



As White-nose Syndrome spreads beyond the northeastern United States, leaving hundreds of thousands of dead bats in its wake, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is urging that no one enter caves in affected or neighboring states except scientists conducting sanctioned research.

The request for a voluntary, year-round moratorium on caving in the region is an effort to slow the spread of WNS and buy time to confirm the cause and determine potential solutions for this devastating threat to American bats. The Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) says at least 60 hibernation caves in nine states (Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Vermont, Virginia and West Virginia) are known to be affected by WNS.

Bat Conservation International endorses the agency's strong recommendations and is reviewing its own activities and programs to ensure compliance. Given the magnitude of this threat and the many unanswered questions about WNS, BCI also urges conservationists, cavers and others throughout North America to exercise extreme caution in and around all bat caves. BCI is working with a variety of partners, including cavers, scientists, agencies and other organizations to understand and deal with this dire threat.

Current evidence suggests that a recently identified fungus probably is responsible, at least in part, for WNS. The FWS says the method or methods of transmission are unconfirmed, but the syndrome's rapid spread suggests that bats are the primary carrier of WNS. However, the service cites "mounting evidence that human activity may also be responsible for spreading the causative agent(s) of WNS, even during seasons when bats are not occupying caves. ... The discontinuous nature of the rapid spread of WNS, especially to the most recently discovered sites in West Virginia and Virginia, suggests that something other than bat-to-bat transmission is contributing to the spread of WNS."

With mortality exceeding 90 percent at many affected sites and devastation expanding, the circumstantial evidence "for human-assisted spread justifies that we exercise an abundance of caution in managing activities that impact caves and bats," the Service said.

The FWS said it is not recommending "closure of commercial sites that offer cave tours to the general public," since such visitors "are considered to pose a very low risk for the spread of WNS to new caves."

The Fish and Wildlife Service recommends:

1. A voluntary moratorium, effective immediately, on all caving activity in states known to have hibernacula affected by WNS, and all adjoining states, unless conducted as part of a [federal or state natural resource conservation] agency-sanctioned research or monitoring project.
2. Cavers in regions outside the WNS-affected and adjacent states should be using clothing and gear that has never been used in caves or mines in the affected or adjacent states. The agency also recommends that clothing and equipment used outside the affected region be decontaminated following the protocols available on the Service's WNS website (www.fws.gov/northeast/white_nose.html).

3. All scientific activities that involve entry into caves or mines where bats reside should be evaluated to determine if the activity has the potential to facilitate the spread of WNS. Potential benefits of research will be weighed against the risk posed to bats. Research or monitoring activities should not be conducted if risks cannot adequately be addressed.

4. For all scientific activity, no equipment or clothing that has been used in any cave or mine in a WNS-affected or adjacent state should be used in a cave or mine in an unaffected state. Within an affected state, no equipment or clothing that has been used in a WNS-affected county should be used in an unaffected or unknown county. As an added precaution, researchers should decontaminate all clothing and gear, using protocols available from the Service or a local state agency, when exiting any hibernacula.

Bat Conservation International is supporting targeted research to answer critical questions about White-nose Syndrome. Your help can make a difference. **Donate to BCI's WNS Emergency Response Fund at www.batcon.org/wnsdonate.**

All articles in this issue:

► [Closing Caves for WNS](#)

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