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STATEMENT OF
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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
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
ON
H.R. 2057, THE "CHRONIC WASTING DISEASE
SUPPORT FOR STATES ACT OF 2003"

June 19, 2003

Mr. Chairmen and Members of the Subcommittees, I am Chip Groat, Director of the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS). I thank you for the opportunity to provide the Department of the Interior's (Department) views on H.R. 2057, the "Chronic Wasting Disease Support for States Act of 2003."

The Department shares your concern regarding the impact of Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) on captive and free-ranging deer and elk and on the economies of states and local communities. Increased surveillance and awareness have resulted in the identification of this disease in free-ranging deer or elk populations in eight states. The detection of this disease in additional states increases the urgency of finding effective means of control.

At the outset, I want to say that the Department strongly supports the concepts embodied in H.R. 2057, particularly the recognition and facilitation of the critical role state wildlife management agencies, universities, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play in limiting the distribution and occurrence of CWD. However, we note that several of its provisions direct the Secretary to carry out programs which appear, at least in part, duplicative of ongoing efforts within the Department. Moreover, the new funding required for implementation must compete with other priorities in the context of the President's Budget.

Recent Departmental Accomplishments

The Department manages roughly one in every five acres of land in the United States and has a variety of stewardship responsibilities for natural resources on these lands. Through the National Park Service (Park Service), the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Fish and Wildlife Service), the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), the Department provides assistance to, cooperates with and, in some cases, co-manages wildlife with states to ensure healthy, viable wildlife populations.

While the Department recognizes that the states possess primary responsibility for management of resident fish and wildlife within their borders, to successfully combat CWD we must employ an approach that recognizes the varied roles of federal and state agencies. In this vein, the Department conducts basic and applied research into the biology and management of this disease, provides wildlife-related laboratory services, and offers technical advice and assistance to our partners. We recognize that we must also work closely with private landowners and incorporate their needs into surveillance strategies and outbreak responses.

In an effort to be good neighbors, proper land stewards, and to provide assistance to the states, the Administration requested a total of \$3.8 million in their fiscal year 2004 budget request for CWD efforts. If funded at the requested level, USGS will expand research and deliver technical assistance and pertinent biological information about the disease to both federal and state agencies. The Park Service will continue monitoring and surveillance and will establish a CWD Response Team, modeled after the highly successful exotic plant management teams, to continue and expand on its ability to respond quickly and professionally to CWD issues in units of the National Park System. The Fish and Wildlife Service will use requested funding to comply with the National Environmental Policy Act and to develop surveillance and disease contingency plans for the National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS).

As a further example of our commitment to cooperation with states on this issue, the Department is working with Colorado, Wisconsin, and other state fish and wildlife agencies, providing technical assistance, manpower, and participating in collaborative research studies. For instance, USGS recently initiated collaborative research studies with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and the University of Wisconsin to enhance scientific knowledge about CWD and to assist in the development of management strategies. During the fall 2002 big game hunting season, volunteers from the Fish and Wildlife Service contributed over 440 hours of assistance to the State of Colorado by gathering data from hunter harvested deer and elk. As a result of positive cases of CWD in one elk and two deer in Wind Cave National Park, the National Park Service is stepping-up CWD surveillance and planning efforts with the State of South Dakota on an elk management plan.

Over the past year, the Department has embarked on an aggressive program of research into the biology of CWD, its hosts, and avenues of transmission. In addition, USGS and its partners are working to develop the methods needed to identify diseased animals at pre-clinical stages. During fiscal year (FY) 2003 alone, USGS is augmenting its ongoing program of CWD-related projects with over \$1.0 million in new research and over \$300,000 in new activities initiated in cooperation with states. This brings the total FY 2003 USGS commitment to its CWD program to \$2.7 million.

In testimony before this Committee last May, I reported that Rocky Mountain National Park was the only unit of the National Park System (NPS) that was known to have elk and deer infected with the disease, and that Wind Cave National Park in South Dakota was at high risk of the disease. As noted above, increased surveillance led to the detection of CWD in deer and elk at Wind Cave National Park. CWD also threatens other NPS units – including Dinosaur National Monument in northwestern Colorado and Agate Fossil Beds and Scottsbluff National Monuments in western Nebraska – due to proximity to wild deer and elk herds where CWD has been detected or in nearby facilities for captive rearing of deer and elk.

Based on samples taken in Rocky Mountain National Park, the prevalence of infection for deer is calculated at about 5 to 6 percent, the same for animals surrounding the park. The prevalence of the disease in elk adjacent to the park was estimated by the State of Colorado to be between 1 and 4 percent and is likely similar within the park. The park is continuing tactical management activities for CWD, and is continuing collaborative efforts on research and joint strategy development with the Colorado Division of Wildlife (CDOW). In addition, the park is removing deer and elk with clinical signs of the disease, as well as deer that test positive for CWD using tonsillar biopsy. The Park Service has also entered into an agreement with Colorado State University to fund a Chronic Wasting Disease Coordinator to assist high risk parks in planning, sample collection and diagnostics, management, and research of CWD over a 2-year period.

Finally, the Department has also worked in conjunction with the Department of Agriculture, as well as universities, state wildlife management agencies, and agricultural agencies, to develop a coordinated management approach to addressing CWD. This approach, released in June 2002, includes, among other things, surveillance, diagnostic, and research action items.

The recent detection of CWD in free-ranging deer in additional states points to the need for continued federal, state, and tribal coordination in efforts to manage this disease. H.R. 2057 attempts to address this

need by directing the Department, through the USGS, to undertake work on several fronts that are important to limiting the distribution and occurrence of CWD. I am proud to inform the Committee that we have already initiated work on several of these important initiatives.

Departmental Views on H.R. 2057

Section 101(a) of H.R. 2057 directs the Secretary of the Interior (Secretary), through the USGS and using existing authorities, to establish and maintain a national database for CWD-related information, and to include surveillance and monitoring data for both wild and captive animal populations that is collected by federal agencies, foreign governments, Indian tribes, and state agencies that receive assistance under the proposal. This database would be made available to government agencies attempting to manage and control CWD, universities and other public and private institutions conducting research on CWD, and cooperating international wildlife authorities.

The Department supports the development of a national database, because the need for sharing information is critical to making informed, science-based, management decisions. This database will take full advantage of our existing capabilities in biology, mapping, and scientific database development. Maintaining CWD-related data on both wild and captive populations will facilitate integrated analyses and allow practical “lessons learned” in diagnosis, surveillance, and control to be shared rapidly among a wide range of users. In fact, through its National Biological Information Infrastructure, the USGS has recently implemented a prototype Wildlife Disease Information Network to develop a CWD national data repository for scientific, technical, and geospatial information. Contributed CWD data will be collected through state and federal agencies, tribes, and other sources. However, in terms of the database suggested by this legislation, we believe that it should be developed in coordination with Department of Agriculture, which has oversight responsibility for captive cervids.

Under the provisions found in section 102 of H.R. 2057, USGS is charged with developing, using existing authorities, a national CWD surveillance and monitoring program in cooperation with state and tribal agencies and in coordination with the Department of Agriculture. The Department is also to provide financial and technical assistance to states and tribes to implement the program for wild herds of deer and elk.

The Department views this program as an important component of a national strategy to identify the rate of CWD infection in wild herds, the geographic extent of its spread, and potential reservoirs of infection and mechanisms promoting the spread of CWD. In fact, on May 1, 2003, the USGS released a report called “Surveillance Strategies for Detecting CWD in Free-Ranging Deer and Elk.” The 41-page document is the culmination of a 3-day interdisciplinary, interagency workshop held at the USGS National Wildlife Health Center in Madison, Wisconsin. This document is the first tool of its kind, and it provides general guidance on the development and conduct of scientifically sound surveillance programs to detect CWD in free-ranging populations of both deer and elk.

The Department’s extensive scientific resources provide us with the ability to synthesize data from multiple sources and conduct local, regional, and national analyses, as needed. As you can see, we believe that the Department’s role in providing technical assistance and coordinating surveillance and monitoring efforts is both appropriate and essential.

Section 103 directs the Secretary to allocate funds directly to state and tribal wildlife agencies for the purpose of developing and implementing CWD management strategies. The criteria provided for the allocation of funds address the need to prioritize this financial support based on the relative rate of incidence, state and tribal financial commitment to CWD programs, integration of state or tribal agency policies related to CWD management, and the need to respond rapidly to disease outbreaks in new areas of infection. The grant program authorized by this section appears duplicative of the Fish and Wildlife Service’s state wildlife grants, and the administration of these grants does not fit within the USGS’s mission.

Finally, section 104 directs the Secretary to expand and accelerate research, through USGS, regarding detection, genetic resistance, tissue studies, and environmental studies of CWD. We believe that the Department’s role in providing basic and applied research is both appropriate and essential to understanding and managing this disease.

Conclusion

The Department’s traditional stewardship role and cooperative relationship with states and other partners

make it ideally situated to facilitate development of a coordinated strategy to combat CWD. We fully support the concepts advanced by H.R. 2057 – recognition of state roles and responsibilities in the management of resident wildlife populations; the Department's scientific and technical expertise and ability to coordinate across an array of interested partners – and pledge to work with the Committee to ensure that our resources and authorities are used in the most efficient manner in addressing CWD in free-ranging cervids.

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