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Dedicated to protecting and improving the health and environment of the people of Colorado

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Colorado Department
of Public Health
and Environment

MEMORANDUM

To: Files
From: John Pape, Epidemiologist, Communicable Disease Epidemiology Program
Date: April 1, 2000
RE: 1999 Plague Summary

Plague activity was moderate in 1999 with 14 counties reporting positive animal specimens. Twenty-nine counties submitted specimens for testing. Larimer County accounted for 35% of submissions as the result of a fatal human case investigation. Colorado reported three human cases. Nationally, nine cases of human plague occurred.

Sixty-nine of 488 specimens (14%) tested positive. This included 6 (2%) of 241 rodents and rabbits, 24 (27%) of 90 flea pools, 13 (18%) of 72 cats and 26 (31%) of 85 other animals (54 dogs and 29 coyotes).

The first human case occurred in a 48 year-old Fremont county woman who developed a fever, chills and rigor on May 24. She was seen the next day at a local hospital ER and discharged. On May 28 she developed a non-productive cough, diarrhea and lethargy, and, two days later, presented to the hospital in respiratory distress. Chest radiographs demonstrated a complete whiteout of the right lung. She was transferred to a regional hospital ICU and made a slow recovery due to complications. Exposure was to rock squirrel fleas brought home by the family dogs.

The fatal case occurred in a 75 year-old Larimer county woman. The patient reportedly developed fever and muscle pains on May 25 but was probably ill a couple of days prior. She arrived at a local hospital in septic shock and died within 12 hours of admission. Chest x-rays demonstrated a right pulmonary infiltrate. An investigation determined she was exposure to fleas brought in by the family pets. No rodent die-offs observed around the residence, which housed over 20 cats and dogs. Three cats and a dog were positive for plague antibodies. The patient had also fed and handled rodents and other wildlife.

The third case occurred in a 61 year-old La Plata county woman. On August 10 the patient developed fever, chills, headache, abdominal pain, left inguinal lymphadenopathy and pruritic rash on both legs. The next day she was seen at a local hospital ER and was treated for a urinary tract infection and cellulitis. She made an uneventful recovery. Plague was not considered until a month later when the patient read a news article about plague and then asked her doctor to do a serology test. Exposure was to prairie dogs and fleas from a colony on her property that she and her dogs regularly hiked through.