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PRESS RELEASE

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Pet Owners Be Aware: Tularemia Suspected in Snowshoe Hares in Interior Alaska

(Fairbanks) – Today, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game in Fairbanks received the body of a dead hare found in the Fairbanks area. Observations of dead hares in the Interior around Memorial Day typically herald the beginning of the annual spring outbreak of tularemia. The department is advising pet owners to be aware that dogs and cats as well as people are vulnerable to infection.

“Tularemia outbreaks in hares are reported every May and June in the Fairbanks North Star Borough,” said Dr. Kimberlee Beckmen, Alaska Department of Fish and Game veterinarian. Typically, cases in dogs or cats then occur from contact with sick hares. The hare examined today had the typical signs of death caused by tularemia, including being covered in ticks and an enlarged spleen. Laboratory confirmation is expected next week. Additionally, a second hare submitted today may have tularemia and had tapeworm cysts that can also infect dogs.

An infection caused by the *Francisella tularensis* bacteria, tularemia is most often diagnosed in hares and pets in the Interior between Memorial Day and Labor Day because it is spread by hare and vole ticks which are active during the summer. The tick species known to carry the bacteria prefer to attach to hares and rodents, but will occasionally bite dogs, cats, or people. Two species of dog ticks have become established around urban areas in Alaska and may also spread the bacteria.

Pets most often get tularemia from mouthing or catching sick hares. In later stages of the disease, hares become slow and easily caught by pets. People can become infected by handling the hares or from the infected pet’s saliva, even before the pet exhibits signs of illness. While it can be fatal if untreated, tularemia is easily cured if diagnosed quickly and the correct antibiotics are prescribed. The most common symptoms in people and pets are lethargy with high fever and swollen lymph nodes.

“Tularemia in humans is rare and can be avoided by taking safety precautions. Do not allow your pets to roam free or have access to hares. Dogs and cats that go outdoors can be treated with a veterinary product that will

kill ticks within 24 hours so that disease transmission doesn't occur from ticks feeding on pets" said Dr. Beckmen.

If your pet does come in contact with a dead hare, wear gloves or use a plastic bag to take the animal away from the pet and wash your hands thoroughly after handling anything coming out of the pet's mouth. Thoroughly wash any scratches, bites, or wounds made by pets or wildlife, immediately with soap and water and seek medical attention, especially if fever, redness, swelling or flu-like symptoms appear afterward. Double bag and dispose of dead hares in the trash or bury where dogs and scavengers cannot get to them.

For more information, see the resources listed below:

- More information about ticks and submitting them to the Alaska Submit-A-Tick program is available at: <https://dec.alaska.gov/eh/vet/ticks/submit-a-tick>
- More information about when to submit deceased wildlife for examination is available at: <http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=disease.main>
- Email the Wildlife Health Surveillance program at dfg.dwc.vet@alaska.gov

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