

Preventing tick borne diseases

Written by Story and Photos by Marley Shebala Sun Correspondent
Friday, 15 May 2015 08:27



TSE BONITO, N.M. – As soon as Navajo Nation Veterinary and Livestock Program Director Glenda Davis got word about a positive human case of Bubonic Plague on the vast Navajo Reservation on May 13, she immediately contacted her Foreign Animal Disease Task Force.

Davis explained that the task force was created in November 2011 in response to the high risk of Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever on the reservation.

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She pointed to a “2015 Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever (RMSF) Calendar” that the task force members developed and said that the members are all listed on the cover.

The members are tribal veterinary and livestock program; the Navajo Epidemiology Center; the Navajo Health Education Program; the Indian Community Health Representatives; Navajo Department of Resource Enforcement Rangers; Navajo Environmental Protection Agency; Navajo Housing Authority, and the U.S. Indian Health Services.

Davis explained that the plague comes from infected fleas, which are usually found on prairie dogs, rabbits, rodents and even cats.

She noted that infected prairie dogs generally don't live too long and that a warning sign of plague infected prairie dogs is dead prairie dogs, which will be found near their burrows or homes.

And so if anyone notices a “prairie dog die off”, he or she needs to report that to the Navajo Nation Fish and Wildlife Department, Davis advised.

She said that the environmental health would be called in to test the fleas and to also do an insecticide treatment of the area to kill the fleas.

After the test and based on the radius of the dead prairie dogs, environmental health workers will go to the nearby homes to check the people and pets, especially dogs, Davis said.

She explained that dogs on the reservation are used to herd cattle and sheep and so there are times when they chase rabbits and dig up prairie dog holes.

The prime goal of the Foreign Animal Disease Task Force is to protect the people and so that's why education about preventing foreign animal diseases is a priority, Davis said.

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Tribal fair and plague

She recalled that a couple of years ago that a prairie dog die off was reported between St. Michaels and Fort Defiance and it was about two weeks before the annual Navajo Nation Fair in Window Rock.

There wasn't enough time to stop the fair and so the tribal veterinary and livestock program partnered with Indian Health Services and conducted an investigation, she said.

Davis said the fleas tested positive for the plague and so staff went house to house checking on the residents and pets and providing quick kill flea and tick pet collars.

There were no positive human cases of plague, she said.

Davis emphasized that the plague in humans is treatable but the individual must be treated as soon as possible.

The symptoms of plague in humans, which usually occur about two to six days after being bitten by an infected flea, are swelling or pain in the neck area, groin or armpit, headache, fever and possible nausea.

According to an April 7 news story published in the medicaldaily.com, public health officials reported that fleas collected in Picture Canyon, a popular hiking area that is northeast of Flagstaff, tested positive for the plague.

Plague and RMSF alert

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Davis said that the reservation-wide plague alert will also include the Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever because it's carried by ticks and the weather is getting warmer.

Pet owners need to make sure that their dogs and/or cats are free of ticks and fleas, which can easily be done by purchasing anti-flea and tick collars, shampoos and medication, she added.

Davis said that the veterinary and livestock program issued its 2015 Navajo Nation Veterinary Mobile Unit Wellness & Spay/Neuter Schedule, which includes a weekly wellness day that is held every Tuesday and includes vaccinations, deworming, education about tick products, rabies and animal licensing, and first come first serve appointments for spay or neutering surgery.

Some people buy over the counter anti-flea and tick treatments and so they need to understand that they must read the label because some treatments are only for dogs or cats or only for puppies or kittens, she explained.

And Davis said people need to understand that they need to protect themselves, especially their children, from infected ticks and fleas by wearing anti-tick and flea products, keeping dog houses and wood piles away from their homes, cleaning their yards of old furniture, mattresses and vehicles, dressing appropriately when working outdoors, and fencing in your yard to keep roaming dogs away.

She noted that if an owner has protected his or her dog from ticks with anti-tick products, a feral or roaming dog that is carrying infected ticks can spread the infected tick to your yard or home site.

According to the 2015 RMSF calendar, a female tick with the bacteria can lay 3,000 eggs already infected with the scourge and ticks can be smaller than a speck and as large as a raisin.

Ticks and roaming dogs

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Davis said that a photo in the calendar is of a feral or roaming dog from the western part of the reservation that has ticks covering its underbelly and armpits, lodged between its toes and all over its ears.

She said that this year is the third RMSF season for the reservation, which means that the tribal animal control program will be conducting its voluntary surrender program for dogs and cats.

Davis noted that the animal control program and veterinary and livestock program work with off-reservation animal organizations and animal humane groups for the adoption of the dogs and cats coming from the voluntary surrender project.

But she said the concern of the tribal programs is that the organizations and groups understand that they must provide treatment for the reservation small animals to prevent tick diseases and infestation of an environment that is free of infected ticks.

Davis said that last year, the animal control program removed about 11,000 dogs from the reservation.

“That’s just like a drop in the bucket,” she said.

According to the 2015 RMSF calendar, one un-neutered male dog and one un-spayed female dog will produce a total of 67,000 dogs over six years.

Davis picked up the 2015 RMSF calendar and pointed out how it is packed with educational information about how to check yourself and your children for ticks, what a tick looks like, why you shouldn’t quash a tick when you find one, and why spay and neutering also prevents outbreaks of the RMSF, Davis said.

She added that everyone needs to get into the habit of checking themselves for ticks and fleas.

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“We are up against nature and nature has made it where ticks will survive,” Davis said. “And we’re pretty much trying to just protect our animals on the Navajo Nation, whether it’s livestock, companion animals, pets. We have a tribal veterinarian that takes care of our zoo. And so our zoo animals are all taken care of.”