



FOREIGN ANIMAL DISEASE DETECTED IN UNITED STATES RABBITS

August 2020

Domestic and wild rabbits in the United States are at risk of infection by an emerging virus: **Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease Virus Type 2 (RHDV2)**. This virus infects domestic and wild rabbit species, including Eastern and New England Cottontail Rabbits. RHDV2 is known to cause high rates of illness and death in susceptible rabbit populations but does not infect people or other animals. This virus is not related to SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID 19 in people.

Since the start of this RHDV2 outbreak in April 2020, the virus has caused infections and death in domestic and/or wild rabbit species in California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, Texas, New Mexico and Colorado. Controlling this disease will be a challenge in the long term if it becomes established in wild rabbit populations. To date, this virus has not been detected in either domestic rabbits or wild rabbits in New England. The United States Department of Agriculture is monitoring the progress of this virus across the country and facilitating diagnostic testing where new cases are suspected.

Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry (ME DACF) recommends that all rabbit owners follow the steps described below to prevent introduction of this virus to our region and to protect rabbits in Maine from exposure to contagious diseases:

- 1) **Do not introduce RHDV2 to our region:** RHDV2 is spread from infected rabbits to susceptible rabbits through direct contact or through exposure to objects contaminated by the bodily fluids of sick rabbits. This virus is hardy and can live for extended periods of time in the environment, on equipment or clothes and even in frozen rabbit meat and rabbit products. Do not import any sick or exposed rabbits or their equipment into Maine, including wild game trapped and processed in affected states. An interactive map on the [USDA's website](#) identifies all currently affected regions.
- 2) **Be proactive about biosecurity:** There is no approved RHDV2 vaccine currently available for use in the United States; therefore, it is extremely important to practice management steps that prevent the introduction of infectious disease to your rabbits. Whether you keep a few pet or show rabbits or manage a colony of rabbits, these general biosecurity steps are vitally important:

For domestic rabbit keepers:

- Separate all domestic rabbits from wildlife and other pets that could harbor or transport diseases.
- Any newly acquired rabbits should be isolated for at least 2 weeks, including any rabbits returning to your facility from an event off the farm.
- Rabbit owners should practice hand washing before and after handling rabbits and their equipment. Please reference this [USDA guidance](#) document for environmental cleaning and disinfection recommendations.
- If any rabbits develop outward signs of illness, isolate them immediately and contact your veterinarian for advice and treatment. Your veterinarian will contact ME DACF if RHDV2 is suspected.

For hunters and trappers:

- Do not harvest or handle sick or found-dead rabbits.
- Properly dispose of all innards and pelts of harvested rabbits, wash your hands and tools thoroughly, cook game meat to a minimum temperature of 165°F and change shoes and clothes after processing wild rabbits.

- 3) Quickly report any suspicious rabbit disease events:** Most often, RHDV2 rabbits are found suddenly collapsed or dead. Signs may sometimes include respiratory distress, lethargy, anorexia and signs of blood in the eyes, nose or feces. RHDV2 can affect rabbits of any age. Rabbit owners who have questions about this disease should contact their veterinarian. To report suspect cases of RHDV2 in wild rabbits or unusual numbers of wild rabbit mortalities, please contact the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife (207-287-8000).
- 4) Stay informed!** Up-to-date information on the status of this disease outbreak can be found on the [USDA APHIS webpage](#). Here you will find FAQs about RHDV2, cleaning and disinfection guidelines and vaccine status updates. ME DACF partners with private practice veterinarians throughout Maine to share timely animal health updates and resources. Your regular veterinarian is well prepared to advise you about biosecurity design and health assessments for your rabbits. Any questions or concerns for your rabbit's health should be directed to your regular veterinarian first.

For more information about Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease, please visit the resources identified below:

- 1) United States Department of Agriculture Factsheet: [Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease](#)
- 2) Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies: [RHD Guidance for Hunting and Outdoor Recreation](#)
- 3) Tufts University Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine: [A deadly Rabbit Virus Spreads in the U.S.](#)
- 4) American Rabbit Breeder's Association: [News](#)
- 5) New England Cottontail: [Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease Information](#)