

Skunk Deaths Not Due to Rabies or Distemper, Tests Show

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Rabies and distemper appear not to be the cause of death for dozens of Northern California skunks, reports a veterinary scientist at the University of California, Davis.

"We want to reassure members of the public that the skunks we tested, which were also found near a dead or dying fox and raccoon in the Redding area, did not die from rabies or distemper," said Janet Foley a veterinary researcher who studies the ecology and epidemiology of infectious diseases in the Center for Vectorborne Diseases. The center is a joint research venture between the School of Veterinary Medicine and the College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences.

"We are now working aggressively with the California Department of Fish and Game to identify what did cause the deaths of these animals, looking closely at possible toxins and parasites," she said. "It's important to identify what is causing this unusual die-off because the skunk can be a sentinel species that often alerts us to environmental health problems."

Foley's laboratory studies the ecology and epidemiology of infectious diseases in animal and human populations, with a special interest in emerging infectious diseases among wildlife. Her graduate students Mourad Gabriel and Greta Wengert are spearheading this investigation.

Since mid-February, some 60 skunks, as well as a fox and a raccoon, have been found dead near Redding, Calif., and were reported to the California Department of Fish and Game. After diagnostic tests by the

Shasta County Health Department ruled out rabies as the cause of death, bodies and biological samples were sent to UC Davis for analysis.

Foley cautioned members of the public not to touch dead or sick wild animals. They should, instead, report any unusual sightings to their county health departments, she said.

Source: UC Davis

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