

DECISION NOTICE:
CHRONIC WASTING DISEASE MANAGEMENT
PLAN FOR FREE RANGING WILDLIFE IN MONTANA

Background

This document details the decision notice (DN) prepared with the environmental assessment (EA) “Chronic Wasting Disease Management Plan for Free Ranging Wildlife in Montana”. The original EA and DN were completed in 2005 and intended to serve as a management plan that would outline the FWP responses to Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) detection in free-ranging wildlife (cervids) in Montana. An Adjusted Decision Notice was issued in February 2013 that suspended the portions of the original decision that mandated local eradication and limited monitoring efforts to symptomatic animals pending this decision notice.

The primary theme of the original Management plan was to take measures to eliminate CWD, by depopulating the local herd, once the disease is detected at a prevalence of 5% or more in free ranging wildlife. During that era, plans from other states included similar goals. CWD would be eradicated by eradication of the host species, typically deer, within some area containing infected individuals, determined with disease testing and herd movements data from radio-collared animals. The specific prescriptions to depopulate infected herds were largely been abandoned as being unfeasible and socially unacceptable in most cases.

CWD was first detected in free-ranging white-tailed deer in Wisconsin in 2002. The state’s initial plan included objectives to prevent the spread of CWD and eradicate the disease in the affected areas, by depopulating the infected herds. Hunting regulations were liberalized and included unique hunter incentives in CWD infected areas with the objective of dramatically reducing deer abundance. The plan also included landowner kill permits and agency removal efforts. However, following 8 years of intensive management, deer abundance in the affected areas was only somewhat reduced, and the known distribution of CWD was substantially larger and increasing. Generally, there was a lack of support from hunters that evolved into widespread, vehement opposition to the eradication plan. Wisconsin abandoned the eradication objective although Illinois continued agency sharpshooting along the Wisconsin border.

The current data are still inconclusive as to the best management practice for CWD-infected cervids. Most state wildlife agencies’ experience and the preponderance of evidence indicate that eradication is impossible due primarily to the long incubation period and persistence of the causative agent in the environment. There are some data from Illinois and Wisconsin that agency sharpshooting may contain the infection rate at a lower level. However, in a recent survey of landowners and hunters in Montana, that option lacked support from the majority of respondents.

Since there is not a clear prescription for managing CWD, current state plans tend to lean heavily on an “adaptive management approach”, using management data and research findings to guide future decisions and management.

Adopting this proposal would direct FWP on surveillance strategies and outline options if CWD is ever detected in Montana.

Proposal

An FWP preferred alternative was not identified in the draft EA and this proposal will draw elements from several alternatives to direct agency management of CWD surveillance and a course of action should CWD be detected. In general, FWP will continue to test symptomatic animals and direct remaining testing funds to high risk areas. If CWD is detected, an adaptive management approach will be employed.

Prevention

FWP will maintain all regulations and policies in effect that are currently in place for prevention of the spread or introduction of CWD. Those include the ban on feeding big game animals, carcass transport from known CWD-positive states and provinces, and prohibition on movement of live cervids within the state. (Alternative 1)

Pre-detection Surveillance

The FWP preferred alternative recommended is a continuation of testing symptomatic deer and elk and focusing remaining funds into 1 high risk area annually. The high risk area will rotate among FWP administrative regions identified via the weighted surveillance strategy unless a CWD-positive is detected. (Alternatives 2 and 3)

Pre-detection Management

Since CWD has a long incubation period and data suggests that population level impacts will take several generations to be detectable, there will be no preemptive changes in deer or elk population management objectives. (Alternative 3)

Post-detection protocols

An internal CWD Action Team consisting of wildlife biologists, managers and wildlife health experts to annually evaluate actions taken. This team will utilize an adaptive management strategy to learn from prior year’s activities and review new CWD-related research to improve future direction. The Wildlife Management Bureau Chief will chair the Action Team. (All alternatives)

General Post-detection Surveillance Guidance

If CWD is detected all surveillance will be focused in the hunting district and adjacent district(s) where it was detected. CWD surveillance within the hunting district will be focused using a weighted surveillance strategy to increase likelihood of detecting CWD. Additional funds, if available will be used to sample adjacent hunting districts. Mandatory testing of harvested animals will be considered for a period of time in high risk areas to increase sample size. Surveillance would be continued for a number of years in order to evaluate the success of attempts to minimize spread of CWD. Voluntary CWD testing of hunter harvested animals will be offered at hunters' expense. (Minor modification from Alternative 3)

General Post-detection Management Guidance

Management will be focused on reducing concentrations of animals and the density of susceptible age-sex classes in infected and high risk areas through hunting. Increased harvest quotas may be used in infected areas to reduce population densities below that of adjacent high risk populations. Lower age class structure will be maintained in CWD-positive hunting districts since CWD is more prevalent in deer 1.5 years and older. Management actions in adjacent high-risk areas would be the same as infected areas if prevalence rates exceed 1% in the index hunting district. (Alternative 6)

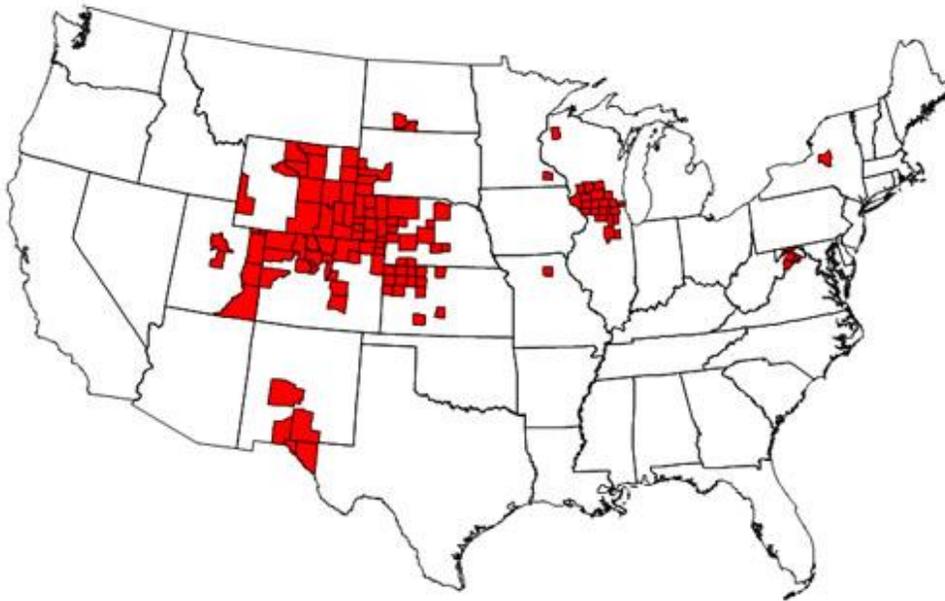


Figure 1. Location, by county, of known CWD presence in free ranging cervids in the United States.

APPROVED:

Ken McDonald, Wildlife Division Administrator

Date