



National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

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National Monument

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El Malpais News Release

11/22/10

For Immediate Release

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El Malpais National Monument to Close Caves

As a preventative measure to preserve cave environments, protect bats and slow the spread of white nose syndrome, all caves at El Malpais National Monument will be closed effective December 6, 2010 according to Superintendent Kayci Cook Collins. While nearly all of the caves in the park have been closed for some time, this notice affects the five caves - Junction, Xenolith, Big Skylight, Four Windows and Braided – which have remained opened.

“Federal and state agencies in New Mexico are very concerned about the spread of the fungus, *Geomyces destructans*, which causes white nose syndrome in bats,” said Collins. “The disease has already killed more than one million bats in the northeastern United States and has spread from New York State all the way to northwest Oklahoma in four years.”

It is unclear exactly how the fungus spreads. “Researchers believe bat to bat contact is one of the ways the disease moves from cave to cave, however the disease may also be spread from cave to cave by humans on their caving gear,” she said. Collins said the discovery in Oklahoma could easily threaten bat populations at El Malpais. “The species that tested positive in Oklahoma, the Cave myotis, is the first uniquely western species to contract the *Geomyces* fungus,” she said. “And, more importantly, the Cave myotis is found at El Malpais.” Collins said research is underway to see if the fungus may already be present in monument caves. “Currently, we have no evidence that the fungus is present in our caves, however we have been doing research over the summer and are currently testing cave soil samples to see if the *Geomyces* strain is here,” she said. “There are several other bat and cave research projects we hope to get underway later this year and next spring that will add to the information we are currently collecting.”

While testing for the fungus and monitoring cave environments is the prime focus of the ongoing and future research efforts, Collins said the monument is also seeing which caves do not have bat colonies. “Caves that have maternal colonies, are bat hibernating sites or have agency species of concern must be closed,” she said. “Once we have more solid information from our researchers, we will look at recreational caving options.”

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For more information regarding the cave closure or white nose syndrome contact El Malpais National Monument by phone at (505) 285-4641; by email at ELMA_Superintendent@nps.gov; or by mail at 123 E. Roosevelt, Grants, NM 87020/

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