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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

White-nose Syndrome Jumps to a ‘Gateway to the West’

May 20, 2010 (Austin, TX) - The White-nose Syndrome (WNS) fungus has taken a frightening leap that apparently opens western states and perhaps Mexico to this deadly wildlife disease that already has decimated bats throughout the eastern United States. The fungus has been confirmed for the first time in Oklahoma and in a new bat species, the cave myotis.

Cave myotis, the first uniquely western species to face the fungus, will likely spread it to other western bats. But an even greater risk of WNS moving into new regions involves cave myotis’ tendency to share caves with migratory Mexican free-tailed bats, one of the most widely dispersed and far-ranging species of bats in the American West and South.

Huge colonies of freetail typically spend their summers in the United States, where they are found from coast to coast, then migrate south for the winter. Their migration routes can cover 1,000 miles or more and reach deep into Mexico.

“The arrival of the WNS fungus in Oklahoma may open a gateway to the West. It certainly puts all the western states on high alert,” said Mylea Bayless, WNS Emergency Response Coordinator for Bat Conservation International. “This may expose a whole new community of bat species to White-nose Syndrome – and we know far less about where these bats hibernate than we do in the east, so tracking and monitoring the disease will be much more difficult.”

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation said in a news release today (May 20, 2010) that the fungus found on the cave myotis in Oklahoma has been confirmed as *Geomyces destructans* fungus linked to WNS.

White-nose Syndrome has killed more than a million bats of eight species since it was discovered in a New York cave four years ago. Mortality rates approach 100 percent at some sites. WNS so far has killed only hibernating bats, which include 25 of the 46 U.S. bat species. Cave myotis hibernate through the winter and are probably susceptible to WNS. Mexican free-tailed bats, however, remain active year round.

WNS’ potential impact on Mexican freetails is unknown, but these bats share their winter and summer ranges with many hibernating species. Biologists fear that migrating freetails, even if they are not themselves battered by the disease, may prove to be carriers that spread the fungus that’s linked to White-nose Syndrome.

Mexican freetail bats form very large colonies and consume enormous quantities of insects, including such expensive agricultural pests as the corn earworm moth. Bat Conservation International owns and protects the world's largest bat colony – up to 20 million Mexican free-tailed bats that spend each summer at Bracken Bat Cave near San Antonio. About 1½ million of freetail bats live under the Congress Avenue Bridge in downtown Austin, Texas, where BCI is headquartered. They constitute a significant tourist attraction in the city.

Endangered Indiana bats already are being killed by WNS, and the fungus has now been found in endangered gray bats. So far this year, the disease or the fungus has expanded into Tennessee, Delaware, Maryland, Missouri and now Oklahoma. It also spread northward into Ontario and Quebec in Canada. Bats across the continent are at imminent risk.

***Bat Conservation International (BCI)** is devoted to conserving the world's bats and their ecosystems in order 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.*