

Committee on Resources

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to speak with you on behalf of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) about H.R. 2057, a bill to provide for a multi-agency cooperative effort to combat chronic wasting disease (CWD).

CWD is a transmissible spongiform encephalopathy (TSE) of deer and elk, in the same family of diseases as bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) and scrapie. It has been diagnosed in farmed elk and deer herds in eight States; known positive or exposed herds remain only in Colorado, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. CWD has also been identified in free-ranging deer and elk in areas of Colorado, Illinois, Nebraska, New Mexico, South Dakota, Utah, Wisconsin, and Wyoming. The origin and mode of transmission of CWD are unknown.

It was just about a year ago that Dr. Jim Butler updated you on our efforts to manage CWD in deer and elk. Many things have moved forward since 2002, and I'd like to take a moment to discuss some of these with you.

First and foremost is the management plan for CWD. To ensure a coordinated and cooperative Federal approach to assisting States, a task force including USDA and the Department of the Interior (DOI), along with universities and State wildlife management and agriculture agencies, drafted a national management plan for assisting States, Federal Agencies, and tribes in managing CWD in wild and captive cervids. The plan was shared with Congress in June 2002. The plan's components include action items for surveillance, diagnostics, and research, among other things.

With input from industry and States, USDA is developing a voluntary national herd certification program to eliminate CWD from farmed cervids. Although initially aimed at farmed elk, the program will now include susceptible farmed deer species. Rulemaking must be completed before the plan is implemented and we expect publication of the proposal shortly. We are planning for implementation to occur by the end of this year. In addition, USDA continues to pay for all laboratory costs associated with CWD testing in the farmed cervid population. Positive and exposed farmed cervid herds are eligible for indemnity. USDA also pays the costs of depopulation and disposal. Our goal is nothing less than eradication of the disease in the farmed cervid population.

USDA has also moved ahead in assisting the States to deal with the wildlife aspect of the disease. In FY 2003, USDA received \$14.8 million for CWD in captive and wildlife herds. USDA recently made \$4 million of

that available to assist State wildlife agencies in addressing CWD. Funding is being distributed according to a formula developed in conjunction with the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies. Under this formula, States are classified according to tiers. Tier 1 States, which have known occurrences of CWD in free-ranging cervids as of March 1, 2003, are eligible for the highest sums. States falling in the Tier 2 and 3 are eligible for lower amounts. A detailed breakout of the \$14.8 million is available for your review.

USDA has also paid laboratory costs for hunter surveillance testing from the 2002-03 hunting season for all States submitting approved surveillance plans.

In addition, our Wildlife Services program is working closely with several States, including Colorado, Illinois, and Wisconsin, to assist them in the surveillance and monitoring of deer in the wild population. Our personnel have assisted in the harvesting of deer for test samples, and have also guided landowners on the removal of deer from their property.

Testing has also been an important issue related to CWD. With the increased testing for CWD, laboratory capacity has been an issue. USDA realized that an increased testing capacity was necessary and expanded the number of laboratories that would be able to run the immunohistochemistry (IHC) assay for CWD. We now have 26 laboratories that can run the IHC test; the estimated capacity is now a quarter of a million samples, more than adequate to meet current demand.

Official diagnosis of CWD continues to be performed exclusively by Federal and State regulatory agency laboratories and this remains the current USDA policy. With ever-increasing international trade, it is essential that we can guarantee the integrity of our diagnostic laboratory network in the United States. A "false positive" for any disease, not just CWD, could result in unnecessary public concern and costly regulatory action. And in the case of a disease like bovine spongiform encephalopathy, a false positive could be devastating, costing the U.S. economy billions of dollars in unnecessary domestic and international market disruption from which it could take years to recover.

This past year has also seen progress in the development of new tests. Our Center for Veterinary Biologics (CVB) recently approved two new diagnostic test kits: one for use on elk, mule deer, and white-tail deer and another kit that has been approved for mule deer and white-tailed deer. These new tests run on an ELISA system, which allows more samples to be processed at once. Until further data can be obtained on their effectiveness, IHC remains the internationally recognized method of choice. CVB officials are also reviewing a number of other test kits and have placed a high priority on the evaluation of CWD test kits.

Research into the area of CWD has continued as well. Our National Wildlife Research Center (NWRC) is researching the possibility of vaccines for CWD. NWRC is also continuing to research ways to identify improved barriers and repellents to keep wild deer and elk separated from captive cervids and other livestock. This research is being conducted to control bovine tuberculosis, but much of the information will apply to CWD. NWRC also plans to examine new decontamination methods for CWD-affected facilities.

The Agriculture Research Service has also undertaken several projects, including assessing the interspecies transmission of TSEs among livestock species and cervids, assessing herbivore susceptibility to TSE, and identifying and developing new methods for detecting prion protein molecules in the environment and feedstuffs.

The Cooperative State Research Education and Extension Service is also continuing to support research projects through both competitive and formula-funded programs to determine the causes and methods of control for CWD. In FY 2002 the National Research Initiative Competitive Grant Program awarded \$250,000 to Case Western Reserve University to understand how CWD causes disease and is transmitted between animals. The University of Wisconsin has dedicated resources from its CSREES-supported Agricultural Experiment Station to the management of white-tailed deer, with a special emphasis on CWD. The National Research Initiative once again requested proposals related to CWD in FY03, and at this time staff is currently reviewing proposals.

As you can see, USDA has been moving steadily forward on its program to combat CWD. However, we feel that even though H.R. 2057 has good intent, much of what is required in the bill is already being done. The bill, if passed, requires that USDOl and USDA conduct certain activities regarding CWD. The USDOl activities include a national database for wild and captive cervid information, surveillance and monitoring programs in wild populations, money for State programs, and the expansion of USGS research. In total, the bill authorizes \$17.5 million for USDOl activities.

The USDA activities include the development of a surveillance and monitoring program, and the expansion of diagnostic testing capability and ARS and CSREES activities. In total, the bill authorizes \$9.5 million for USDA activities. The bill also requires USDA and USDOl to enter joint rulemaking when promulgating rules to implement the Act.

Again, we agree with the intent of the bill, which is to establish a program to combat CWD. However, many aspects of the program are already in place at USDA. In addition, the bill does not take into account changes that have been made to the USDA program in the past year.

For example, the bill requires that Federal facilities be upgraded to facilitate the timely processing of samples from the surveillance and monitoring. As stated earlier, we currently have the capacity to run 250,000 samples and USDA is working to expand testing capacity for all TSEs, which would also benefit CWD. We should also point out that because the States have not submitted as many wild cervid samples as APHIS had anticipated, \$500,000 that was allocated for testing is being used to set up cooperative agreements with Tribal Nations.

The bill also requires that the official database for CWD reside with DOI, including information on the farmed cervid population. Under the Animal Health Protection Act, USDA is the lead Department in livestock diseases. We do not believe that a database for livestock, such as farmed cervids, should reside with another Department, especially since we must be conscious of the privacy concerns of producers. In addition, we are currently working with industry on an animal identification program for livestock; both the North American Deer Farmers Association and the North American Elk Breeders Association have been a part of that process. We are concerned about the impact that this provision may have on a livestock animal identification program.

CWD is an important issue to USDA. There is a lot of work being done and it will continue as we implement our herd certification program and expand our testing capabilities. By continuing to work together with our Federal and State counterparts, we can get a handle on this disease.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.