

DR. DEER'S VIEWS



THE HYSTERIA OVER CHRONIC WASTING DISEASE

By Dr. James C. Kroll, Ph.D.

Headed anything lately about Chronic Wasting Disease or CWD in deer and elk? It seems the disease has pretty much dropped off the public radar screen, and there are a lot of states now playing down its importance. What has happened and where do we stand with CWD? You might be surprised.

In the May/June issue of this magazine, my buddy Horace Gore pointed out the Wisconsin debacle in dealing with CWD. I need to add some intriguing facts to bolster his comments.

As you may remember, Chronic Wasting Disease is one of a host of Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathies (TSEs) known to afflict mammals. To make the long name easier to understand, it means you can catch it from another individual of your species and it turns your brain into a Swiss cheese.

The human version is Creutzfeldt-Jacob Disease. About one in a million or so people come down with this disease annually—not much of a real problem. But, when a similar disease showed up in deer, it set scientists a-buzzing!

It often is reported CWD first was “discovered” in 1967 among research animals (mule deer) in a “wildlife research facility in northern Colorado.” That is the way the reports go when discussed by critics of modern intensive deer management.

What is judiciously left unsaid is the “disease” was discovered actually in 1968 among animals housed at the Colorado Fish and Game Department’s Rocky Mountain Research Station. Later, it showed up in four additional state facilities in Colorado and Wyoming.

We do not know where it came from,

but conventional wisdom now assumes it was a cross-species acquisition from the sheep co-mingled with the deer. Sheep are notorious for their own form of TSE, which is called Scrapie due to their habit of scraping their skin against objects from itching.

The disease went unnoticed by most scientists until 1978 when a young veterinary researcher (Beth Williams) identified the sickness as a deer version of TSE. Still, there was not a great deal of interest until 1981 when it showed up in free-ranging elk in Colorado. Then, things really began to heat up.

In 1996, and again in 1998, it showed up in farmed elk in Saskatchewan.

Paralleling all this was the growing deer breeding industry. This new industry violated the zealous beliefs of many wildlife biologists. It just did not seem right to raise deer in pens or to intensively manage them on the land for that matter. But, deer farming was generating substantial income to faltering farmers, so biologists were reluctant to attack the new industry.

CWD, on the other hand, gave them a rather large hammer to use against deer breeders. In no time, “official science dictated deer breeders created this disease and were spreading it across the

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landscape. No matter some of the spread can be traced back to deer and elk being moved out of the Colorado research facility, many to the wild. No matter there was a tie between the diseased elk in Saskatchewan and Colorado. It was now a "fact."

The disease remained a regional problem associated with the Rocky Mountains. Then, CWD showed up in New Mexico near the White Sands area. This appearance quickly was put to sleep because no one raises deer in New Mexico. To this day, no one has a workable hypothesis for the origin, leading me to believe it may be a disease with many origins, natural and man-made. I guess some deer or elk walked 1,000 miles to infect New Mexico mule deer.

In 2001, Wisconsin discovered some infected deer in the wild in the south-central part of the state near Mt. Horeb. It appeared in several more deer and among a breeding operation. Again, deer breeders

were the culprits and they must go.

By that time, scientists were developing a number of opinions, most of which were based on little scientific data. The most frightening theory was put forward by a University of Wisconsin professor who said his computer model predicted the virtual extinction of whitetails in Wisconsin within 30 years. That was enough to turn normally rational biologists into lunatics.

The knee-jerk reaction of the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR)—supported by learned scientists—was the entire herd in the area around Mt. Horeb must go. The plan seemed simple on the surface.

First, they would kill every deer (buck, doe and fawn) living in the "eradication zone (EZ)." Next, a larger area would encircle the EZ, in which the herd population would be reduced to 10 deer per square mile (that's a deer to 64 acres to you Texans).

Even though a hard pill to swallow,

many local residents and deer hunters bought into the plan. After all, they did not want to lose whitetails forever. But, all of these actions were based on some assumptions; few of which have been proven scientifically to date:

CWD was always fatal.

All deer were equally susceptible to the "disease."

That CWD was indeed a disease caused by rogue prions.

I became involved in this mess when Horace, Jerry Johnston and producer Brian Hawkins asked me to comment on the situation on "The Journal of the Texas Trophy Hunters" TV Show. I followed this and other situations for years and decided to stick my neck out. "When it is all said and done," I asserted, "I will be surprised if the infection rate exceeds two percent." (I was right!)

I then pointed out the so-called eradication program would not work. Just as with Tb (Tuberculosis) in the Michigan deer herd, CWD would be yet another disease or condition we would have to manage our way around. (All the major animal disease texts will tell you the first thing you do during a potential epidemic is to conduct a solid surveillance program. Jumping out there and killing all the animals may not even be necessary.)

Well, to say the least, neither of us was very popular with the DNR in Wisconsin. What business did a bunch of Texans have sticking our noses into their problem? The reason was it needed to be "headed off at the pass," before the hysteria spread to our own state. Fortunately, we had and still have some very rational and competent state wildlife officials who have already said they would (will) handle it differently.

Scientists have earned the reputation of being fact-based folks. It has only been recently the general public is beginning to smell something about my professor. Turns out, scientists are human and make human mistakes.

One is letting their professional judgment be clouded by their own pursuit of fame and fortune, not to mention

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nature religion. Modern scientists are rewarded and promoted in relation to the number of publications they have and the amount of grant funds brought into their institution. A disaster of the proportions asserted by that Wisconsin professor is enough to make state and federal agencies turn loose with a whole lot of cash.

In the interim since CWD became an issue, state agencies and the federal government (United States Department of Agriculture, National Institute of Health (NIH), etc.) have awarded literally millions of dollars in research grants to the very people who have cried the loudest about the dangers of CWD. Grants are often awarded by panels of other scientists who serve as "peer review" to a proposal.

One of the best ways to get a lot of research money is to become part of the "clique." Soon, "official science" emerges and anyone dumb enough to put forward an alternative hypothesis might as well forget funding. Since all this began, millions have been appropriated and spent on CWD. Let me illustrate a few programs.

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) spent an estimated \$24.3 million in fiscal year (FY) 2002 alone on TSE research and then requested another \$29.2 million in FY 2003.

The president of the American Veterinary Medicine Association testified to Congress (Senate Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife and Water; Chronic Wasting Disease Financial Assistance Act, S. 1366), stating: "Financial support from

the federal government will be required to comprehensively and effectively test wild elk and deer populations."

The International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (IAFWA) identified \$34.15 million of CWD funding needs for the 2005 federal budget. Other agencies such as the National Research Initiative Competitive Grants Program jumped on board, awarding thousands to various researchers. Hatch Act funds were also spent on research and activities. The list goes on and on.

If you have ever tried to find out how much money has been spent on programs by the federal government, you would spend the rest of your life trying to find where they hide it. Bottom line is; a whole lot of folks have gotten a great deal of money and academic tenure as a consequence of CWD.

Now, I am not saying this is all bad. And, I am not saying CWD is not a problem of significant interest. What I am saying is the way we approached it comes into serious question.

The next thing I knew, some of the outdoor magazines jumped on the bandwagon. Fortunately, the two I write for the most did not take the bait. One of the oldest and most respected outdoor periodicals in America reported as fact three men died from CWD. They had eaten venison in their lives, so their deaths must have been due to eating venison.

Yet, in a recent investigative report by the Wisconsin 2005-06 Joint Legislative Audit, they noted: "A joint investigation by DHFS and the Centers for Disease

Control and Prevention concluded that only one of these individuals died of Creutzfeldt-Jacobs Disease, and its onset was not linked to consumption of venison but was the typical sporadic form. The other two [men] individuals died of unrelated causes." The banner headline in the periodicals read, "Mad Deer Disease Kills Three Hunters." The only thing "mad" in this case was the magazine's editor.

So, what happened in Wisconsin? Horace gave it away last issue. By any account, it was a complete and total failure. Yet, until the Wisconsin state legislature stepped in and investigated (audited) the program, the true story remained hidden.

In a mail out pamphlet dated 2005 (PUB-CE-461), the story was quite different. The total eradication effort was reduced to a goal in the EZ of reducing the herd to five deer per square mile. That came about when the state discovered it was not possible to eradicate a wild deer population, something I learned many years ago.

Only the results from one of the management units (MU 70A) were presented in this publication. They reported, "Cumulative population reduction since 2001 for deer management unit 70A, which is entirely within the DEZ is estimated to be 40 percent; from 48 to 29 deer/mi. squared."

They then danced around what was going on in the Herd Reduction Zone around the EZ by presenting the number of deer killed ("successfully hunted") from 2002 to 2005. No mention is given as to what was going on with the deer population.

Well, along came the Wisconsin legislature's audit of the program. In the Report 06-13, November 2006 publication, "An Evaluation, Chronic Wasting Disease, Department of Natural Resources," they concluded: "DNR's effort to reduce the deer populations in CW zones have not been effective." They go on to point out the "...estimated number of

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