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PRESS ALERT

In Response to “the first reported death from a vampire bat in the United States”

August 18, 2011 – Since the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reported on Friday that a 19-year-old migrant farm worker died from rabies caused by a vampire bat bite, several news outlets have run the story. In order to avoid needless panic about bats and rabies, there are several important points about this incident, and about rabies in general, that should be included.

- According to the CDC, the victim’s mother says **he was bitten by a vampire bat** on July 15, 2010, **in the Mexican state of Michoacán, which is more than 400 miles south of the U.S./Mexico border**. Obviously, vampires pose no direct risk for those who live in the United States. The only vampire bats in the United States are in zoos or research facilities.
- Like most mammals, bats can get rabies, but the vast majority of bats do not. Nonetheless, any bat that a person can approach and touch is far more likely than other bats to be infected. People should never touch a bat or any other wild animal.
- The CDC counts 32 human rabies cases in the United States since 2000, eight of them caused by exposures in other countries, usually from dogs. Most of the remaining 24 cases involved bats.
- Of more than 1,200 species of bats worldwide, only three are vampires and all are in Latin America. Two primarily feed on the blood of birds and one – the common vampire bat (*Desmodus rotundus*) prefers mammals, especially livestock. Movies notwithstanding, vampire bats do not suck blood. They lap it like kittens.
- The common vampire bat uses its heat-sensors to locate where blood flows through vessels near the skin of its prey, then uses small but very sharp teeth to create small wounds. An enzyme in the vampire’s saliva keeps the blood from clotting as the bat feeds. That enzyme, by the way, is now a potent anticoagulant medication used to prevent strokes in humans.
- Vampire bats range from Mexico south through most of Central and South America. These bats require areas where winter temperatures do not fall below 50 degrees F. Research suggests, however, that if climate change continues unabated, vampires could expand into some parts of the United States **decades from now**.