Wildlife disease debate heats up

Dr. Deer's position on this is:

For several years now, the wildlife profession in general has been against feeding deer. Some states even have laws against it. Yet, when hunter opportunity is threatened by winter kill and along with it, license sales, some state and federal agencies (along with NGOs) suddenly support this activity! Feeding can be an important part of management, but emergency winter feeding is not a sound practice. If agencies would do a better job of managing populations through hunting, plus managing more on an ecological rather than a hunter opportunity basis, there would be fewer problems.
I am Dr. James C. Kroll, and this is my world!

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Monday, October 20, 2008 8:35 PM MDT

LANDER -- At the heart of the story are a sick moose, a regional forester, a state agency, a mutated protein and five conservation organizations.

And they all could influence, in different ways, the future of elk feedgrounds in Wyoming.

A regional forester has decided to uphold Bridger-Teton National Forest Supervisor Kniffy Hamilton's decision to allow the Wyoming Game and Fish Department to continue operating elk feedgrounds on the national forest for at least 20 years, an agency spokeswoman announced Monday.

The decision had been appealed by five conservation groups that cited, among other things, fears about potential harm to Bridger-Teton soils and water supplies from the spread of chronic wasting disease to the feedgrounds.

The choice to uphold the 20-year feedground permits came three days after a Game and Fish Department official said a euthanized moose in western Wyoming had been infected with chronic wasting disease, and was found just 13 miles from a state-run elk feedground in Star Valley.

Complicating things further, two conservationists with two of the five groups that appealed the decision said Monday that they had accepted a compromise with the Bridger-Teton in September, which would have cut the feedground permits to three- or five-year increments instead of 20. The groups said Bridger-Teton officials withdrew the deal in early October.

Lloyd Dorsey with the Greater Yellowstone Coalition and Franz Camenzind with the Jackson Hole Conservation Alliance both expressed disappointment about the decision to uphold the 20-year permits, and forest officials' apparent flip-flip on the compromise.

"We had reached our agreement with them on Friday, Sept. 26, after energetic negotiations, and then they withdrew on Oct. 6," Dorsey said.

But Mary Cernicek, spokeswoman for Bridger-Teton, said Dorsey's claim is "not correct at all," and "obviously there was a miscommunication."

"No one reneged," Cernicek said. "It was made very clear to them what the next steps in the process were, and the forest did not agree to anything."

Before the deal was to become final, Bridger-Teton officials first had to confer with the Game and Fish Department and reach an agreement with that agency, Cernicek said. Then that

agreement had to be approved by the regional office, and the final step would have been for all parties to sign the agreement.

That never happened, she said.

On Monday, Hamilton expressed concern about the "westward progress of the disease and (possible) infection of elk that use feedgrounds for winter survival," but stood by her original decision to renew the feedgrounds permit for 20 years, Cernicek said.

The sick moose

A Game and Fish Department scientist said Monday that the discovery of chronic wasting disease in a Star Valley moose -- in far western Wyoming -- was "alarming."

Not only was this the first moose known to be infected with the disease in the state, it's also the first Wyoming animal of any kind west of the Wind River Mountains to test positive.

"This is bad no matter how you slice it," said Hank Edwards, a wildlife disease specialist with the Game and Fish Department -- although it's a type of bad news most wildlife managers in the state had expected to receive eventually.

Chronic wasting disease is, as far as wildlife biologists know, a 100 percent fatal brain disease that afflicts deer, elk and moose. It is not thought to be dangerous to humans, but the World Health Organization advises against eating meat from animals infected with it, just to be safe.

The disease is caused by a mutated protein that is somehow ingested by the animals, but scientists don't know yet exactly how it is transmitted. The mutated protein, or prion, somehow makes its way to the animal's brain and slowly destroys it.

It can take years for a deer or elk to die from the disease, and the most typical symptom is chronic weight loss leading to death by starvation.

But the case of the Star Valley moose is a strange one, because the animal wasn't suspected of having chronic wasting disease. The moose was in good body condition, obviously not starving, yet it could not stand up.

The animal was not dying yet of the disease, Edwards said. Rather, it was dying much faster from a parasite. The moose was euthanized by Game and Fish personnel in February near Bedford, but the discovery that it was infected with chronic wasting disease didn't happen until recently.

"This case was submitted (to the lab) for the parasite eleaophera, which is not a high priority," Edwards said. "If we were suspecting CWD to start with, we certainly would have gotten the results faster. This is the first moose in Wyoming, for one, and, two, it was a long way from any known CWD areas."

Once chronic wasting disease exists in an area, scientists believe it can be transmitted from moose to elk, or deer to moose, or any other combination, Edwards said.

"It's hard to go back and figure out how it got there," Edwards said. "All we know is that it's there. And whether we'll see it again this year or next year, that's going to answer some questions for us. We may not see CWD there for another five years. We may see it next week."

'Walk-in petri dish'

The general belief among most conservation groups and many wildlife biologists is that if the disease were to spread to feedground elk, the disease would rip through the populations at much higher rates than it does in normal, "free-ranging" herds, because the animals are

artificially concentrated on feedlines in the winter.

An associated fear is that the feedgrounds themselves -- the very soil under the animals' hooves -- would then become rife with the disease for years and possibly decades or more.

"With the discovery of chronic wasting disease in Star Valley, it emphasizes that it's high time for the resource managers to exhibit leadership to protect our wildlife," Dorsey said. "The public has every reason to expect the (Bridger-Teton) forest, the (National) Elk Refuge, the Game and Fish Department and the BLM, who all have a hand in operating the feedgrounds, to craft solutions that carefully phase out these dense concentrations of vulnerable big game."

Camenzind with the Jackson Hole Conservation Alliance agreed. He said in light of the Star Valley discovery, the Forest Service should give the problem another look within a few miles of the feedgrounds.

"One of the concerns we have is if CWD should come into the feedgrounds, and the prion gets shed into the area, it becomes like a walk-in, walk-out petri dish to continually infect elk," Camenzind said. "I certainly hope it doesn't happen, but there is no indication that it can't; that the area becomes so contaminated that it has to be fenced off."

But Cernicek said there are currently no diagnostic tools that can determine if an environment is contaminated with chronic wasting disease prions.

"It is also not known whether contaminated soils play a major role in disease transmission," she said.

The Game and Fish Department and other agencies are conducting research into the disease, Cernicek said, which will help the Forest Service "determine appropriate responses to this disease."

"Currently, there is neither empirical evidence nor data anywhere in North America suggesting that chronic wasting disease is a (devastating) epidemic," she said. And Cernicek indicated that the Forest Service plans to follow the lead of state wildlife managers when it comes to dealing with the disease.

"Disease management is not in the realm of expertise of the Forest Service. It is, however, the expertise of the Game and Fish," Cernicek said.

Eric Keszler, spokesman for the Game and Fish Department, said the agency will increase surveillance in Star Valley and the surrounding areas during the rest of the fall hunting season.

"For the moose and elk seasons that are still open in that area, we'll set up additional test stations and get word out to hunters to get their help to let us extract (the animals') lymph nodes," Keszler said.

If harvested animals test positive for the disease, hunters will be notified by the Game and Fish Department, he said.