

Rabies Ad Hoc Committee Update for Council

Aug. 4, 2021

Chair Raye S. Leonard

The Rabies Ad Hoc Committee seeks input from the council on next steps for its work. Seven months of monthly meetings led to committee agreement that moving forward with an oral rabies vaccination plan that would involve the widespread dropping of raccoon vaccine baits requires a coordinated effort with the surrounding communities of Phippsburg, West Bath, Brunswick, Harpswell and Topsham.

Members of the committee hold different opinions regarding the viability of a full-scale vaccine bait drop due to cost, time, and coordination with other communities, based on research conducted by the committee and presentations shared by experts in the field. The committee requests an indication from Council regarding next steps for its work.

Would council favor setting up a new committee to consider a process for obtaining buy-in from other municipalities in a joint rabies vaccine bait drop to commence as earlier as 2022?

Background and lessons

The ad hoc committee to consider options for addressing potential rabies outbreaks in the wild animal population of the Greater Bath area convened on Jan. 20, 2021 with a Zoom meeting.

The committee was formed in response to the rabies epizootic that plagued Greater Bath in 2019 to 2020, resulting in 18 rabid animal attacks on humans, among other encounters. Council voted first on March 4 and again on March 9, 2020, to spend about \$27,000 from its contingency fund to initiate a trapping program with USDA in attempt to address the unprecedented spike in the disease. This piqued the concern of many residents, who organized against the plan, arguing that trapping and euthanizing potentially healthy animals was short-sighted and did not solve the problem.

Just five days after the March 9 vote, the state of Maine shut down in response to the Covid-19 global pandemic. While the USDA trapping program went ahead, Council and city staff were prevented from taking up any action to further address the rabies issue and the concerns of citizens given the circumstances.

Committee members attending the Jan. 20, 2021, organizational meeting included committee chair and Ward 4 Councilor Raye Leonard; Councilor Sean Paulhus, Ward 2; council Chair Aaron Park, Ward 7, City Manager Peter Owen, and Lindsey Goudreau, marketing and communications for the city.

It was decided that the scope of the work would be to:

- Look closely at the recommendations of USDA's final report following the trapping efforts in the spring of 2020;
- Contact other communities to learn about their rabies issues and strategies for addressing the disease;
- Create a PSA for Bath residents to educate about how to limit wildlife encounters

Councilor Elizabeth Dingley, at-large, then Bath Police Chief Mike Field, the Deputy Chief Andrew Booth, and Animal Control Officer Jim McKnight joined the ad hoc committee in February.

What follows is what the committee learned in monthly meetings held between January and July.

Lindsey reported that the February meeting that she spoke with Tom Berja, a zoonotic disease specialist in Maryland, about a county-wide vaccination effort in the state. Bait was distributed throughout the rural area in a 23-year-long effort to eradicate the disease.

Key lessons:

- A large-scale rabies vaccination attempt should include surrounding communities;
- Rabies vaccination is a long-term commitment, not a one-shot solution.

Evan Franklin, a Maine game warden based in Gray, attended the March 17 meeting to share his experience dealing with sick animals. Franklin covers about 15 to 20 towns and has served as a game warden for the last 10 years.

Key lessons:

- Complaints of sick animals results in a phone call to determine what the complainant means by "sick." Is there a public safety issue? Does the animal exhibit neurological impairment? Can the concern be handled over the phone or does someone need to lay eyes on it? Does the animal need to be taken out of the population?
- Rabies "giveaways" include a sick animal falling over, spinning in circles, skunk smells, or porcupine quills in its muzzle.
- Franklin had little to do with Bath's outbreak because local police handled the calls.

Chief Field, Deputy Chief Booth, and ACO Jim McKnight confirmed that sick animal calls and complaints of animal attacks are addressed by local law enforcement.

Chief Field shared that unlike the rural communities that surround Bath, residents are discouraged from dispatching sick animals themselves, by shooting them or other means.

In June, State Veterinarian Michelle Walsh and Robin Dyer from USDA attended the meeting to present what a rabies vaccination bait drop might look like for the city. **Significantly, Walsh did not recommend the city invest in this program due to its expense, the density of Bath's population, and challenges with tracking animals.**

Key lessons:

- Vaccine bait targets raccoons only;
- Vaccine bait is provided only by one approved distributor;
- Vaccine bait has only ever been dropped in Northern Maine over heavily wooded areas;
- The program would consist of dropping bait from helicopters and distributing it in other vehicles;
- The minimum distribution area is 400 square miles;
- To be successful, a rabies vaccination program must include surrounding communities. In the case of Bath, it should include Phippsburg, West Bath, Brunswick, Harpswell and Topsham;
- Pre-baiting (trapping) is necessary to collect blood and tooth samples to analyze biomarkers. Trapping would be done in the month of July;
- Baiting would be accomplished in the month of August;
- Post-bait monitoring is required to measure effectiveness of the vaccine;
- Additional surveillance of roadkill is required, along with other opportunities to obtain animal samples for additional information;
- Minimum 3- to 5-year commitment;
- Cost for single application is roughly \$150,000, not including staff hours coordinating the effort.

The Rabies Ad Hoc Committee welcomes Council discussion and consideration of these facts.

Respectfully submitted,

Raye S. Leonard

Ward 4