



# SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY Public Health Laboratory

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## Bulletin

## November 2011

### **Rabies activity in San Luis Obispo County – all quiet on the Western front?**

The old adage “if you look, you shall find” may be applicable to Rabies Surveillance. Conversely if you don’t look, you can be easily lulled into thinking that something is not there.

SLO laboratory rabies testing since 1997 has shown consistently low ascertainment of rabies virus in wild animals, with detection being sporadic. During the ten year period of 1997-2006, rabies was detected in only three species - skunks (81 positives), bats (37) and foxes (4)— for an average of a dozen positives specimens annually. Since that time, rabies has seemingly gone dormant with only six lab-positive cases in the past five years. No domestic animal has been demonstrated to have contracted rabies in the county for the period 1992-2011— as far back state records go.

While of very low prevalence, the finding of even a few cases in recent years shows that rabies persists in wild animals. These results mirror more distant cyclical patterns of rabies activity, and the current low levels should not lead the public to assume that rabies risk is now nearly nonexistent. As there is no rabies elimination program in our county, the incidence of rabies can be predicted to continue to follow natural cycles of transmission. As carnivores eat the dying or dead, rabies may appear in atypical species. After only one positive result in bats in 2007 and 2009, along with two positive skunks in 2009 (two in northern Nipomo/southern Arroyo Grande), a single positive result again was obtained in 2010. But this positive was in a Coyote—recovered by animal rescue workers in Nipomo, the only reported positive rabies result for this species throughout California in 2010. In 2011, no positive results have been obtained, but the number of specimens submitted has declined by 25%. It is unlikely that human behavior and the resultant number of animal exposures have changed. Rather the decline in testing may be a measure of increased complacency. Note an example from Humboldt County that saw a smoldering level of infection in foxes balloon from 4 positives (2007), to six positives in 2008 and then 36 positives in 2009, only to return to 2 positives in 2010.

In summary, residents and visitors to the county should note that rabies continues to be endemic and can be expected to infect some wild animals, the tiniest fraction of which is subjected to routine testing. Don’t let the decrease in testing or the epizootic nature of this disease cloud your understanding of true rabies prevalence in wild animals.

### **Influenza**

Based on low levels of influenza-like illness and laboratory detections, overall influenza activity in California during Weeks 40 and 41 was “sporadic.” The SLO Public Health Laboratory participates in the surveillance testing and reporting for the Respiratory Laboratory Network (RLN) in concert with 28 other local public health laboratories.. During the week of October 23-29, 562 specimens were tested of which two (0.4%) were positive for Influenza A.