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New efforts aim to help bats recover

By Joel Banner Baird, Free Press Staff Writer

No cure exists for the fungal plague that has killed millions of bats nationwide, but wildlife experts this week unveiled renewed funding and research strategies that aim to stem the decline.

VIDEO: VT Biologists study White-Nose Syndrome

A re-population experiment starting Tuesday introduced 79 healthy little brown bats from colonies in Wisconsin to two hibernation sites in Vermont.

The Bridgewater and Stockbridge caves, like many in the Northeast, suffered devastating winter die-offs in the past two years from white-nose syndrome, a fungus that thrives in cold weather and leaves telltale smudges on bats' snouts and wings.

"Can you have bats successfully survive there? Or will they develop the disease even if there aren't any infected bats there?" asked Al Hicks, a wildlife biologist for New York's Department of Environmental Conservation. The experiment might help determine whether the disease persists at hibernation sites even after infected bats are gone, Hicks said.

Entrances at the two sites are screened to keep in the bats; gates will keep out people.
Bat-cams and grants

Earlier this month, researchers installed video surveillance systems in the recesses of an abandoned upstate New York mine favored by hibernating bats -- and a likely venue for white-nose syndrome. The project, undertaken by the U.S. Geological Survey and National Park Service, will attempt to document abnormal activity associated with the fungal infection.

For the relocation project, Vermont and New York biologists pooled state and federal money.

A fresh infusion is on the way: The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced Monday the award of six grants totaling $800,000 to support white-nose-syndrome prevention, eradication and decontamination projects.

None of the grants will pay for research in Vermont or New York (where access to bats in the winter is intermittent), but experts say the results would impact the full sweep of white-nose syndrome infestations, from New England to Virginia.

The projects aim to:

• Establish a captive population of Virginia big-eared bats -- an endangered species -- in Front Royal, Va..

• Assess the genetic resistance of Indiana bats to white-nose syndrome.

• Identify compounds that slow or stop growth of the fungus.

• Examine the immune functions of infected versus uninfected bats.

• Develop fast-acting diagnostic tests for white-nose syndrome.

• Identify the genetic susceptibility of little brown bats.

The Fish and Wildlife Service selected the projects from 41 submissions with a cumulative price tag of $4.8 million, a news release stated.

Albany, N.Y.-based Jeremy Coleman, the service's national coordinator for white-nose syndrome, tempered his optimism about the new funding with a reminder of the enormity of the problem.

"Our only regret is that we were unable to fund many more of the project proposals that could lead us to answers about what is killing our bats, and how to control this devastating problem," he said.

Mollie Matteson, a conservation advocate with the Richmond-based nonprofit Center for Biological Diversity, defined the shortfall in less diplomatic language.

"It's a drop in the bucket, considering the size of the problem," she said.

New initiatives likely will get another chance -- but not in time for this winter.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service lists a Jan. 8 deadline for new grant proposals for white-nose-syndrome-related projects from state agencies.

Last year, Northeast states pooled their efforts and received $940,870 from the fund.

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