



Legislative Briefs

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FIGHTING CHRONIC WASTING DISEASE IN DEER

2001 Wisconsin Act 108, passed in a May 2002 Special Session of the legislature and signed by Governor Scott McCallum on May 18, 2002, provides funding and authorizes the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to take action to control the spread of Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD), a fatal neurological disorder that could wipe out whitetail deer in Wisconsin. The disease threatens the annual hunt, which by some estimates generates over \$2 billion in tourism-related revenues and, if left unchecked, could devastate the state's entire herd in as little as 10 years. State officials are also seeking federal aid to prevent the spread of the disease to other states.

BACKGROUND

Deer throughout the state have been tested for CWD since 1999, based on samples taken from selected animals killed on the opening weekend of each annual fall hunt. It was announced in February 2002, that three deer shot the previous fall in the vicinity of Mount Horeb had tested positive. The DNR conducted a special hunt in the spring of 2002 in Dane and Iowa Counties to evaluate the magnitude of the infestation, and 15 of the 516 deer killed were found to be infected. Human involvement is suspected in transmission of CWD across the Mississippi River. This is the first time the disease has been reported east of the river. It first appeared in the United States in 1967 and, until recently, was confined to wild cervids (deer, elk, etc.) in parts of Colorado and Wyoming. It has since spread to five adjacent western states (Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, Oklahoma, and South Dakota) and two Canadian provinces (Alberta and Saskatchewan).

CWD is a neurological disease, and while it is related to Mad Cow Disease, which killed over 100 people in Europe and resulted in the mass slaughter of British herds, the World Health Organization (WHO) has stated there is no scientific evidence that CWD can infect humans. Both WHO and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control have, however, warned against the consumption of any part of a deer or elk with evidence of the disease, particularly in the brain, spinal cord, eyes, spleen, tonsils, and lymph nodes. DNR has also stated that it cannot guarantee the safety of the meat. It is not known whether CWD can be passed to cattle, but the Federal Food and Drug Administration advises against having infected deer around livestock herds.

While most diseases are caused by bacteria or viruses, CWD results from an abnormal protein, called prion, which attacks healthy proteins in the brain and spinal cord. The diseased proteins gradually accumulate, riddling tissues with tiny sponge-like holes and lesions. CWD is always fatal, and there is no vaccine for it. Following an incubation period of 16 to 32 months, animals begin to exhibit CWD symptoms, including loss of control of bodily functions, emaciating weight loss, and unusual behavior, such as tremors and stumbling. Death occurs within weeks or months after symptoms appear. CWD is believed to be spread by close contact between animals, possibly through saliva and feces, and by exposure to a CWD-contaminated environment. (Prions are able to survive in the soil for three years or more.) There is no way to test live animals for CWD. Tissues taken from dead animals must be examined under a microscope, a labor-intensive procedure costing up to \$30 per test.

DNR ACTIONS

DNR proposes to contain CWD by eradicating the deer in the vicinity where infection was found using both private hunters and DNR marksmen. This will require the destruction of nearly all of the estimated 15,000 wild deer in an approximately 351-square mile eradication zone in the south central portion of the state centered around Mount Horeb. The zone, which will expand if more infected deer are discovered, now covers portions of Dane, Iowa, and Sauk Counties. It is calculated on the fact that a buck can travel 10 to 12 miles in a year. The goal of DNR biologists is to keep the population in the eradication zone at or near zero for five years. They believe that any infected animals not shot will succumb to the disease within that period. The DNR also proposes to reduce the herd by about 50% in counties surrounding the eradication zone. The plan calls for an extension of the fall hunting season to October 24, 2002, through January 31, 2003, and permitting higher bag limits. Landowners in the eradication zone and surrounding areas will be issued liberal permits to hunt in additional specified periods.

As part of the CWD controls, deer carcasses may not be removed from the disease management area and kills must be registered in the hunting unit where they were shot, so as to facilitate accurate tracking of the disease. Carcasses resulting from the hunt will be incinerated or disposed of in landfills.

ACT 108 PROVISIONS

To support the DNR's efforts to wipe out CWD in the state, the new law:

- Allows state or federal wildlife employees to shoot firearms, bows or crossbows from or over unpaved roads and from vehicles and motorboats.
- Allows marksmen in the eradication zone to hunt from airplanes or helicopters if this measure is considered necessary to control the spread of the disease.
- Allows farmers to shoot deer from tractors and farm implements.
- Directs the DNR to regulate the recreational and non-hunting-related feeding of deer and other wild animals.
- Authorizes spending of approximately \$4 million for CWD management positions and operations, including about \$900,000 for equipment at the UW-Madison's Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory to enable it to conduct CWD testing.
- Permits the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection to kill and test animals on game farms that may have been exposed to CWD, with owners being reimbursed up to \$1,500 per animal.
- Requires the DNR to give adequate public notice prior to commencement of hunting in any eradication zone.

Authorization for the first four items expires on June 30, 2004.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

A copy of 2001 Wisconsin Act 108 is available at www.legis.state.wi.us/2001/data/acts. For further information contact the DNR Bureau of Wildlife Management at (608) 266-8204, or access the DNR's CWD website at www.dnr.state.wi.us/org/land/wildlife/whealth/issues/CWD/index.htm.