

AN OUTBREAK OF VIRAL HEMORRHAGIC SEPTICEMIA IN THE GREAT LAKES: MONTANA'S NEXT WHIRLING DISEASE?

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Viral Hemorrhagic Septicemia (VHS) is an aquatic rhabdovirus that has the potential to cause significant mortality in fish. It is believed to have originated in Europe where it affects mostly freshwater fish in culture situations. It was first reported in the United States in 1988 and has since become enzootic in the Pacific Northwest in several marine species including pacific herring and several salmon species. In 2005 a variant of the virus was discovered in the Great Lakes Region and has been associated with significant mortality in a variety of freshwater fish species. Although the origin of this Great Lakes genotype of VHS is unclear it has demonstrated the ability to cause severe mortality among a number of species unaffected by previously isolated strains of the virus, including most game fish found in Montana. Due to this unique characteristic, the outbreak in the Great Lakes generated an unprecedented regulatory response from a variety of state and federal agencies. There is already in place a national framework of regulations at various jurisdictional levels aimed at preventing the spread of destructive pathogens and organisms; however, it is not a perfect system. It is important to remain active and informed at the local level so as to increase our protection even more. Though it has not been found in Montana, this pathogen has significant implications to fisheries managers in Montana. It is important to remain vigilant in our oversight of potential transmission vectors to ensure that this pathogen does not find its way into Montana waters.