By Jan Rahn
Managing Editor

An area farm puppy is in quarantine and its owners are being treated following a skunk attack on Jan. 9 northwest of Grant.

Dr. Dave Baltzell of Baltzell Veterinary Hospital in Ogallala said a skunk tangled with the family pet and a child killed the skunk with a rock. To protect everyone in the family due to possible saliva or blood exposure, all members are being treated.

The family told Baltzell that the skunk had hold of the hind leg of the puppy. Even though the dog was not injured and there was no puncture wound, it was important to treat the pet as if it was exposed since rabies is almost universally fatal.

The dog will be quarantined at home for six months under strict health department protocol. It had been vaccinated, but Baltzell said the pup was young and not enough time had been allotted for the vaccine to provide protection.

The family members are receiving a series of injections.

“They [injections] are not as ugly and scary as they used to be,” said Baltzell.

The skunk’s aggressive behavior occurred in the daytime, however, Baltzell said there is a misconception about seeing skunks in the daytime. Seeing them during daylight hours does occur, however, it’s their abnormal behavior that people need to be aware of. If they are not afraid of coming near humans and display other signs of erratic behavior, they are most likely rabid.

Rabid skunks are more common than you would think, said Baltzell. There were three cases in 12 months within a 20-mile radius of his clinic.

There is potential for many more positive results if skunks reported as “looking funny” were actually sent in for testing, said Shannon Jensen, DVM at the Perkins County Animal Shelter.

In 2012 there were 59 positive cases of rabies in the state of Nebraska—70 percent of which were skunks. Tests for the rabies virus are performed on the brains of animals which are sent to a central lab at the University of Kansas.

“So if you shoot a skunk, don’t shoot it in the head,” advised Baltzell.

Farm pets in general are not vaccinated at the same rate as those in town, posing a threat to the animals and to their owners. No one really knows the incidence of positive rabies in wildlife, but skunks are a primary reservoir for it,” said Baltzell.

Farm Cats are Concern

Baltzell said one of the biggest risks for exposure to rabies comes from farm cats.

“Unvaccinated cats represent potential hazard to a family on a farm,” he said. “They [cats] are certainly at risk for being exposed.” Even if they were known to be exposed, it’s not practical to isolate them for six months, he said.

He realizes it is not easy to catch or vaccinate farm cats, but would like for residents to at least consider it.

Preventing risk of rabies

Two cases of positive rabies have been confirmed in Nebraska in 2013—a skunk in Perkins County and a bovine in Cherry County.

The risk of exposure to rabies is real, but the disease is preventable in both humans and domestic animals. In the U.S., there are around 7,000 animal rabies cases diagnosed every year.

In the Midwest, skunks and bats are the main sources and the most common animal species positive for rabies. Domestic pets and livestock can be infected from exposure to these wildlife sources of rabies.

Rabies prevention consists of vaccinating domestic animals, educating humans to avoid exposures, and providing exposed persons with prompt post-exposure rabies prophylaxis. The World Health Organization estimates that approximately 70,000 people die of rabies infection world-wide every year.

Local health experts offer these tips to prevent rabies:

- Have your veterinarian vaccinate all dogs, cats, ferrets, horses, and valuable livestock against rabies.
- If bitten by an animal, seek medical attention and report the bite to your local public health department or animal control department immediately.
- If your animal is bitten, contact your veterinarian for an appointment for the animal to be examined.
- Do not handle or feed wild animals. Never adopt wild animals or bring them into your home.
- If wild animals appear sick or injured, call animal control or an animal rescue agency for assistance.
- Teach children never to handle unfamiliar animals, wild or domestic, even if they appear friendly.

If you have additional questions, please contact your veterinarian, local or state health department.

The listing of positive cases in Nebraska for 2012 can be found at: http://dhhs.ne.gov/Pages/srd_rabies12.aspx.