Services, (911) who will dispatch the appropriate law enforcement agency for assistance.