Rabies cases now total 12 in parish

By Nissa Darbonne

Confirmation rabid animal finds in Lafayette Parish now total 12, officials say the problem is only in its infancy. It will grow before it declines, said two officials Wednesday.

Certain already is that life in Lafayette Parish and neighboring areas is changed by the 12 local finds and seven cases just outside parish lines, all of them skunks:

- state health officials now recommend treatment of people who have been bitten by a wild animal that is not found and tested, here or in the area;
- treatment involves five shots over a 2-day period at a reported cost of about $1,400 altogether;
- pet owners here cannot be lax about getting their pets vaccinated regularly and veterinarians are seeing more customers, many who have never visited a vet's office before;
- school officials may have to take precautions since campuses, many in rural or wooded areas, are prone to skunk visits and already report sightings, one found dead on the Northside High School campus and later confirmed rabid;
- state officials are responding by quickening the animal testing pace, having animal control officials bring the whole animal to a lab rather than only its head;
- Lafayette City Council members called for a plan of action Tuesday from animal control officials, who say they have already drafted one.

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Parish government officials have assigned an environmental services manager to assist in handling wild animal calls and other rabies-related work, at 267-7068;
- state wildlife and fisheries staff may be asked to assist in the local problem, which will reportedly be labeled an "epidemic" only if cases number as many as 60 in 30 years;
- traps are being loaned to citizens for only three days rather than the usual seven because there aren't enough at the parish animal control center to meet demand.

"If they (the cases) continue to come this way, we'll have to see what we can do to get some relief personnel," said Royce Duhon, parishwide animal control director.

"Rabies skunks have now been found in all parishes surrounding Lafayette Parish, except St. Martin, according to recent reports," said Duhon.

All of the finds are the first in 25 to 50 years in each parish, officials say. Acadia reported its first case, now totalling at least four, last year. Vermilion was next with five, and St. Martin reported a case last month. And, Iberia officials reported their first in more than 30 years this week.

"There's nothing else we can do other than what we're doing," Duhon said.

That includes testing animals and warning citizens to vaccinate pets, stay away from wildlife and avoid attracting wildlife, such as by containing garbage.

Duhon added Wednesday, however, that pet owners should be reminded to get their pets vaccinated, and that the rabies vaccine can be located if the vaccine was from a bad lot.

"In the area, of a child under five years of age, we may have to see if it stays that way," Duhon said. He believes rabid skunk finds here have not peaked.

"It may be near peak or it may be a few years away," he said.

Dr. David Elston, a local veterinarian, said, "It's going to stay that way," Duhon said. He believes rabid skunk finds here have not peaked.

"It was kind of unnecessary, but what can you do?" he said.

Dr. Nathan Landry, a general physician whose practice is in north Lafayette, said Wednesday that his patients have not expressed concern about rabies but have expressed new caution in dealing with wildlife.

"Which is good," he said. "One patient said she's worried about her kids being exposed."

Most of his patients live in rural areas, where wildlife is common and already are always aware of the rabies threats, he said.

Anyone bitten by a wild animal should immediately wash the wound with soap and water and call a physician, he added. Also, he said, he wouldn't recommend handling a wounded animal at all right now, but if doing so anyway, absolutely wear gloves.

Duhon said that adding to his staff's burden of local calls to test or trap animals is non-local citizens calling with their problems. "Unfortunately all of our neighboring parishes are calling this to worry they have a problem," Duhon said.