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Health board cautions hunters about Tularemia

Posted: February 19, 2011 - 12:12am

By ALYSSA DIZON
AVALANCHE-JOURNAL

The Lubbock Health Board on Friday discussed a disease found in feral hogs that is a potential health threat to residents, particularly hunters.

Anna Hoffarth, a graduate student at The Institute of Environmental and Human Health (TIEHH) at Texas Tech, gave a presentation of her thesis on tularemia in feral hogs in the Texas High Plains.

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Tularemia, or rabbit fever, is an infectious disease caused by the Francisella tularensis bacteria that can be carried in more than 250 species, including rodents and wild game animals, and can spread to humans, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website.

Humans may become infected by ingestion, inhalation, direct contact or a tick or mosquito bite. Symptoms include a fever and skin lesions at the start of the infection.

From the 27 samples taken from feral hogs in Crosby County, 48 percent tested positive for the bacteria, which was higher than other U.S. reports, Hoffarth said. The 70 samples in Bell and Coryell counties also showed a relatively high percentage of feral hogs that tested positive.

According to CDC statistics, Texas has had eight reported human tularemia cases between 2000 and 2008; the largest number of cases in one year during that period was three in 2002.

"If we have that much tularemia in feral hog populations, I would say it is vastly under-reported in humans because it is a flu-like disease," said Steve Presley, the new chair of the Health Board and an associate professor at TIEHH.

Hoffarth advised hunters should wear protective clothing and eyewear as well as rubber

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gloves when handling or cleaning feral hogs and deer, especially since there is a subspecies of Francisella tularensis, Type A, which is a deadly bioweapons agent.

So far, she said, TIEHH researchers have not yet determined the prevalence of Type A or the less harmful Type B in the High Plains.

The Health Board also presented a certificate to the former chair, Kae Hentges, in appreciation for her two years of service to the board.

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