Web tool puts wildlife diseases on the map

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The Global Wildlife Disease News Map marks stories of wildlife diseases around the world.

A new online map makes it possible, for the first time, to track news of disease outbreaks around the world that threaten the health of wildlife, domestic animals, and people.

The Global Wildlife Disease News Map (wildlifedisease.nbii.gov/) was developed jointly by the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS).

Updated daily, the map displays pushpins marking stories of wildlife diseases such as West Nile virus, avian influenza, chronic wasting disease, and monkeypox. Users can browse the latest reports of nearly 50 diseases and other health conditions, such as pesticide and lead

poisoning, by geographic location. Filters make it easy to focus on different disease types, affected species, countries, and dates.

The map is a product of the Wildlife Disease Information Node (WDIN), a five-year-old collaboration between UW-Madison and two federal agencies, the National Wildlife Health Center and the National Biological Information Infrastructure, that are part of the U.S. Geological Survey. WDIN is housed within the university's Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies and the USGS.

A powerful feature of the wildlife disease news map is its ability to tap into the WDIN's large and growing electronic library of information from around the globe.

"If you click on the name of a particular disease, it takes you to our main Web site and does a quick search of everything that we have on that topic," says Cris Marsh, a librarian who oversees the wildlife disease news services for the WDIN.

State and federal wildlife managers, animal disease specialists, veterinarians, medical professionals, educators, and private citizens will all find the news map useful for monitoring wildlife disease, adds Marsh.

Produced by WDIN staffer Megan Hines, the map is the latest addition to a suite of tools aimed at keeping users abreast of wildlife disease appearances. The WDIN gathers news from more than 20 online sources and makes it available in a number of handy formats, from a Wildlife Disease News Digest at wdin.blogspot.com to desktop widgets, e-mail, and RSS feeds.

Ultimately, the WDIN seeks to provide a comprehensive online wildlife disease information warehouse, according to project leader Josh Dein, a veterinarian with the Madison-based USGS wildlife health center.

"People who collect data about wildlife diseases don't currently have an established communication network, which is something we're working to improve," says Dein. "But just seeing what's attracting attention in the news gives us a much better picture of what's out there than we've ever had before."

Concerns about the emergence and spread of diseases that can pass between species have forged new links in recent years between wildlife health, human health, and domestic animal health professionals.

"It all ties in together," says Marsh. "The West Nile virus acted as a catalyst for that connection. People in different areas in the eastern U.S. began to see isolated incidences of dead and dying crows that seemed abnormally high, but nobody knew other areas were experiencing the same thing."

Because West Nile virus also affects humans and other mammals, it became apparent to scientists that disease outbreaks of this kind need to be addressed as quickly as possible, explains Marsh. Outbreaks of monkeypox and highly pathogenic avian influenza soon afterward underscored the importance of linking information about emerging diseases across all species.

"If scientists share with one another the information they're collecting on the patterns of diseases like these, we can respond to outbreaks much more efficiently," says Marsh.

Besides providing news services, WDIN collaborates with a wide variety of public and private entities to gather and provide access to important wildlife disease data. Because of the global significance of these diseases, WDIN encourages others to become involved with the project.

"The more information we can link," says Marsh, "the more robust our

service becomes."

Source: University of Wisconsin System