Rabies here changing state official’s advice

By Nissa Darbonne

Residents here and nearby have already been affected, indirectly, by the area’s 14 rabid skunk cases in a year, a state official said Tuesday.

Dr. Louise McFarland, state epidemiologist whose New Orleans office keeps tabs on Louisiana rabies cases and other public health threats, said her office can no longer advise doctors in this area that odds are slim their bitten patients are free of rabies infection.

"Two years ago, I would have said to a doctor from your area who called about an animal bite that there is no reason to treat the patient for this because we had not seen any rabies cases in the area," McFarland said.

Now, she said, her advice has had to change since discoveries of rabid skunks in Lafayette, Vermilion and Acadia parishes. The three parishes had not had rabid animal cases in 25 to 50 years until last February.

Now, a person in this area who has been bitten by an animal should receive treatment, McFarland said, if the animal is not caught and tested.

She has not received calls from local doctors yet, asking for an update, but a call a few days ago from a doctor in Baton Rouge is an example of the advice they will get, McFarland said.

The doctor’s patient was bitten by a dog that was not caught, for observation or testing. McFarland told the doctor, "If you would have called me this time last year or even just six months ago, I would have said treatment was probably not needed."

But, a rabies-infected cat was found in neighboring Iberville Parish in November. Because of that, McFarland recommended the Baton Rouge patient undergo treatment.

Treatment of people for rabies consisted in the past of a series of 21 painful shots in the abdomen. It is now a series of seven shots in the arm.

Nine rabid skunks have been found in Lafayette Parish since last February, four in Acadia Parish and one in Vermilion Parish. Statewide, McFarland’s office received only four other rabies reports in 1993: a bat, a skunk, and a fox in north Louisiana, and the cat in Iberville Parish.

Dr. James England of LSU’s veterinary school said Tuesday that he is not certain yet why rabid skunks are appearing in populated areas of south Louisiana. Rabies cases, however, are common in north Louisiana.

"It would be interesting to know what’s going on," he said. "For some reason, this year we started seeing skunk rabies south of Interstate 10."

He has a theory, however: clearing and other alterations to south Louisiana’s landscape has slowed enough for the natural skunk population to proliferate, become crowded, begin moving, and cross paths with people and pets.

"It’s probably a situation not of an increase in skunk rabies but an increase in the skunk population," England said.

Regardless of the cause of the cases, he added, protection is necessary. Pets should be vaccinated and farm animals probably should be too.

McFarland’s office is waiting on results of a National Centers for Disease Control check on whether the south Louisiana rabies virus is not a new strain. McFarland said she doubts that the virus is any different but requested a CDC check to be sure.