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Media Release – May 13, 2020

Wilkes County Takes Additional Steps to Address Rise in COVID-19 Cases

May 13, 2020 – Wilkes County leaders are taking additional steps to ensure its residents, businesses and those who work in the county stay healthy, after a significant rise in COVID-19 laboratory-confirmed cases. Measures include increasing testing capacity and contact tracing, as well as working with local and state partners to reinforce the importance of social distancing and staying home when sick.

The Wilkes County Health Department released new data today, confirming that the county currently has 264 positive cases. Most are linked to the Tyson Foods plant. The health department tested 200 Tyson team members last week, which resulted in 19% positive tests. Tyson has completed testing of all team members. Tyson is requiring all team members have a negative test or be without symptoms if test is not available before returning to work. In addition, Tyson performed deep cleaning at the plant May 9th-11th.

“We are all concerned about this significant increase in positive cases,” said Wilkes County Manager John Yates. “Our top priority is the health and safety of all residents and visitors to Wilkes County, including those who work and play here. We are working closely with local, state and regional partners to address the numbers and ensure we take care of everyone impacted.”

The Wilkes County Health Department is working closely with Tyson to ensure all those who tested positive follow guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in order to protect their family, friends and coworkers and stop the transmission. Along with this guidance, Wilkes Health speaks daily to the plant regarding employee health and any new recommendations that are developed, and work with plant leaders to identify a process to manage confirmed cases and close contacts to cases. In addition, the Health Department, State Strike Team for COVID-19, and CDC will be visiting Tyson today to look for ways to help with mitigation and prevention moving forward.

If a confirmed case is identified, the employee is told to self-isolate for ten days and 72 hours post fever, whichever is longer. The plant will also send home those who are considered close contacts to a positive case with instructions to self-monitor symptoms and to call a medical professional if symptoms develop. Tyson Foods is also working with Matrix Medical Network to provide its front-line workers with health-care services.

In addition to the cases tied to the Tyson plants, the Health Department is also monitoring positive cases at two residential-living facilities. In a long-term care setting, a COVID-19 outbreak is defined as two or more laboratory-confirmed cases. As of May 5, Wilkes Health and Rehabilitation found five positive cases after testing all residents and staff members. As of May 12, Rose Glenn Village in Wilkesboro had two COVID-19 cases; those who tested positive are self-isolating. The health department will administer COVID-19 tests to the majority of the facility's 86 residents and 50 staff members later this week.

Wilkes County School Nurses are assisting the team of nurses at Wilkes Health with contact tracing. Contact tracing is the process of supporting patients and notifying contacts of exposure in order to stop chains of transmission. When a person tests positive for COVID-19, contact tracing identifies anyone who may have been in close contact with that person, so those people can take precautions to avoid infecting others.

Wilkes County is also working with the state of North Carolina Division of Health and Human Services to provide free drive-through community testing at our local Walmart. The dates and times will be announced as soon as they are available.

"Partnering with our local businesses, the school district and the state are critical as we make every effort to stop the spread of COVID-19," said Wilkes County Board of Commissioners Chair Eddie Settle. "We have to work together to protect ourselves and our communities."

Wilkes County will continue providing regular updates on COVID-19 cases. The Wilkes County Health Department offers regular notifications regarding cases and other information. These updates are available on our website www.wilkescounty.net.