

STATEMENT OF
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BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FORESTS AND FOREST HEALTH,
AND THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FISHERIES, CONSERVATION, WILDLIFE AND OCEANS
COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
JOINT OVERSIGHT HEARING ON CHRONIC WASTING DISEASE

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Mr. Chairmen and Members of the Subcommittees, thank you for this opportunity to provide the Department of the Interior's (Department) views regarding the emerging issue of Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) in deer and elk. The Department is very concerned about the potential effects this disease could have on captive and free-roaming deer and elk and on the economies of affected areas of our country. The Administration believes that meaningful cooperation and coordination with the states is vital to addressing this matter.

In addition, the Administration believes that it is critical for the federal agencies involved to work in concert on this important issue. It is important that we work together to protect wildlife resources and maintain healthy wild populations of these animals. The Department has the skills and expertise to assist the states in the conduct of research to detect and characterize this unusual disease, to provide research and monitoring facilities, and to assist in other appropriate ways. Only through coordination, communication, and cooperation within the federal family, with the states, and with stakeholders will we succeed in managing this issue.

CWD is a disease known to be found in mule deer, elk, and white-tailed deer. CWD is fatal to both deer and elk. The disease's cause, transmission route, and treatment methodologies are

unknown, although associated with altered protein structures (called prions) in the lymphatic system and brain. The recent detection of CWD in wild white-tailed deer in Wisconsin, the first known occurrence east of the Mississippi, increases the urgency in investigating and controlling this disease. Chronic Wasting Disease is not known to occur in humans or domestic cattle or sheep.

The Department recognizes that states have primary responsibility for management of cervids and other resident species within their borders, including mule deer, elk, and white-tailed deer. With particular reference to hunting and harvesting, for instance, states set deer and elk hunting regulations — length of season, harvest methods, and limits — and have established wildlife management programs, generally housed within state fish and game or natural resource agencies.

The Department manages roughly one in every five acres of land in the United States and has stewardship responsibilities for natural resources on these lands. Through the National Park Service, Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management, and Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Department provides assistance to, cooperates with and, in some cases, co-manages with states to ensure healthy, viable wildlife populations. Free-roaming wildlife do not recognize jurisdictional boundaries. The Department shares thousands of miles of coterminous boundaries with state, private, and other federal lands. To successfully combat this disease we must employ an approach in the wild and in captive herds that respects the varied roles of federal and state agencies, as well as affected landowners, while also bringing the strengths of each respective entity to bear on the challenge we face.

Populations of deer and elk in a number of states and Canada have tested positive for CWD. Many states, like Colorado and Wisconsin, are in urgent need of basic information about CWD transmission and methods for control and prevention.

The U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) is the principal science and research agency for the Department. The USGS National Wildlife Health Center (the Madison Center) is the only federal research facility specializing in wildlife disease research and is uniquely positioned to work with state fish and wildlife agencies, as well as federal land management agencies. Since 1975, the Center has provided research, training, and technical assistance to states and other federal agencies related to the diagnosis, prevention, and management of wildlife diseases in naturally occurring populations. Through the Madison Center, the USGS has coordinated activities with states and other federal agencies on critical disease outbreaks such as West Nile Virus, Newcastle disease, avian cholera, botulism, and others.

The Department stands ready to assist with research, monitoring, information, and technical assistance roles in combating this disease in free-ranging deer and elk with our state partners. As more states detect CWD in their wild herds, they will need reliable information in a timely manner. As research reveals more clues about the disease, that information needs to be available rapidly to benefit state and federal efforts in controlling the disease. The Department can and does develop, utilize and share research knowledge and assist nationally in monitoring and surveillance programs to help ensure that the most appropriate response strategies are shared among wildlife managers in state and federal agencies. The Department, through the National Wildlife Health Center, can establish a forum for technical information, including issues such as depopulating procedures, non-lethal testing procedures, disposal of infected carcasses, and worker safety.

The Department and the Department of Agriculture have agreed to form a Joint Federal CWD Working Group. The Working Group's mission will be to assist the states in a cooperative and coordinated manner. Leadership will be comprised of one person each from the Departments of Interior and Agriculture and key officials from each bureau or agency within those two

Departments.

Currently, the Department is working with Colorado, Wisconsin, and other state fish and wildlife agencies in developing cooperative and synergistic research and control programs that are urgently needed for Chronic Wasting Disease. For instance, although a new diagnostic technique using tonsil tissue instead of brain tissue has been developed for live deer, this technique is not applicable to elk. Currently, this technique is best suited to captive animals. The Department proposes to participate with the state wildlife agencies to assist in a national program for the detection and management of CWD in wild herds of deer and elk.

The Department's land management bureaus can contribute to the application of science in the cooperative management of federal lands under their control. The National Park Service, which manages more than 84 million acres contained in 385 park units, is extremely concerned about CWD and the potential impacts this disease could have upon the wildlife resources of the parks and adjacent lands and the ability of park visitors to view wildlife. To date, Rocky Mountain National Park is the only unit of the National Park System that is known to have elk and deer infected with the disease. However, Wind Cave National Park in South Dakota, and Agate Fossil Beds and Scotts Bluff National Monuments in Nebraska are at high risk of infection because the disease was recently detected in nearby wild deer and elk or in nearby facilities for captive rearing deer and elk.

Chronic wasting disease, which is not endemic to Rocky Mountain National Park, was first discovered in the park in 1981. The prevalence of infection for deer, based on samples taken in the park is about 5-6%, the same for animals outside the park. The prevalence of the disease in elk, less than 1%, is believed to be the same for elk outside the park. For the past seven years, both the Colorado Division of Wildlife (CDOW) and the National Park Service have been collaborating on research projects, conducting surveillance of deer and elk movements,

cooperating on capturing deer to obtain tonsillar biopsies for CWD testing, removing infected animals, and developing joint strategies for management of the disease. Recently the CDOW was asked to work with the park as a cooperator developing a chronic wasting disease management plan and environmental impact statement for the Rocky Mountain National Park area. Federal and state funds will be used to support this effort.

This week, the National Park Service has approved for funding three projects related to CWD in two national parks. Two projects will be conducted in Rocky Mountain National Park. One of those projects will develop a management plan, and the other will implement interim management actions. In Wind Cave National Park, a study is planned to detect the occurrence and transmission of the disease in deer within and near the park. Animals will be monitored for movement patterns, including dispersal and migration, and other factors relevant to CWD.

To date, there are no known cases of CWD on National Wildlife Refuge lands. Regardless, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the CDOW recently agreed to jointly address CWD if, and when, it occurs on National Wildlife Refuge lands. This will include survey, testing, and active management, including any necessary efforts to depopulate infected herds.

The Department's stewardship role and cooperative relationship with states dictate that it step forward to help address this problem. Without coordination of information collected by federal and state agencies, information provided by new research, and the means to rapidly disseminate that information to state agencies and federal land managers, this disease could further impact wild deer and elk populations and have an impact on local economies.

Mr. Chairmen, this concludes my written statement and I will be pleased to respond to any questions you might have.