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Department of
Fish and Game

Division of Wildlife Conservation

STATE OF ALASKA

PRESS RELEASE

For Immediate Release

Black bear cub in Alaska diagnosed with Avian Influenza

Nov. 18, 2022 (Juneau) – Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) has been detected in a black bear in Southeast Alaska. This is only the second time HPAI has been detected in a bear. The bear, a cub in Bartlett Cove, Glacier Bay National Park, was reported sick in October and this month, tests confirmed the virus was present.

In October, a park biologist and members of the public observed that one of three cubs accompanying a sow was having difficulty walking. The cub was eventually abandoned by the sow. Shortly after the park biologist picked up the cub, it developed seizures and was euthanized by the ADF&G area biologist Roy Churchwell. At post-mortem examination there were no signs of trauma, so samples were collected and sent to diagnostic laboratories to rule out typical seizure disorders including rabies and canine distemper.

The virus that causes HPAI was detected on both nasal and rectal swabs and in brain tissue screening at Washington Animal Disease Diagnostic Laboratory and Cornell University Animal Health Diagnostic Center, respectively. Detection and identification of the virus as H5N1 was confirmed by the National Veterinary Services Laboratory this week. This virus has only once previously been diagnosed in a black bear, an adult female in Quebec, also with seizures, in June. The cub was most likely exposed and infected with the virus while scavenging an infected sick or dead bird.

State Veterinarian Dr. Robert Gerlach and ADF&G Wildlife Veterinarian Dr. Kimberlee Beckmen have detected this virus in only two other wild mammals during this outbreak, red foxes in Unalaska and in Unalakleet. HPAI was detected in eagles, ravens, shorebirds, waterfowl, and domestic poultry throughout the summer and is still being detected in resident bird populations.

This particular strain of HPAI has a very low risk to humans according to the US CDC. Only one person in North America and three other people in the world have been diagnosed during this outbreak. However, proper hygiene is always advised when handling sick animals or butchering wild animals for consumption. Wear gloves, wash hands and utensils with soap and water and disinfect surfaces. Cook meat to an internal temperature of 145°F degrees and poultry to 165°F to avoid risk of infections.

Thanks to public reporting, authorities were able to recognize this rare infection. The public is reminded they should report sick or dead wildlife to the nearest ADF&G office or online via the link: <https://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=distressedwildlife.main>. Morbidity or mortality of domestic poultry can be reported to the Office of the State Veterinarian (907) 375-8215.

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