News Release

Monongahela National Forest

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Forest Service Issues Regional Cave and Mine Closure Order to Protect Bats

(Elkins, WV) In response to the uncontrolled spread of white-nose syndrome affecting bat species, all caves and mines on National Forests in the Eastern Region of the Forest Service have been closed by Forest Service managers for one year. This includes caves in the Monongahela National Forest. The closures are intended to allow scientists time to study the white-nose fungus and learn more about how it is spread.

Nearly 500,000 bats have died as a result of white-nose syndrome in the New England and Mid-Atlantic states, including almost 25,000 endangered Indiana bats. White-nose syndrome is named for a white fungus (*geomyces*) which appears on the faces, ears, wings, and feet of hibernating bats. The disease causes bats to come out of hibernation severly underweight, often starving before the insects on which they feed emerge in the spring. Once a colony is infected, the disease spreads rapidly and has the possibility of killing over 90% of bats within the cave in just two years.

Scientists believe the fungus is spread bat-to-bat as the cluster in caves and mines, and there is evidence it can be unknowingly transferred from one cave/mine to another on the footwear and gear of humans. There have been no reported human illnesses attributed to the fungus. Infected caves and mines may not show obvious signs of the infection.

"White-nose syndrome has already affected mines on the Green Mountain National Forest in Vermont and caves on the Monongahela National Forest in West Virginia," said Logan Lee, Deputy Regional Forester. "Staying out caves and mines is the one thing we can do right now to slow the further spread of the fungus. We will enforce this closure order in hopes of protecting some of the largest bat populations in the United States."

Bats are one of nature's most effective controls on overpopulation of forest and argicultural insect pests. A single small insect-eating bat can eat up to 1,000 mosquitoe-sized insects an hour, providing an invaluable contribution to human comfort as well as health. The Monongahela National Forest contains numerous species of bats, including tiny pipestrals, little brown bats, big brown bats, red bats, and two endangered species: Indiana bats and Virginia big-eared bats. Some of the largest colonies in the United States of several species of bats are found in the Monongahela, which makes the appearance of white-nose syndrome in West Virginia of particular concern to biologists and land managers.

Forest Service Issues Regional Cave and Mine Closure to Protect Bats (cont.)

Even before the disease had been found in the State, Forest Service managers on the Monongahela took the unusual precaution of issuing a Forest Supervisor's closure order in the spring of 2008 for the Forest caves considered at the highest risk. The new closure order issued by the Regional Forester extends to all federally-owned caves within the Monongahela. Monongahela biologists have been working closely with their counterparts in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the WV Division of Natural Resources as well as with other Forest Service biologists to monitor bat populations in the Forest and learn as much as possible about the disease. Additionally Forest staff are working with members of the caving community and other environmental organizations. "This is an extremely alarming occurrence that has potentially devastating effects for our bats" noted Monongahela National Forest Supervisor Clyde Thompson. " We appreciate that so many people in the caving community understand the urgency to keep people out of our caves to do what we can to reduce the likelihood of spread of the disease."

Additional information about white-nose syndrome is available on a national website maintained by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service at http://www.fws.gov/northeast/white_nose.html.

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