

UW-Madison Statement on Chronic Wasting Disease
October 2002
University of Wisconsin-Madison

We come forward today to add an independent perspective to the public evaluation of the state's efforts to control chronic wasting disease (CWD). Members of the university community, representing a diversity of disciplines, including specialists in the areas of wildlife ecology, botany, infectious diseases, veterinary medicine and others, have been in active discussion about this crisis and feel that, in the tradition of the Wisconsin Idea, it is important for the university to lend any expertise and insight it may have toward solutions to the CWD problem.

Our conclusions, quite simply, lead us to the imperative for immediate, decisive action to eliminate CWD from the area in which it has appeared in south-central Wisconsin. Failure to do so invites certain spread of the disease and a significant risk of serious, unpredictable economic and ecological consequences for the state.

Since the DNR announced an eradication strategy for the affected area, based on the best information then available, the emerging scientific evidence associated with the disease indicates that the DNR's strategy is fundamentally sound. Based upon the locations at which infected deer have been found within the affected area, and based on the results of the upcoming surveillance period, the outer perimeter may need to be expanded to account more for the natural dispersal capacity of the male deer that are the most likely carriers of the disease to uninfected areas. It is the natural movement of deer spreading CWD that lends urgency to the efforts to eliminate deer in the eradication zone.

Moreover, given our knowledge of the disease and its spread, we strongly recommend that the state immediately curtail the transfer of deer between game farms in Wisconsin, at least until a viable live test for CWD is developed. Humans moving deer by truck can transport CWD farther and faster than deer moving on their own ever could. Wisconsin game farms should also be required to test animals and report all results to the state. This is a notable gap in an expensive and difficult effort at surveillance and control and it should be closed as soon as possible. We are aware that this recommendation has severe economic implications for the game farm industry and hope that this potential hardship can be addressed by the state as it searches for solutions to the spread of CWD.

Testing for CWD has also become a confusing issue for the public. It must be publicly emphasized that testing is simply a means of surveillance. No known test can ensure the safety of venison for human consumption.

The hunting public and private landowners are the most critical components of the state's strategy, and have been vocal about their concerns. We do not take issue with the emotional character of this response and the skepticism associated with an absence of definitive answers to many important questions about CWD. But from a scientific perspective, the only known way to curtail the spread of such a disease is to quickly eliminate it while it remains confined to a relatively small area. If we do not do that, the only certainty is that the disease will spread without limit.

Much of the debate concerning the DNR's eradication strategy has centered on the ethics of hunting and killing deer without consuming them, and not directly on the reasons for the strategy itself. While at present there is no evidence of trans-species infection to humans, there is precedent elsewhere. It has happened before, although the possibility is very small. It could happen here. We simply do not know. Moreover, we do not know the manner in which the disease is transferred between animals, whether by direct contact or contact with other bodily products. If intimate contact is not required, then CWD could spread farther and faster than is now believed.

On balance, the skeptics are correct: many of their concerns cannot be answered, or answered with certainty. What is certain, however, is that our best chance to contain this disease -- and to eliminate the unknown possibilities associated with its spread -- is now. Moreover, success in curtailing this outbreak of disease will not come without the willing participation of hunters and landowners throughout the affected area and beyond.

Finally, we recognize the imperfect state of knowledge of CWD and its potential influence on the environment, human health, the economy and social traditions over the next several years. Toward that end, we recommend that a formalized CWD Advisory Council -- composed of state and national scientific and other experts -- be convened to help address this critical lack of information. The purview of this council would be to further inform the public debate and feed into the state's existing efforts to confront this difficult problem.

Among the questions and issues that could be addressed by such a body include:

- * Evaluation of additional means beyond those already proposed for removing deer from the intensive harvest and management zones identified by the DNR, and analysis of how implementing these might be integrated into the state's adaptive planning for managing and eliminating the disease.

- * A more precise assessment of the dispersal rate of deer and the association of that dispersal rate with the spread of CWD.

* Exploring the feasibility of private testing of deer as a desirable option, provided that the testing is reportable and done in accordance with standardized and accepted scientific protocols and overseen by the appropriate regulatory authorities. The concentration of testing responsibility within the DNR and Wisconsin Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory threatens the ability of those agencies to address other critical needs as the magnitude of the CWD testing effort places a clear strain on existing resources.

* Issues of human and animal health.

* The potential next steps and ecological impacts of a failed effort to control CWD and any resulting permanent decline in the number of people taking part in the annual hunt, now our primary means of managing Wisconsin's deer population and its impact on natural ecological communities and economic crops.

* The implications of the emergence of CWD on overall deer management.

* Aspects of deer management that might affect the likelihood of other disease outbreaks and how rapidly we can control any such occurrences.

* Methods for safe, cost-effective disposal of infected or potentially infected deer.

These are just some of the unknowns with which we need to come to grips. An authoritative panel that can make impartial recommendations for the state to act on would provide us with another important perspective to enhance the public discussion and would assist current efforts in finding knowledge-driven solutions for a difficult problem.

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