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NEWS – FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: MARCH 1, 2010

LARGEST U.S. CAVE EXPLORERS' GROUP URGES PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP TO COMBAT BAT-KILLING DISEASE

Members of the National Speleological Society (NSS), the nation's largest cave exploration and conservation organization, today called on several federal agencies to partner in combating White Nose Syndrome (WNS), a disease that has been killing tens of thousands of bats in the eastern United States.

Since the disease's discovery, the NSS has provided valuable support toward finding a cure, including scientific study, field work and research funding. The nonprofit organization seeks to protect caves and their natural contents through conservation, stewardship, ownership and public education, promoting responsible cave exploration and fellowship among those interested in caves.

"We are offering the resources of our more than 11,000 members to help combat this threat to bats, and in doing so, aligning with our long-term goals of ensuring the public's appreciation and enjoyment of the unique cave environment and all the species that live within it," said Gordon Birkhimer, NSS president.

The NSS proposed a multi-pronged initiative to expand the fight against WNS. Key strategies include:

- Enhancing existing memoranda of understanding between the NSS and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and the National Park Service to fight WNS;
- Reaching out to affiliated cave conservancies along with NSS members to assist with field work, public education, and cave and bat monitoring and conservation;
- Focusing WNS containment strategies, research, and resources on the acknowledged primary method of disease transmission – bat to bat;
- Targeting cave closure strategies at priority bat roosting sites in a scientifically defensible, financially manageable, and effective manner to minimize disturbance of hibernating colonies and help prevent the disease's spread from identified WNS sites;
- Applying scientifically developed cleaning and decontamination protocols for any clothing, gear, or equipment used in cave visitation or bat research in caves in a targeted manner that engenders high levels of compliance;
- Promoting vigilance against reuse of any gear from a WNS-infected cave outside that area; and
- Finding and focusing sufficient funding for priority research needs, including understanding WNS' progression and identifying and analyzing disease resistance that may help bat populations recover.

Since 2006, WNS has been advancing from an epicenter near Albany, N.Y., and now has reached as far as northeastern Tennessee. Bat populations in affected hibernacula have been reduced by as much as 70-95%. Although the cause of the disease has not been confirmed, a novel fungus, *Geomyces destructans*, has been identified as a common factor in all the bat deaths.

WNS' spread follows a typical geographic pattern of infectious disease, leading most investigators to believe the fungus is implicated, either as the direct cause, or an opportunistic entity taking advantage of bats. The NSS and others working to combat this threat are beginning to develop baseline data and experimental mitigation strategies to slow or stop WNS and protect at-risk bat populations.

NSS members have been at the forefront of WNS study through field and laboratory work, science and management strategy symposiums, public education and funding a research grant program. Efforts include a number of caves owned and managed by the NSS where WNS has spread. The NSS operates one of the most active and informative WNS Web sites, www.caves.org/WNS.

"Having been intimately involved in the WNS investigation to date, and with the current developments, we feel we have the opportunity to refine and accelerate our efforts collaboratively," Birkhimer added. "We bring a lot to the table – nearly 70 years of cave resource conservation experience – and believe now is time to build upon our existing relationships and rededicate ourselves to solving this challenge by gaining synergies with federal agencies and other stakeholders."

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