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NEWS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
August 1, 2005

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Owyhee County Horse Tests Positive for West Nile Virus

A horse in Owyhee County has tested positive for the West Nile virus. This is the third horse that has tested positive in the state in 2005 and the first evidence of West Nile virus in Owyhee County this year. Both Canyon and Gooding counties also have reported West Nile activity during the past two weeks.

"We experienced West Nile virus activity in people, horses and birds in southern Idaho last year, knowing it was only a matter of time before we began seeing evidence of the virus again in 2005," says Dr. Christine Hahn, State Epidemiologist for the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare. "It is very important for people to take precautions to protect their health and fight the bite of mosquitoes that spread West Nile virus."

West Nile virus was first discovered in the United States in 1999 in the New York City area. Since then, the virus has spread westward and can be found throughout the country. Last year, 11 of Idaho's 44 counties reported West Nile activity, including a horse in Owyhee County last October.

To protect themselves, Hahn advises people to:

- Insect-proof their homes by repairing or replacing screens;
- Reduce standing water on their property that provides mosquito breeding habitat, such as bird baths and decorative ponds;
- Cover up exposed skin when outdoors;

(more)

- Apply insect repellent approved by the EPA to exposed skin and clothing. Follow instructions on the product label, especially for children;
- Avoid mosquitoes when they are most active at dawn and dusk; and
- Report dead birds to your local Fish and Game office.

"About 80 percent of people who are bitten by an infected mosquito will not become sick, but others may experience a mild, flu-like illness that can include headaches, body aches and a mild fever," Hahn says. "Occasionally, the virus can lead to serious illness that requires hospitalization, especially in people over the age of 50."

West Nile virus does not appear to affect most animals including dogs and cats, but can cause severe illness in horses and certain species of birds. Although there is not a vaccine available for people, there are several vaccines for horses. Approximately one-third of unvaccinated horses which contract West Nile virus will die, so horse owners are encouraged to contact their veterinarian about vaccinating their animals. Horse owners who suspect West Nile viral infection of their animal should contact their veterinarian immediately.

Additional information about the virus is available from the Department of Health and Welfare's web site at http://www.westnile.idaho.gov. The Idaho State Department of Agriculture's Urban Pest Management program also has information available on steps to prevent home-grown mosquito infestations. Information is available on ISDA's web site at http://www.idahoag.us.

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(Editors: For additional information about West Nile infections in horses, please contact Wayne Hoffman at the Idaho Department of Agriculture at 332-8671. For information about human infection, please contact Tom Shanahan, Idaho Department of Health and Welfare, 334-0668, or Laurie Boston, Southwest District Health, 455-5325.)