While there were no official reports of rabbit hemorrhagic disease in Oklahoma this summer, a state veterinarian and wildlife official both say it likely is here â€” and here to stay. The disease does not affect human health but has been widely nicknamed â€œbunny Ebolaâ€• because the virus affects rabbits, both wild and domestic, in a fashion similar to that of the human Ebola virus that attacks multiple internal organs and causes widespread internal bleeding. Infected rabbits might die in as little as two or three days, according to state veterinarian Rod Hall with the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry. The state instituted a 90-day ban on June 24 on any rabbit shows or sales. Variants of the disease have been common in Europe and China for decades but only recently turned up in the United States, with three outbreaks reported since 2018. This summer marked the largest outbreak yet, with cases from Washington, California, Utah, Colorado, New Mexico and Texas, according to U.S. Department of Agriculture reports. â€œA couple of months ago, it was really spreading pretty rapidly across western states,â€• Hall said. â€œWe were definitely trying to alert people who raised rabbits to ramp up their biosecurity measures.â€• No reports surfaced in Oklahoma, but the USDAâ€™s Animal and Plant Health Inspection Serviceâ€™s map of reported cases shows infections documented in wild rabbits north and south of Oklahomaâ€™s Panhandle. The reports came from northern Texas near Amarillo, eastern New Mexico in Colfax County and southeastern Colorado in Prowers County â€” all within about 50 miles of the Oklahoma state line. â€œI think itâ€™s entirely possible we have it here, but we just havenâ€™t had any reports,â€• Hall said. If the disease is here and is in wild rabbits, it likely is here to stay. Vaccinations, currently only available from European suppliers, can be used for domestic agriculture practices and show or pet rabbits; but in the wild it can carry on, he said. With early presence of the virus likely in wild rabbits, it is probable the disease already is endemic, Hall said. Jerry Shaw, programs supervisor with the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation, said the lack of a report shouldnâ€™t

be considered an assurance wild rabbits here havenâ€™t carried the disease. Rabbits with the disease die quickly so the most common reports of wild rabbits dead of the disease are suburban backyard cottontail rabbits, he said. Finding a jackrabbit dead in the brush before a coyote or bobcat found it would be like â€œfinding a specific needle in a stack of needles,â€• he said. Ranchers or hunters who do find dead rabbits, especially if there are several rabbits in an area or if the dead animals have blood coming out of the nose or anus, should report those findings to a local game warden, he said. Shaw emphasized the disease does not spread to humans but that any sick or dead rabbit should be avoided, mostly because of tularemia or other diseases that might be present. Rabbit-hunting season doesnâ€™t open until October. Even then, hunters should be aware of the possible diseases and eat only rabbits that look healthy and cook the meat of those that are harvested to temperatures high enough to eliminate risk. Rabbits are an important prey species for coyotes and bobcats; and while incidents of population issues due to the disease have been reported in Europe in the past, neither Hall nor Shaw expected issues of that kind in Oklahoma. The virus likely would be something that cycles, with good years and bad years in particular areas where rabbit and prey populations would recover and fill back in, Shaw said. â€œItâ€™s just something that we need to be aware of that is around now,â€• Hall said. Featured video Kelly Bostian 918-581-8357 kelly.bostian @tulsaworld.com Twitter: @KellyBostian