

Chronic Wasting Disease in Canada
A Position Paper Submitted By
The Alberta Chapter of the Wildlife Society
Submitted to the Expert Scientific Panel on
Chronic Wasting Disease in Canadian Wildlife
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Alberta Chapter of the Wildlife Society

The Alberta Chapter of The Wildlife Society (ACTWS) is a non-profit organization comprised of approximately 250 professionals and students in the field of wildlife biology and management. The chapter was formed in 1988 as a subsidiary of The Wildlife Society, an international organization representing 9000 wildlife professionals worldwide. Members represent a broad cross-section of professionals (research scientists, biologists, technicians, managers, policy makers, and academics) and post-secondary students. Members are associated with academic institutions, government agencies, consulting firms, private organizations, and industry. Professionals dealing with both terrestrial and aquatic systems are represented.

Position on Chronic Wasting Disease in Canada

Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) is a contagious, fatal disease affecting the nervous system of deer (*Odocoileus* sp.) and elk (*Cervus elaphus*). No cure exists and vaccines are not available to prevent CWD (Williams et al. 2002). In areas where CWD has been detected, management action usually involves drastic reductions in cervid populations (Bartelt et al. 2003; cited in Diefenbach et al. 2004). Based on models of epidemic dynamics, the most effective methods of limiting outbreaks of CWD appear to be selective culling, in combination with population reductions (Gross and Miller 2001).

Detection of CWD on over 40 elk farms and in over 30 wild deer in Saskatchewan, as well as in one elk and two white-tailed deer on two game farms in Alberta, have alerted wildlife managers in Canada to the risks and concerns associated with this disease. Similarly, the recent findings of CWD in high density white-tailed deer populations in Wisconsin and Illinois, as well as in mule deer on the west side of the Continental Divide in Colorado, are a wake-up call that this disease must be addressed immediately if we are to stand any chance of preventing widespread establishment in wild cervids across the continent. While there is limited direct evidence of significant effects on the population dynamics of wild cervids in Colorado, there is ample evidence from various provinces and states that this disease has significant effects on tourism, trade, and public confidence in wildlife managers.

The ACTWS applauds Alberta's current balanced program, from 1996 to present time, of targeted passive surveillance of wild deer and elk for CWD. This program, which uses hunter- and road-kills in specific areas, supplemented with active collection of additional surveillance samples in the vicinity of identified cases (e.g., the three cases on two farms in central Alberta, and along the Alberta-Saskatchewan border), has sampled over 5000

wild deer and elk. The program is expensive, well over \$500,000 since 2001, but is absolutely necessary to understanding the dynamics of potential entry, spread, and eradication of CWD in Alberta. Unfortunately, monies to deal with CWD problems rob other important fish and wildlife programs such as: species at risk, public education, big game management, and fisheries management. They also use enforcement and biological staff in deer-elk collection programs, thus removing them from normal job description activities of protecting and managing our fisheries and wildlife resource.

Deer and elk viewing is important to Canadians and these species provide considerable economic benefits well beyond the significant economies associated with traditional hunting and guiding opportunities (Federal-Provincial-Territorial Task Force on the Importance of Nature to Canadians 2000). Given the importance of these species to Canadians and the current and potential management problems associated with CWD, scientifically-credible surveillance throughout Canada should be a high priority and eradication should be the ultimate goal wherever and whenever CWD is detected. Best evidence to date indicates that the disease is not naturally enzootic in Canada (Williams et al. 2002) and wise stewardship of free-ranging resources dictates that we act swiftly and effectively to limit further establishment beyond the known pocket in Saskatchewan. As was the case in Wisconsin prior to 2001 (Joly et al. 2003), we do not have sufficient data to know whether or not CWD may be present in eastern Canada. We realize that eradication of CWD comes at a significant monetary cost; however, we believe that the cost of inaction will be much higher.

The Alberta Chapter of The Wildlife Society asks that the Expert Scientific Panel on Chronic Wasting Disease in Canadian Wildlife seriously consider the following recommendations:

1. We support a national discussion concerning CWD so that consistency among jurisdictions and shared responsibilities can be achieved.
2. The Federal and all Provincial Governments should adopt a policy of eradication of CWD wherever and whenever the disease is detected.
3. We believe that CWD is a national wildlife disease emergency and as such the Federal Government should be supportive of a national program by providing access to funds for detection and eradication work. CWD is a national concern and individual provinces can not be expected to bear the fiscal responsibility alone. Currently, in some provinces, funds from other necessary wildlife programs are diverted to deliver provincial CWD programs. In other provinces, the need for surveillance has not been a priority and data are lacking. It is important to know the extent of the problem in order to address the scale of the eradication effort.
4. All provincial jurisdictions should continue or initiate scientifically credible surveillance for CWD in wild populations.
5. The provincial programs of targeting specific areas (hotspots) for passive surveillance and, when necessary, active collections of white-tailed deer and mule deer should be continued.

6. Appropriate effort and funds should be directed immediately to achieve eradication of CWD in Saskatchewan as soon as possible.
7. We recommend continuing scientifically credible surveillance programs for a minimum of 5 years following the last case detected in any jurisdiction, whether in farmed or wild cervids.
8. We would encourage hunters to provide deer heads for examination in target surveillance areas. Consideration should be given to making this a mandatory requirement for hunters and for road-killed animals, if sufficient sample sizes are not provided through volunteers.
9. We would encourage the panel to recommend increased research effort into finding a viable and logistically-feasible antemortem test. Current tests are very costly and logistically challenging (see Wolf et al. 2002). Canada has put very little money into CWD research and virtually no funds in the context of managing the disease in wild cervids. The research doesn't have to be conducted in Canada, but Canada could contribute to appropriate programs in the US, in places like Colorado, Wyoming, and Wisconsin. A workable antemortem test is probably essential if we are to eradicate CWD from Canada and prevent further introductions.

In summary, the ACTWS believes that the eradication of CWD is the most important wildlife disease issue in Canada at this time. In our opinion, a pro-active, fully funded program, with access to federal environmental emergency funds when needed, is the only responsible course of action for the Federal and Provincial Governments to adopt. The current lack of surveillance in eastern jurisdictions (in both wild and farmed cervids), as well as the waning response to wild cases in Saskatchewan, demand that this be addressed sooner rather than later.

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