

Need for Action to Address White-Nose Syndrome, a Disease Killing North American Bats

Members of the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives

May 20, 2009

Dear Member of Congress:

We are writing to express our deep concern about the recent, dramatic die-off of North American bats, due to a newly emergent disease called “white-nose syndrome.” The survival of several species is at stake. We also stand to lose vital ecological services insect-eating bats provide to agriculture, forestry, and society at large. We are writing to ask for your assistance and support for urgently needed funding for research, management, coordination, and outreach to confront this grave new threat to America’s bat populations.

White-nose syndrome has swept nine eastern states over the last two winters, killing bats at hibernating sites at rates approaching 100 percent. The estimate of total bat deaths to date is as much as one million. At this point, the disease shows no signs of slowing its spread across the country, wiping out bat populations along the way. The implications for ecosystem health, agriculture and forestry, and even public health, are potentially enormous.

We, the signers of this letter, are representatives of over 60 national and regional non-profit organizations and businesses, as well as individual professional scientists. Our diverse expertise includes wildlife and habitat protection, sound agricultural policy including the promotion of organic farming, the reduction of pesticide use, protecting public health, wildlife conservation, and furthering effective conservation policy through scientific research and understanding. We are deeply concerned that white-nose syndrome could precipitate the demise of several species of bat in the United States before scientists have a chance to determine the cause and a possible cure for the malady.

We also fear the loss of crucial, economically important ecological services freely provided to humans by bats, and the increased costs to farmers, other businesses, and various levels of government, if bats are no longer present to keep insect populations under control.

The most urgent need for addressing this crisis is increased funding for research, coordination, and management. Multiple federal and state agencies as well as private institutions are trying to cope with white-nose syndrome; none have the resources necessary to deal with a threat of this magnitude. As the disease spreads into more states, the situation is becoming increasingly complicated and dire.

An April 10 *Washington Post* article outlined the gravity of the situation and the scarcity

of resources available for addressing white-nose syndrome:

"If this continues to spread, we are talking about extinctions," said Thomas Kunz, an ecologist and bat expert at Boston University... In one study of eight Texas counties, [he] said, researchers found that if bats disappeared, farmers would have to spend as much as \$1.2 million more on pesticides each year. That means more-expensive food, more chemicals in the food supply and the environment, and who knows what other cascading effects on the animals that depend on bats as a source of food or their guano for nutrition... White nose syndrome does not appear to [directly] affect humans. That's a blessing and a curse, Kunz said. "There's been little attention and little sense of urgency about this," he said. "Most of us are doing this research on a shoestring."

The Department of the Interior, and specifically, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Geological Survey's National Wildlife Health Center, are the lead federal agencies in responding to the bat crisis. In a separate letter to Interior Secretary Ken Salazar, we have urged him to take the following actions immediately to address white-nose syndrome:

- Appoint a full-time white-nose syndrome coordinator to work with federal and state agencies and private institutions responding to white-nose syndrome, and to be the central point of information and contact on the disease.
- Elevate departmental focus on this issue; make it a top priority for research and species' protection efforts.
- Establish a plan for controlling or minimizing the spread of the syndrome, based on current knowledge.
- Identify funding needs for a coordinated response to white-nose syndrome, including coordinator position, research, and management.
- Examine the possible tools for implementing greater protective measures for white-nose syndrome-affected and non-affected bat populations, including the use of federal statutes such as the Endangered Species Act.
- Implement an education and outreach campaign for cave recreationists, in coordination with caving and speleological groups. Explain why staying out of all caves and mines in the eastern United States is critically important until scientists better understand the means of white-nose syndrome transmission.

As a member of Congress, your leadership is urgently needed to address the threat of white-nose syndrome to America's wildlife heritage, agriculture and forestry, and public health. We ask for your assistance and support in obtaining immediate, emergency funding for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and U.S. Geological Survey/National Wildlife Health Center, for research, management, coordination, and outreach. Federal land management agencies with responsibility for cave ecosystem protection—such as the National Park Service and U.S. Forest Service—should also receive assistance in their efforts to contain the spread of white-nose syndrome.

Swift, decisive leadership is needed on this issue now. We look forward to learning how

you intend to proceed on this pressing matter.

Thank you very much.

Sincerely,

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