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New WNS death toll confirms worst fears

January 17, 2011 (Austin, TX) – The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced today that the deadly bat disease known as White-nose Syndrome (WNS) has now killed more than 5.7 million bats. The new estimate, which some biologists believe may be conservative, ranges up to 6.7 million fatalities.

“We knew that White-nose Syndrome has been taking a devastating toll on bats, and this confirms our worst fears,” said Nina Fascione, Executive Director of Bat Conservation International. “Extinctions are a real and imminent threat across North America.”

Since its discovery in a New York cave in February 2006, WNS or the fungus that causes it has spread to 19 states and 4 Canadian provinces, infecting more than 190 caves or mines where bats hibernate. Bat deaths have occurred only in eastern North America so far, but the disease appears poised to spread into western states.

“This tragic report puts real numbers on the heart-wrenching images of dead bats littering the frozen floors of caves,” said Mylea Bayless, a conservation biologist for Bat Conservation International.

Because they hibernate in caves and mines, more than half of North America’s bat species may be susceptible to this fatal disease. Estimates that bat populations have declined 88% or more at infected sites now seems more real than ever.

“We must redouble our efforts to deal with this terrible disease, and additional funding is crucial,” said Fascione. “If WNS continues to take such a huge toll, the environmental and economic costs will be enormous.”

Scientists estimate that one million bats would have consumed nearly 700 tons of insects per year. Since many of the insects eaten by bats are agricultural pests, losing more than 5.7 million bats will have expensive impacts on agriculture.

Scientists across North America are searching desperately for solutions, but they have thus far found no way to cure WNS or to slow its relentless advance across the continent.

“We don’t know what the future holds for bats in North America,” said Fascione. “But what we do know is that we will keep trying to find a solution.”

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***Bat Conservation International (BCI)** is devoted to conserving the world’s bats and their ecosystems to ensure a healthy planet. Founded in 1982, the organization has achieved unprecedented progress by emphasizing sustainable uses of natural resources that benefit both bats and people.*