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April 1995

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Fearneyhough, M. Gayne, "THE ORAL RABIES VACCINATION PROJECT AND THE EXPERIMENTAL USE OF RABORAL V-RG IN THE SOUTH TEXAS CANINE RABIES EPIZOOTIC" (1995). *Great Plains Wildlife Damage Control Workshop Proceedings*. 431.

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THE ORAL RABIES VACCINATION PROJECT AND THE EXPERIMENTAL USE OF RABORAL V-RG IN THE SOUTH TEXAS CANINE RABIES EPIZOOTIC

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Abstract: Beginning in October 1988, Texas experienced the onset of an expanding epizootic of canine rabies in far South Texas. That epizootic now involves 18 counties, with 522 laboratory confirmed cases as of December 1994. Approximately 50% of those cases have occurred in coyotes (*Canis latrans*) and most of the remainder in domestic dogs. Forty-three "spill over" cases have been reported in 7 other species, both wild and domestic. Since 1988, over 1600 people in South Texas have received postexposure rabies treatment due to potential exposure to a rabid animal and 2 human deaths have been attributed to this virus strain. Texas Department of Health (TDH) is the lead agency in the development of the Oral Rabies Vaccination Project (ORVP) designed to explore potential use of an oral rabies vaccine, Raboral V-RG. The ORVP is an innovative cooperative project involving TDH, Texas Animal Damage Control, United States Department of Agriculture, Texas A&M University-College Station, Texas A&M University-Kingsville, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Denver Wildlife Research Center at Denver, Colorado and Logan, Utah, the United States Army, Rhone Merieux Inc., and the Canadian Ministry of Natural Resources. The goal of the experimental project is to control the spread of the epizootic by using a bait/vaccine combination to establish a 40-mile wide zone of immunized coyotes along the northern advancing edge of the epizootic. In the subsequent 5-6 years, a continuation of the project is planned with the goal of pushing the epizootic southward and eliminating it from Texas. The technology and equipment developed for this project will provide the capability to launch an immediate response to contain and eliminate future incursion of canine rabies while the geographic area involved is still small and relatively easy to control.

Page 88 in R.E. Masters and J.G. Huggins, eds. Twelfth Great Plains Wildl. Damage Control Workshop Proc., Published by Noble Foundation, Ardmore, Okla.

Key words: canine rabies, *Canis latrans*, coyote, epizootic, oral vaccination, Texas.
