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As Bats Die, Closing Caves to Control a Fungus

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

CHARLESTON, W.Va. (AP) — The federal Forest Service is preparing to close thousands of caves and former mines in national forests in 33 states in an effort to control a fungus that has already killed an estimated 500,000 bats.

A Forest Service biologist, Becky Ewing, said an emergency order was issued last week for caves in 20 states from Minnesota to Maine. A second order covering the Forest Service's 13-state Southern region should be issued this month.

The sites will be closed for up to a year, Ms. Ewing said.

The orders follow the request in March by the [Fish and Wildlife Service](#) for people to voluntarily stay out of caves in 17 states.

[Bats have been dying at alarming rates](#) from what scientists call "white-nose syndrome," so named because it appears as a white powder on the face and wings of hibernating bats. The problem was first spotted in New York and in two years has spread to caves in Virginia and West Virginia.

Researchers believe the fungus is spread from bat to bat, but they have not ruled out a human connection, said Dennis Krusac, a biologist with the service's Southern region.

"We don't have the answers at this point," Mr. Krusac said.

Biologists are concerned that the fungus could wipe out endangered species like the gray, Indiana and Virginia and Ozark big-eared bats. The fungus affects bats' hibernation habits and causes them to starve.

Bats play a important role in keeping insects like mosquitoes under control. Bats eat from April to October, usually consuming their body weight in bugs each night. Ms. Ewing said the loss of 500,000 bats meant 2.4 million pounds of bugs not eaten in a year.

Peter Haberland, a caver from New York, said organized caving groups should not object to

the closings. "For a period of a year, most people can deal with that," said Mr. Haberland, who serves on the [Northeastern Cave Conservancy's](#) board.

Peter Youngbaer, white-nose syndrome liaison for the National Speleological Society, a caving group, said it made sense for the Forest Service to issue umbrella orders to communicate a clear message. "There is a huge concern," Mr. Youngbaer said. "The recreation aspect is probably the least of our concerns."

Yet many people who explore caves are not part of organized groups, he said, so education will be important.

The Forest Service order says people found in a cave or mine face up to six months in jail and fines of up to \$10,000. Ms. Ewing said Forest Service officials would enforce the bans.

Mr. Youngbaer said he was not convinced that humans helped to transmit the fungus.

A study based on soil samples taken from 200 sites in 30 states should help resolve that question. Results should be available in September.

Mr. Youngbaer said better financing from the federal government was needed to research the problem.

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