

**INTERAGENCY RESPONSE PLAN FOR NEW MEXICO
WHITE-NOSE SYNDROME (WNS)
November 8, 2010
CARLSBAD LIBRARY ANNEX**

In Attendance at this Meeting:

NAME	GROUP	EMAIL	Phone (area code 575 unless noted)	If WNS help is needed by the agencies, I may be interested in assisting
Jim Goodbar	BLM	James_goodbar@blm.gov	234-5929	Yes
Paula Bauer	NPS	Paula_bauer@nps.gov	785-3090	Yes
Gary Ziehe	USFS	gziehe@fs.fed.us	434-7220	Yes
Ken Harrington	SWR	Ken_harrington@hotmail.com	234-1664	Yes
Dave Belski	SWR	belski@valornet.com	885-6168	Yes
Pat Seiser	DVG CRF	cavewench@windstream.net	361-2283	Yes
Mike & Barbara Bilbo	SWR	mbbilbo@yahoo.com	354-6030	Yes
William Tucker	CRF, HGRP LAG	William.tucker@att.net	806-799- 6322	Yes
Dianne Gillespie	NCKRI	dgillespie@nckri.org	270-404- 2034	Yes
Mark Joop	NSS	cavexplorer@me.com	865-207- 9111	Yes
Dale Pate	NPS	Dale_pate@nps.gov	785-3107	
Roger Beason	NFS		885-4181	
Marikay Ramsey	BLM	Marikay_ramsey@blm.gov	954-2177	
Brad Bolton	Lincoln NF	blbolton@fs.fed.us	434-7212	
Jim Stovall	BLM-Carlsbad	Jim_stovall@blm.gov	234-5981	
Cherie Edwards	Guadalupe RD	cherieedwards@fs.fed.us	885-4181	
Donna Hummel	BLM	dhummel@blm.gov	505-954- 2019	
Kathy Elmore	CAVE	(Meeting Scribe)		

At 6:30, Paula welcomed everyone to the meeting. She asked everyone to sign in and stated that meeting notes will be sent to everyone who includes an email address. The group will go through the plan, and she asked everyone to save their questions until that was done.

Donna said that agency managers looked at the notes from earlier meetings and were impressed at how pro-active area cavers and researchers have been so far with addressing WNS. As a gesture of appreciation, a case of de-contamination chemicals has been made available to each of the agencies, and if a grotto participant was in attendance, Donna encouraged them to take a case of the chemicals, too. Otherwise, the chemicals will make their way to the appropriate groups.

At this point, everyone introduced themselves. Copies of the Final White-nose Syndrome Interagency Response Plan for New Mexico were distributed to all attendees. Copies of a FAQ sheet were also distributed.

Donna emphasized that WNS is being approached as a wildlife issue not a recreation issue. It also includes abandoned mines used by bats. The agencies have been working toward a way to minimize the impact of WNS as it moves west. Two working groups were convened by senior agency managers and the biologist/cave specialist group came up with the plan, which will be presented to the public tomorrow. This meeting is an opportunity to get an early look at the plan. Lots of effort went into the plan, including peer review. Each of the cooperating agencies has agreed to targeted cave closures. Each agency will implement the plan on its own timeline, so there are no set dates, but everyone will be kept informed on the various agency schedules. Everyone takes WNS as a serious threat, even though the fungus hasn't yet reached this area. Donna emphasized that the best available information was used in developing the plan, but there are new things coming out all the time. The plan is released to coincide with the beginning of the bats hibernation for this winter.

The work is just starting. The public announcement of the strategy is important and we need everyone's help with a variety of activities. We're trying to get a sense of who we might be able to call on, as we go along, for help. Those interested in offering help should indicate it on the sign-in sheet. This issue is getting a lot of national attention.

At this point, Marikay began going through the actual plan. The plan lists Cooperators, States, and Interested Parties, and an Introduction. The Background section is the scenario that we think is going on, from its first observation in New York in 2006. More than a million bats have died from the disease in the eastern U.S. In May 2010, the fungus associated with WNS was confirmed in caves in MO and OK. A color-coded map shows the spread of WNS across North America.

To determine the presence of WNS and/or the fungus in hibernating New Mexico bats, a qualifier will be used since there's a lot we still don't understand about hibernation. "The overriding management objective for the cooperating agencies in New Mexico is to prevent the arrival of WNS by effectively controlling transmission from already-infected areas." Several supplementary objectives are also listed.

The Interagency Communications Team (represented at this meeting by Donna and Paula) is responsible for announcing the plan and disseminating it to the media.

The plan strongly emphasizes the mandatory protocols and gear dedication procedures, and anyone working with wild bats should follow them. "Significant bat roost" is a term that will be used to help determine which caves and mines will be closed. Monitoring and early detection is very important. The plan's actions apply to caves and mines that are managed by New Mexico federal and state land management agencies, and management and/or regulatory actions are outlined. Some private landowners will be contacted and asked to consider closing, to recreational caving only, significant bat roost caves that exist on their property. Post documentation management actions are not specified because there's still so much that is unknown.

The plan includes two pages of references, literature citations and computer links. Appendix A lists the most current decontamination protocols. Appendix B defines a "Significant Bat Roost" for New Mexico.

We were faced with three choices: Leave things as they are, close everything, or something in between.

Discussion and Q&A

How effective are the decon practices if we're dealing with fungal spores? It was agreed that there's a lot of unanswered questions, and we don't know what the spore load is that actually triggers the infection. Touching things with hands that haven't been cleaned yet is a problem, and it's really tough to decon and get it right to keep from re-contaminating things. Figuring out how we determine these procedures is still on-going and modified protocols may be in the future.

Someone commented that athlete's foot medicine can kill the fungus. Unused decon chemicals can be returned. There was a general discussion on the appropriate chemicals, Lysol, etc., as well as the appropriate percentages. Chemicals can be disposed of at dump stations, such as they have at Ft. Stanton. There could be problems getting chemicals back from sites like Three Mile Hill. Decon is being used with five gallon buckets. Most groups bag and carry clothes and wash them when they get home. Total decon is not achievable, all we can do is reduce contamination.

What is the threat to free-tails? It's unknown, but the reasoning follows that they could groom it off. People are worried that free-tails will be the agent for spreading WNS since they are so widespread. Again, there are more unknowns than knowns, and what's going on in the west is different than the east. Loggers are being installed in most of our caves so we can start getting data. The whole hibernation cycle is different in the west, maybe because we have milder temperatures. Bats can wake up more often. Some bats like to hibernate closer to cave entrances, where it's cooler.

What is the temperature that affects population? It's unknown, but for a while they were saying humidity had to be high. However, the fungus can grow even with low humidity.

What kind of time period are we talking about with cave closures? There's no way of knowing, although some agencies are ahead of others in this regard. BLM has done an Environmental Assessment (EA), which is good for 24 months. During that time, study and research must be done in order to extend the EA. BLM is in a two year closure of significant bat roosts, and of their 1,028 caves, less than 30 are affected. They want to do what is right for the bats. This figure seems low, which makes it even more important to work together.

Has the fungus ever been detected in a cave where there are no bats, in other words, is it a natural thing? BLM is looking at that and doing sample work. Are we, in all our wisdom, not actually accomplishing anything? Sometimes things have a way of solving themselves, and we're trying to catch up with the learning curve. There is no genetic variation in the fungus detected so far, but its spread indicates it's a serious issue that isn't going to go away by itself. It's the same thing found in all the states and there's been enough time for a genetic variation if there was going to be one. Testing cave sediments may not be the best way to detect the fungus.

When bats are being netted, people are instructed what to look for. This will also be included in the surveillance procedures of the plan. The wing damage index probably isn't a good way to detect the fungus. A national surveillance plan is being developed, hopefully, by the end of the year. We expect these documents will be updated frequently. There's a lot of discussion about whether it's worth going into bat caves and possibly disturbing their hibernation in order to get information, particularly if the bats are healthy. The goal is to do as much passive data monitoring as possible.

The sense is that we will have a lot more information in the spring, and hopefully, we might find that our concern was a little overrated. There was a big push in the DOI for a full closure, but all managers stuck together to make the plan adaptive. Everyone feels we've done the best we can, and in New Mexico, we are on the leading edge because many states did go for full closure.

When can we expect the list of significant roosts? The 26 BLM caves will be listed on the website beginning tomorrow. It will include forms asking for shared input about caves and asking for help. The assistance will be voluntary and will help in creating a database on people who might be available to help in a variety of ways. The mailing list will be shared with the agencies. The website is www.blm.gov.

The FWS national response draft is now available and there's a 60 day comment period. If we see things that could use improvement, this is the time to let FWS know. They're the lead agency for the national plan and USGS is the lead federal WNS science agency.

BLM has a national website linked to WNS, including decon procedures and the draft national response plan. A single go-to site for WNS hasn't been developed, but this is being worked on to help make the information more accessible.

The meeting adjourned at 8:00.

Notes taken by Kathy A. Elmore