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Mapping Wildlife Diseases May Help Prevent Their Spread

MADISON, Wisconsin, May 5, 2008 (ENS) - Tracking wildlife disease outbreaks around the world is now possible with another online map that shows where threats to the health of wild animals, domestic animals, and people are occurring.

The Global Wildlife Disease News Map, developed jointly by the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the U.S. Geological Survey, USGS, was introduced publicly today at: http://wildlifedisease.nbii.gov

Updated daily, the map displays pushpins marking stories of wildlife diseases such as West Nile virus, avian influenza, chronic wasting disease, and monkeypox.

Users can browse the latest reports of diseases and other health conditions, such as pesticide and lead poisoning, by geographic location. Filters focus on different disease types, affected species, countries, and dates.

The map is a product of the Wildlife Disease Information Node, a five-year-old collaboration between UW-Madison and two federal agencies, the National Wildlife Health Center and the National Biological Information Infrastructure, that are part of the USGS.

The Wildlife Disease Information Node, WDIN, is housed within the university's Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies and the USGS.

"If you click on the name of a particular disease, it takes you to our main website

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and does a quick search of everything that we have on that topic," says Cris Marsh, a librarian who oversees news services for the Wildlife Disease Information Node.

State and federal wildlife managers, animal disease specialists, veterinarians, medical professionals, educators, and private citizens will all find the new map useful for monitoring wildlife disease, says Marsh.

Produced by WDIN staffer Megan Hines, the map is the latest addition to a suite of tools aimed at keeping users abreast of wildlife disease news.

Ultimately, the Wildlife Disease Information Node seeks to provide a comprehensive on-line wildlife disease information warehouse, according to project leader Josh Dein, a veterinarian with the Madison-based USGS National Wildlife Health Center.

"People who collect data about wildlife diseases don't currently have an established communication network, which is something we're working to improve," says Dein. "But just seeing what's attracting attention in the news gives us a much better picture of what's out there than we've ever had before."

The Wildlife Disease Information Node collaborates with a wide variety of public and private entities to gather and provide access to important wildlife disease data. Because of the global significance of these diseases, WDIN encourages others to become involved with the project.

"The more information we can link," says Marsh, "the more robust our service becomes."

Another strong service is ProMED-mail - the Program for Monitoring Emerging Diseases, which also maps wildlife diseases.

This Internet-based reporting system is dedicated to rapid global dissemination of information on outbreaks of infectious diseases and acute exposures to toxins that affect human health, including those in animals and in plants grown for food or

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ProMED-mail was established in 1994 with the support of the Federation of American Scientists and SatelLife. Since October 1999, ProMED-mail has operated as an official program of the International Society for Infectious Diseases, a nonprofit professional organization with 20,000 members worldwide.

ProMED-mail operates with the mission of providing early warning of outbreaks of emerging and re-emerging diseases so that public health precautions at all levels can be taken in a timely manner to prevent epidemic transmission and to save lives.

Editor Larry Madoff says, "We cover the animal and human infectious disease world – which in the wake of avian flu and SARS, we now recognize is imperative if we are to understand and slow the spread of diseases jumping from animals to humans."

"We receive no government funding – which means we can be totally objective," says Madoff in an email sent to subscribers today requesting donations.

"Each day I and about 30 other scientists receive dozens of e-mailed reports of mysterious outbreaks sent in from experts and amateur disease watchers throughout the world," he says. "We scan newspapers and health department alerts, government reports and other information sources worldwide for inklings that an infectious disease, perhaps not yet reported widely, is threatening animal, human or food crop health."

There are more than 40 diseases in existence today that were unknown a generation ago, and about 1,100 epidemic events verified by the World Health Organization in the past five years, Madoff says.

ProMED-mail is online at: www.promedmail.org

The ProMED-mail Health Map is found at: http://www.healthmap.org/promed