



AP file photo

A radio transmitter is inserted Jan. 27, 2009, into a little brown bat in an abandoned mine in Rosendale, N.Y.

Scientists find drugs to fight bat affliction

By **MARILYNN MARCHIONE**

The Associated Press

BOSTON—Scientists might have found some ways to help the nation's bats, which are being wiped out by a novel fungal disease, an unprecedented wildlife crisis.

Lab tests show that several drugs can fight the germ and that some antiseptics might help decontaminate areas where bats live or the shoes and hands of people who visit them, researchers reported at an infectious-diseases conference Sunday.

"Both of those are critical elements. The decontamination is, in my mind, the most immediate need," because people may be helping to spread the disease, called white-nose syndrome, said Jeremy Coleman, who heads the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's response to the problem.

Coleman had no role in the research, which was done by New York state's Department of Health in Albany, the state capital. The department's scientists helped identify the fungus as the cause of the bat die-off, first seen in Albany, about 150 miles north of New York City, in 2006.

Bats have a key role in nature — eating and helping control mosquitoes and other insects that harm crops and carry disease. One type, the little brown bat, "was the most common bat in the Northeast and typically the most common bat in the nation, and they've been just completely decimated," Coleman said. In some areas, "we're down to 3 percent of the original population."

More than 1 million bats have died from the fungus, which has been found as far south as Tennessee and as far west as Oklahoma. Some caves on federal land have been closed to the public to try to stem the spread, but scientists don't know how the disease is transmitted or even how it is killing the bats.

The fungus grows on the nose, wings and ears, and one theory is that it irritates these membranes, causing bats to wake often during hibernation and burn so much energy that they starve to death before spring. But there are signs the fungus is directly damaging wings, which are important for maintaining water balance and blood pressure control, Coleman said.