



State of Wisconsin \ DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

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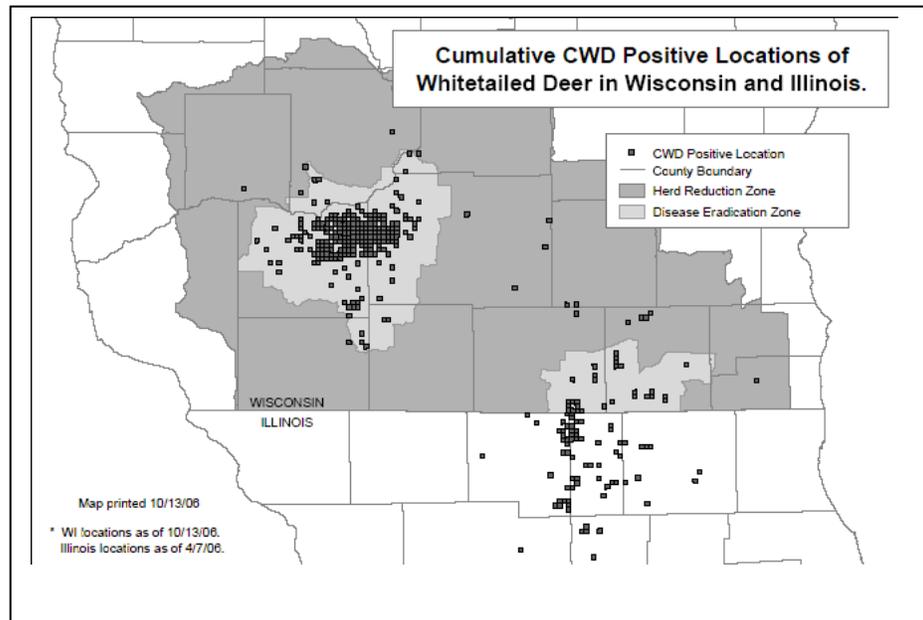
To: Natural Resource Board Members

From: Scott Hassett, Secretary

Re: Management of Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD)

This fall marks our 5th year since discovering CWD within our state. We'll finish the initial "assessment" phase of CWD management next year (2007) upon completion of our second round of statewide surveillance for CWD. When those data are in, we'll have a very firm knowledge on the extent of the disease in our state. No other state or province in North America will have better data on the distribution or prevalence of CWD within its borders.

I suspect all of you, like me, have a vivid memory of when the news of CWD frightened the whole state. We didn't know much about this disease back then and there was no roadmap showing us the path to controlling the disease. We quickly sought the advice of the nation's leading experts and then launched an ambitious effort to answer our many questions and to implement strategies that would reduce the harmful impacts of this disease upon our state.



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was not a hard decision to make since white-tailed deer are an important part of the quality of life here in Wisconsin. We needed to do all we could to restore a healthy deer herd. Wisconsin stepped up and I am proud of all our state has accomplished. Here are a few notable examples of what state government has accomplished:

- Completed the largest baseline surveillance for CWD in the nation in 2002. This unprecedented effort showed that CWD was not widespread in Wisconsin.
- Immediately on finding the disease, formed a strong partnership with DATCP, DH&FS, UW-System, USGS and USDA to take action.
- Built a world-class testing strategy that provides hunters a way to check the health status of deer they harvest and also provides research data to monitor changes in disease prevalence and abundance.

- Implemented sweeping farmed-cervid regulations to protect Wisconsin's farmed and wild deer herds. Identified and appropriately destroyed several infected captive herds.
- Our Wisconsin Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory built a state of the art CWD testing center that has significantly enhanced state testing capabilities.
- Through testing options and education, we have restored hunter confidence in the deer herd. The overwhelming majority of hunters in the CWD zone are keeping their deer and participation has rebounded.
- Implemented a variety of expanded hunting season frameworks and incentives to evaluate deer hunter capacity to contribute to disease control.
- Built a comprehensive CWD research program that is looking at the vulnerability of deer to CWD by genotype, age and sex; soil contamination; deer movement; survival and dispersal; disease modeling; new testing techniques, and hunters/landowner attitudes.

Taking stock

Our work continues as the initial assessment phase winds down. At the same time, we need to begin planning for the next phase of CWD management. Earlier this year, I asked our staff to take stock of where we are with CWD management and where we need to be going. This past September, a core group of staff from multiple disciplines that are intimately involved with our CWD management efforts held a retreat to begin this process. I want to share their important conclusions with you.

Discussions brought in the latest data on CWD in southern Wisconsin deer, research on prion diseases, human dimension research of hunters and landowners in Wisconsin, and first hand experiences of our department staff – all part of the “*learn and adapt*” strategy that is important to Wisconsin's pioneering response to CWD. Staff had a frank discussion about the viability of eradicating CWD and reflected upon progress, opportunities and barriers to CWD management, and our state's approach to date. The group reviewed Wisconsin's original goal statement and the assumptions that were made in support of that goal. And, importantly, after much work, they re-affirmed the validity of those five original assumptions and added seven more.

CWD management goal and assumptions:

- Goal: Minimize the negative impact of CWD on cervid populations, the state's economy, hunters and others who are affected by deer management
- Ongoing Assumptions:
 1. CWD is a transmissible spongiform encephalopathy caused by prions that are spread by direct contact between animals but also may be transmitted indirectly via environmental contamination. Recent research documented that CWD can be spread through saliva.
 2. CWD was recently introduced into the state, it is not a part of our native ecosystems, and its distribution is limited to an area in southern Wisconsin.
 3. If uncontrolled, CWD may have a significant negative impact on white-tail deer populations, and its presence diminishes the real or perceived value of deer and elk.
 4. High host animal density and frequent animal contact are associated with increased transmission and prevalence of the disease.
 5. CWD will not disappear spontaneously in the absence of management actions, and restrictions on human activity are necessary to prevent its spread into new areas.

➤ Additional Assumptions Identified by the Attendees

6. DNR cannot manage CWD alone. Cooperation with landowners, hunters, partners and legislators is critical. Success is not achievable without a shared prioritization of this issue by the DNR, legislators, and the public.
7. CWD demands a long-term effort and commitment on the part of DNR and other stakeholders.
8. Stakeholders must be willing to sacrifice now for the *greater* good to regain a healthy white-tail deer population for future generations.
9. Hunter harvest alone will not be sufficient to control CWD. Non-traditional and, potentially, controversial methods will be required.
10. CWD is a regional and national issue. DNR is a contributor to national & international management and understanding of the disease.
11. Aggressive disease management in farmed cervid populations by agricultural agencies and the captive cervid community is a critical part of CWD management.
12. For Wisconsin to be successful, we need our neighboring states, particularly Illinois, to be successful with their disease management effort.

On the second day of the retreat, staff re-assessed a number of disease management approaches. For each approach they outlined the consequences of the approach, the feasibility of using it, and the actions necessary to implement it.

On the final day of the retreat, after further evaluation and reflection, the group identified a **preferred approach** that they were most interested in having the state discuss and consider.

➤ **CWD Management via a three-phase, long-term approach**

1. **Containment (limit geographic distribution)** – First, we need to begin by demonstrating that Wisconsin can contain the disease within a limited area of the state.
2. **Control (limit prevalence)** – If we can successfully contain CWD, we should work to reduce the prevalence or intensity of disease in the affected areas.
3. **Eradication (eliminate CWD)** - If, and only if, containment and control are successfully underway, Wisconsin should work toward eliminating CWD.

The retreat participants identified a second set of approaches that they felt should be considered in a statewide discussion of where to go with CWD management:

1. **Monitor the spread and intensity of the disease** and communicate the findings.
2. **Slow the Spread** of the disease but accept as inevitable the eventual spread of the disease across the state.
3. **Contain and Control** the geographic extent and intensity of the disease.
4. **Eradication** of CWD from the state.

From that process also emerged some approaches that were incompatible with the long term goal of a healthy deer herd and staff recommended that they should not be considered further. These “no go” approaches were viewed as an abdication of the DNR’s public trust responsibility:

- 1. Do Nothing.** Revert to traditional deer seasons and management.
- 2. Provide only CWD testing for hunters** but in no other way manage the disease.
- 3. Support and review CWD Research and communicate the results to the public** but in no other way manage the disease

Conclusions and Recommendation

After nearly five years of hard effort, we believe that the health of Wisconsin's deer herd was worth the investment made of time and dollars. During FY02-06, our agency has expended \$26.8 million on this important work. This is about one-half of one percent of the \$5 billion Wisconsin's white-tailed deer herd is estimated to have contributed to the state's economy in the same period. Yet even though this rationale is sound, we need to be constantly evaluating our choices. Conservation funding is limited and we take seriously our need to use the funding we are entrusted with wisely. We have no desire to spend time or funding on activities that aren't effective in managing this disease.

The sobering conclusion of the department's CWD leaders is that we have not made as much progress as we would have hoped in managing this disease. In spite of considerable effort on DNR's part, and in spite of increased hunting opportunity, unlimited bag limits, free tags, allowing landowners in the DEZ to hunt on their own property for \$2, economic incentives, and encouraging and facilitating food pantry donations for additional deer hunters take in the DEZ, we have not made sufficient progress in reducing the deer herd. Hunters make the decision on pulling the trigger or letting the arrow fly. If Wisconsin is going to avoid the statewide, negative impacts of CWD, we are going to have to do things differently.

Survey results continue to show that two-thirds of hunters agree that CWD "*should be eliminated from the wild deer population*" and nearly two-thirds agree that "*CWD should not be allowed to spread further in Wisconsin.*" Similarly, the reciprocal notion that the "*DNR should do nothing to try and eliminate CWD*" has been rejected by a majority of hunters in five different surveys. Yet despite widespread support for doing something to stop CWD, hunters have not embraced the pioneering tools and options in place.

I am encouraged by recent results from a survey conducted by Professor Bob Holsman from the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point that showed 71% of DEZ hunters said they were willing to continue "deer reduction efforts" for another three or more years and approximately half of those said they will support the plan "as long as it takes" to know if it is working. And I am encouraged to know that DEZ hunters still most frequently assigned a letter grade of "B" when evaluating our agency response to the disease.

But Dr. Holsman's research also shows that there are a variety of social constraints to hunter's willingness to shoot more deer and manage this disease. And wildlife disease researchers are telling us that if we are not able to aggressively snuff out "disease sparks" in the Herd Reduction Zone, then we can't hope to contain the disease, much less eradicate it.

Therefore, we believe it's time to begin a statewide dialogue with stakeholders about where we've been and our future CWD management approach in Wisconsin. What do we really want our CWD management goal to be? If our state's CWD management goal is containment, control and eventual disease eradication, what are the tools that the public is willing to use in each of these increasingly challenging phases? Finally, what are the consequences of our success or failure to manage the disease and is the public willing to accept those consequences? These will be challenging and frank discussions. Choices we make today will determine the health of the deer herd we hand down to our children and grandchildren. Potential troubling impacts of our choices include:

- A steady increase in the distribution and prevalence of the disease across the Wisconsin landscape affecting more people and deer herds each year.

- Growing negative impacts to the state's billion dollar deer hunting industry and ever growing costs to pay for testing hunter-killed deer.
- A growing and costly disposal burden as the number of CWD+ deer increases.

I have asked my staff to prepare a presentation for your February 2007 meeting on this matter. We will be seeking your approval to develop the next phase of CWD management by the department and to consult the public during the development. We have learned that we need to do more to manage the disease and we need stakeholders to help us decide what more DNR, landowners and hunters can/are willing to do.

I have heard people question whether Wisconsin has the collective resolve needed to even contain, let alone control or eradicate CWD. I am not ready to accept their conclusion without first speaking with the citizens of our state. We have the best data in the country. We believe that to give up on a goal of a healthy deer herd would be irresponsible, and would forever change the landscape of Wisconsin. And we believe that working with the public we can find strategies that hunters, landowners and the public can embrace. Without the public's support we can't succeed.

As Gaylord Nelson said, *"The ultimate test of a man's conscience may be his willingness to sacrifice something today for future generations whose words of thanks will not be heard."* The time is right, in 2007, to engage the citizens of Wisconsin in an informed public dialogue about the importance of CWD management to Wisconsin.

Finally, I want to again acknowledge that since February 28, 2002, DNR has conducted our work as just one member of an interagency team of CWD partners that includes DATCP, DH&FS, UW-System, USGS and USDA. We appreciate their efforts over the past five years and will ask for their continued help with tools, expertise and funding needed to make future CWD management efforts successful.

I hope I have your support to embark upon this important journey and I would welcome your thoughts on how we might frame that dialogue.

Cc: Secretary Rod Nilsestuen – DATCP
Secretary Helene Nelson - DH&FS
President Kevin Reilly, University of Wisconsin System
Dr. Leslie Dierauf, National Wildlife Health Center, USGS
Dr. Thomas Varty, Wisconsin AVIC, USDA-Veterinary Services
Senator Neal Kedzie, Chair, Senate Natural Resources & Transportation Committee
Representative Scott Gunderson, Chair, Assembly Natural Resources Committee