

Bethel officials change policy on shooting foxes

by Geoff Kennedy
for the Tundra Times

BETHEL — City and state officials in Bethel have decided to stop shooting foxes on sight.

Officials here were worried about a return of a rabies outbreak brought here by foxes two winters ago. The high number of foxes increased the risk of rabid animals, they reasoned.

Within 10 days last month, city police logged 34 fox sightings in city limits. Five of those foxes were shot and killed, police say.

But the fox carcasses sent to a virology laboratory in Fairbanks revealed no trace of rabies. In fact, officials haven't found a rabid fox in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta since Jan. 17, 1989, said biologist Randy Kaycon of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game.

"If there's just a fox running around and it doesn't look like it's posing a problem, I don't think we should kill foxes just because they're foxes," Kaycon said. "There are people out there that depend on foxes for income like trappers, and some people just like to view the animals and I think it's an asset that we have foxes. Sometimes, they spread rabies. But they're part of the Alaska wildlife resources."

Kaycon recently recommended the city police devote their energy to preventing loose dogs from spreading rabies. Eighty-five percent of human rabies comes from dogs, Kaycon said.

"Loose and stray dogs are more of

a problem in transmitting rabies," said Mike Burley, Bethel animal control officer. The situation has improved somewhat in recent years, but the problem persists, Burley said.

Many dog owners let their animals run free because they like to give their animals freedom, says visiting Anchorage veterinarian Bob Sept.

"Dogs love to run. You coop a dog up and don't allow him exercise, and pretty soon he becomes a nuisance to the owner," Sept said.

"Dogs usually pester the owners to the point where, if they don't let the dog exercise, then they let them out. This gets into a bad habit and pretty soon the dogs stay out longer. Dogs are pack animals. They like to team up. One dog isn't so bad. You get two or three dogs or a pack of dogs, and you have really serious trouble."

Unlike dogs, foxes usually travel alone and, therefore, are less likely to contract rabies from each other, Kaycon said.

But foxes are more likely to spread the disease in February, March and April when they make dens for newborn foxes, he said.

Ironically, foxes are flooding Bethel despite the fact their numbers have declined from their peak in January 1988, Kaycon said. The problem is, he said, the rabbit and lemming populations also have declined, and the scarcity of prey has forced them to seek food in Bethel dumpsters and fish racks.