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STATE VET LAB HELPS IN INVESTIGATION OF DOG POISONINGS

The Wyoming State Veterinary Laboratory (WSVL) is assisting law enforcement officials and veterinarians in the investigation of approximately 25 dog poisonings in areas surrounding Jackson.

University of Wyoming Professor Merl Raisbeck of the Department of Veterinary Sciences identified aldicarb, a restricted-use pesticide, as the culprit in the mysterious poisonings that began in March. The most recent cases occurred in early June.

While some of the affected dogs have died after eating tainted hot dogs and meatballs, others receiving quick medical attention have recovered.

Raisbeck diagnosed the type of contaminant using the WSVL's new gas chromatograph, an instrument that measures certain kinds of organic compounds.

The pesticide, Raisbeck says, has a high mammalian toxicity. "A few grains would make enough poisoned hot dogs to pack an entire county," he notes. "You can mix aldicarb with anything dogs can eat. They're not fussy."

The University of Wyoming and the United States Department of Agriculture cooperate.

Clinical signs include slobbering, diarrhea, vomiting, involuntary urination, constricted pupils, muscular trembling, and fluid accumulation and swelling in the lungs. Dogs often die from respiratory failure after their muscles give way. “It has some nasty effects, but there’s a pretty good shot at treatment if you can get the stomach emptied fairly quickly,” Raisbeck says.

Veterinarian Michael Dennis of the Teton Veterinary Clinic first contacted and sent samples to Raisbeck. He has also tested specimens forwarded by Deputy Darren Rudd, animal control officer for the Teton County sheriff’s office. Cases have been documented in Lincoln and Sublette counties and are thought to have begun in Idaho.

Although there was early speculation that the pesticide-laced bait might have been intended for wolves, Rudd says there have been no confirmed wildlife deaths. The U.S. Forest Service, the Wyoming Game and Fish Department and other city, county, state and federal agencies are involved in the investigation.

“Evidence is coming up that is pointing in other directions,” Rudd says of the wolf rumors. “The theory is starting to change.”

Raisbeck suggests that the perpetrator(s) might have been disgusted with free-ranging dogs.

“A meticulous job has been done cutting the cores out of hot dogs and gluing them back together. Somebody is way too mad,” he notes. To bait wildlife, Raisbeck adds, a person might just slash a carcass and sprinkle poison on top of it.

Dennis points out that bait has been left in locations where one would expect to find dogs.

Rudd says the poison he has discovered is a dark gray or black chemical granular substance with the consistency of table salt. "It has a very faint sulfurish odor to it," he adds. "I've lived here my whole life and have never heard of anything like this in the area."

The animal control officer notes that the chemical is extremely toxic to people and that it can be absorbed through the skin. He advises those who may have found the substance to mark the spot and then contact law enforcement officials to collect it. "Don't touch it," he cautions.

"If exposure does occur, people should get veterinary attention for animals and medical attention for humans as soon as possible. This stuff does work very quickly," Rudd says.

Aldicarb, which has many brand names, is used by farmers to protect crops such as potatoes, sugar beets and soybeans. Only individuals with a pesticide application permit are allowed to purchase it. Misuse of the material constitutes a federal misdemeanor and could also be considered animal cruelty in the current situation.

"When it's used properly, it's very effective for what it's trying to do," Rudd says. UW's Raisbeck says he is aware of only occasional accidental poisonings caused by the pesticide in the past 30 years.

Both Rudd and Dennis express appreciation for the help provided by Raisbeck and the WSVL in the investigation.

"This is what we are here for," Raisbeck says. "We got involved peripherally because someone was trying to treat a poisoned animal. Our primary focus is diagnostics. I think sooner or later someone would have figured out the cause, but if the lab weren't here it might have taken much longer."

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