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Dr. Deer's Views



The Hysteria Over Chronic Wasting Disease

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

Heard 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

[CONTINUED ON PAGE 122]



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Sweetie	8094	2003	Peanut 220 B&C
Maggie	5910	2003	Impact 202 2/8 B&C
Princess	5907	2003	Impact 202 2/8 B&C
Dixie	8161	2005	Daggertine 201 Net Typical B&C
Darling	8162	2005	Daggertine 201 Net Typical B&C
Twinkie	9026	2005	Impact 202 2/8 B&C
Rose	9055	2005	Impact 202 2/8 B&C
Bridgett	9027	2005	Impact 202 2/8 B&C
Selena	9019	2005	Impact 202 2/8 B&C
Cupcake	9022	2005	Impact 202 2/8 B&C
Ruth	9070	2005	Brutus 214 5/8 B&C
Angel	12889	2006	Impact 202 2/8 B&C
Vanessa	12891	2006	Impact 202 2/8 B&C
Wendy	12892	2006	Impact 202 2/8 B&C
Violet	12894	2006	Impact 202 2/8 B&C
Meg	12499	2006	Magnum 248 7/8 B&C
Blue Bell	12890	2006	Impact 202 2/8 B&C
Farah	12935	2006	Impact 202 2/8 B&C
Iris	12888	2006	Impact 202 2/8 B&C
Elsie	5921	1999	Charro 231 B&C

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The Hysteria Over Chronic Wasting Disease

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 120]

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 profession. 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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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

saying is the way we [illegible]

into serious question.

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

Yet, in a recent investigative repor the Wisconsin 2005-06 Joint Legisla Audit, they noted: "A joint investiga by DHFS and the Centers for Dis








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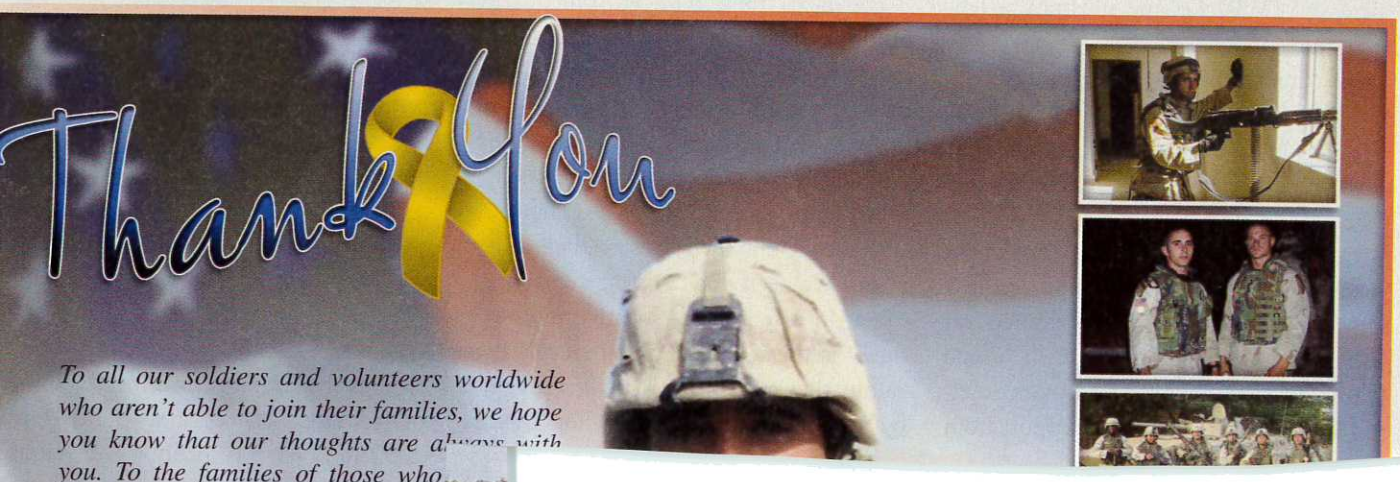
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The Hysteria Over Chronic Wasting Disease

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 124]

deer in the CWD zones increased from 26.4 per square mile in 2002 to 38.3 per square mile in 2005, which is the greatest density since the identification of CWD in Wisconsin."

The DNR biologists countered the reason for the increase was really related to adopting a new census technique. Well, I guess the census method they used for years, and on which they placed so much confidence, must have been wrong? They did admit, at the worst, the deer population remained unchanged.

Yet, one population decline was documented in the report: hunters. As a direct result of the hysteria, the finger-pointing and media malpractice, many hunters declined to buy licenses. "You're not bringing something that will kill my children in this house!" a wife would proclaim.

As a consequence, during the 2002 hunting season, 73,000 fewer deer were killed than in 2001. Over the following winter, how many deer starved and froze to death, compared to those dying from CWD?

State game agencies operate on licenses, fines and fees. Hunting license sales for 2002 declined by 11.9 percent and, according to the report, "...sales have not returned to pre-CWD levels." It is my opinion they never will. Those folks are now playing golf.

The full extent of this debacle goes on and on, far beyond what my editor will allow. But, I must summarize the findings of the Wisconsin legislature:

$32.3 million was spent on CWD through 2005-06.

To date, DNR's efforts to eradicate CWD have not been effective.

Steps have been taken to control CWD in farmed deer and has been successful. (I might add, many farmers now qualify for CWD-free status.)

Wisconsin's approach to CWD should be reevaluated.

In her letter of transmittal, State Auditor Janice Mueller noted: "...to date, DNR's efforts to eradicate CWD in the free-ranging deer population have not been effective. Neither the estimated number of deer in CWD zones nor the percentage infected with CWD has decreased. In addition, fewer deer have been killed in the CWD zones; the number declined from 23.1 deer per square mile in the 2003 hunting season to 17.4 deer per square mile in the 2005 hunting season."

Was I right in my predictions? Initially, the assumed infection rate was very high, principally due to the small number sampled. Using the Wisconsin DNR report data, I conducted a statistical analysis comparing the number of deer sampled to the number infected. The range of numbers ran from 38,471 in 2002 down to 1,009 so far for 2006. There was a 75 percent negative relationship between the size of the sample and infection rate.

Recently, they have made a big deal out of a three percent rate for 2006, but on closer reading they only tested 1,009 animals as of the time of the report, most of which I bet came from one or both of the zones. The average infection rate in Wisconsin from 2001 to 2006 was 1.08 percent, including the bogus 2006 infection rate. Without 2006, the average was 0.7 percent. I was right either way!

Oh, yes. What about the professor's Wisconsin model? It seems both Colorado and Wyoming, where the disease has been known for the longest time, are issuing bonus tags. Also, some of the research paid for with your dollars was worthwhile.

CWD tends to not show up until the animal is mature. The highest infection rates reported by the DNR were for deer 3-1/2-plus years of age. Bucks seemed to be the most susceptible. The percentage of yearling bucks in the annual number of deer killed in Wisconsin ranges 59.4-76 percent, leaving very few bucks left to reach maturity. Doe population age structure, based on removal, suggests only 20 percent of does are 3-1/2-plus years.

Vehicle accidents probably give a more unbiased estimate of age structure. Less then 10 percent of deer killed by cars were older than 3-1/2 years. Most deer never live to become clinical for CWD. This also puts a big hole in the professor's model. The fact deer herds increased in the EZ and HRZ adds another nail to the coffin.

What is the take home message? First of all, do not ever think I am minimizing CWD as a deer problem. What I am doing is pointing out how biased scientists can stir up problems and do serious damage both to hunting and to wildlife. The correct approach is the one I know for a fact Texas Parks and Wildlife will use when or if CWD shows up in our state.

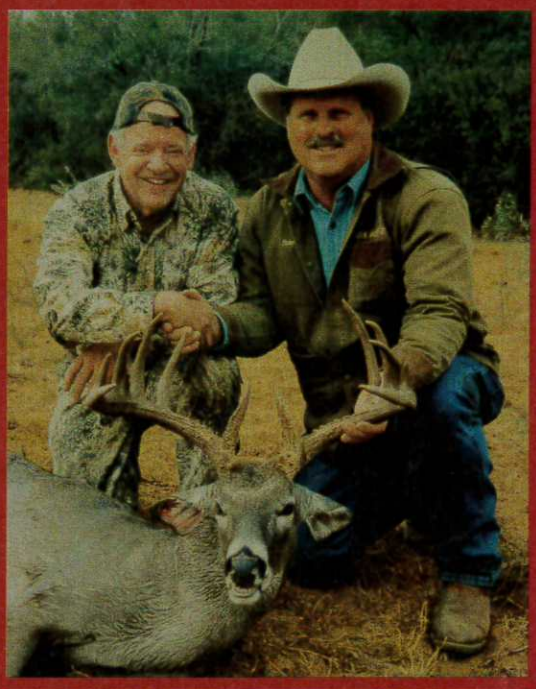
The first step will be to establish a sampling protocol inside a buffer around the location. From this work they will be able to establish the boundaries of the disease and then a plan to manage, not eradicate it. Believe me, I personally know the consequences of not establishing the limits of a disease (cancer) before acting. As to penned deer, they are the easiest to deal with when a problem arises. Unlike their free-ranging cousins, they by nature are confined and, being so, they can be monitored and assigned effective solutions for any particular problem.



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