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A Tradition of Leadership and Excellence in Equine Medicine

West Nile virus Raymond D. Rood, D.V.M.

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There have been several cases of suspected West Nile virus reported in Marion County in recent weeks. None of these have been confirmed yet to my knowledge, but many are showing signs most commonly associated with the disease, including: in-coordination, weakness of the legs, uncontrolled muscle twitches, inability to stand, and death. Infected horses may or may not have an elevated temperature. Other diseases that may show many of these same signs are rabies, Eastern and Western Encephalitis, Wobblers and Equine Protozoal Myelitis (EPM).

Owners should use care when handling horses showing these signs to reduce risk of exposure to rabies. West Nile virus infections are harbored in wild birds, and may be spread to humans and horses by mosquitoes. The best prevention for the disease is to prevent exposure to mosquitoes. This may not be feasible for many horses in Marion County. The next best form of protection is the West Nile virus vaccine. The vaccine is currently available under a conditional license and in limited supply. It should be administered as a primary dose, and then again 3-6 weeks later as a booster. Vaccinated horses probably will not have a protective level of immunity until shortly after the "booster" vaccination.

The vaccine has passed a vigorous safety trial. There were only five pregnant mares included in the original safety trial, and there is, therefore, no label approval for safety in the pregnant mare. However, I believe the vaccine will be safe for pregnant mares, and I have vaccinated many in the past several weeks with only a very small occurrence of mild reactions. One of the benefits in vaccinating the pregnant mares may be to help insure some level of immunity being passed to the newborns next spring.

I recommend vaccinating all horses within the next two or three months because I believe the disease will continue to be a problem in our area, and there may be a very high incidence of the disease in the coming weeks, and/or next spring.