

Statement of

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Legislative Hearing on a bill to create a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Chronic Wasting Disease Task Force

Environment and Public Works Committee
United States Senate

December 4, 2019

Chairman Barrasso, Ranking Member Carper, members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on one of the most critical issues facing America's wild deer, deer hunters, and the future of conservation funding, Chronic Wasting Disease. And what's more, thank you for bringing CWD to the attention both of this committee and the United States Senate. Now is certainly the time for legislative action.

Simply put, CWD is the single greatest threat to hunting and conservation in America today. It has now been detected in 26 states, is 100% fatal, and impacts all species of North America's wild deer: whitetails, mule deer, elk, and moose, collectively the most popular, and most economically important, game animals in the United States. The disease creates holes in the brain of infected deer, and while there has never been a documented human case of CWD, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recommends that people not consume meat from CWD positive animals.

The disease has sent state wildlife agencies scrambling to respond and has America's 11.5 million deer hunters scouring for accurate information. Apart from some limited research funding, the federal government has not been involved in the fight against CWD in wild deer in a meaningful way, and given the scope of this interstate, and indeed international problem, it is time for that to change.

With the addition of the legislation before the committee today, there are now at least five bills in the United States Senate dealing directly with Chronic Wasting Disease. All are a step in the right direction, but none of them are aggressive or visionary enough to truly address this problem. Sportsmen and women saved America's deer from the brink of extinction more than a century ago, and we stand ready to work with all interested legislators to build out a truly comprehensive proposal that does the job again.

It is important to note that the single most important thing Congress can do to stop the spread of CWD is to give the states the resources they need to track and fight the disease in the wild. The states face significant challenges as they sit on the front lines of CWD response, including re-establishing and staffing physical check-in stations, addressing the issue of lab capacity that slows testing results, enforcing proper carcass transportation and disposal regulations, monitoring and evaluating herd health, and implementing rapid response plans to address new and existing outbreaks. And of course, there is tremendous need for hunter education, to ensure that hunters understand the threat of CWD, can differentiate between the facts and the myths of the disease, and can be part of the solution in controlling CWD.

Congress provided strong and consistent federal funding to assist the state wildlife agencies in responding to CWD through 2011 but when the funding ended, states were forced to take funds from other sources to deal with the disease. Some states simply stopped looking for it. The 2020 House Agriculture Appropriations bill reestablishes federal funding for CWD by providing \$15 million to state wildlife agencies for CWD surveillance and testing. That bill is currently in conference with the Senate, which provides just \$2.5 million for wild deer in its bill. If members of this committee care about stopping CWD, I urge you to reach out to your colleagues on the Appropriations Committee and ask them to support the House level of \$15 million in the Agriculture Appropriations bill.

Coordinating and expediting the federal response to CWD is also important, and the task force proposed by this committee could help do this. Today the Department of Agriculture has primary federal jurisdiction over CWD, and part of the reason we are in the situation we are today is the Department's

abject failure to control the disease in the captive deer population. The Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) CWD Herd Certification Program has proven utterly ineffective, allowing CWD positive captive deer to be moved across state lines, and CWD positive deer to persist on the landscape. The Department of the Interior, charged with maintaining viable populations of wild animals on public lands, has been far more aggressive in raising the alarm about CWD, thanks largely to Secretary Bernhardt's leadership. But Interior needs a partner at USDA and a strong relationship with the CDC.

I noted at the beginning of my statement that CWD poses a huge threat to conservation in America, and that is why non-hunters as well as hunters should care about stopping the disease's spread. Eighty percent of America's hunters are deer hunters. And deer hunting is now the entry point for most new hunters, who can take to the field without the need for expensive decoys, calls, dogs, boats, and other gear. A successful deer hunt requires little more than a hunting license, an accurate firearm, and a place to go. And while overall hunting numbers have been declining, there has been growth in a "field to table" food movement, where new hunters are attracted to the idea of locally-sourced, organic protein that they can harvest themselves and few game animals fit the bill of table fare better than America's deer.

Collectively, hunters pay the freight for the vast majority of on-the-ground wildlife conservation work. Through the purchase of licenses, conservation stamps, firearms, and ammunition, hunters contribute billions of dollars to wildlife habitat conservation every year, work that clearly benefits the non-hunting public. Deer hunters, who comprise about 80% of all hunters, lead the way. As questions persist about what and who to believe about CWD, many hunters may find it easier and safer to stop hunting, with dire consequences for state wildlife conservation budgets, and America's public wildlife resources. America cannot afford to lose more hunters.

Chronic Wasting Disease is a symptom of a systematic failure to invest in conservation. That is why America's hunters and anglers so fervently hope that this Committee will help address the CWD crisis, as well as move legislation that reauthorizes the North American Wetlands Conservation Act and authorizes the Pittman Robertson Modernization Act and the National Fish Habitat Conservation Act.

These bipartisan and non-controversial bills are waiting for passage through this committee and on to the Senate floor, and together they comprise a considerable segment of the universe of sportsmen's legislative priorities for this Congress. As noted before, CWD has forced many state wildlife agencies to divert funds from wetland and fish habitat conservation programs to help meet the challenges presented by the disease. It is altogether relevant and appropriate that the Committee move these bills forward as quickly as possible.

What's more, quick action on S. 2092, the Pittman Robertson Modernization Act, which the leadership of this committee tried to have included in the public lands package passed earlier this year, would help clear the way for states to spend trust fund dollars to educate hunters about hunting and CWD, including the proper handling of harvested deer. This will help hunters to understand that CWD does not have to mean the end of safe deer hunting.

Thank you again, Chairman Barrasso and Ranking Member Carper, for elevating the profile of Chronic Wasting Disease in the United States Senate. It is a good time to have that conversation, and I would close by asking that Congressional thinking about how we tackle CWD matches the scope and scale of the problem. I look forward to your questions.