

Chronic wasting disease, or CWD, is a brain disease that affects cervid species including deer and elk. This disease is incurable, untreatable, and always fatal. CWD is contagious and can spread through exposure to contaminated environments and by direct animal-to-animal contact. CWD-infected animals may not show clinical signs of the disease for up to 18-24 months post infection. During this period, animals look and act normal, but they are spreading the disease across the landscape and to other animals. CWD is a persistent problem affecting deer and potentially elk in Pennsylvania, requiring a long-term, strategic, and coordinated response involving the Game Commission, Department of Agriculture, and public partnerships.

There is much that is still unknown about CWD, but the things we do know are quite alarming. Research conducted on CWD has demonstrated that plants can uptake CWD prions and remain infectious; soils retain infectious CWD prions for years; and water sources can be contaminated with CWD prions. To date, according to the Center for Disease Control there is no reported cases of CWD in humans. However, the risk is never zero and common sense dictates that eating meat from an animal that is infected with CWD is never recommended. For these reasons, limiting potential exposure of all species, including people, is an important component of the Game Commission's response to CWD.

The Game Commission, which was created to safeguard public wildlife resources, is responsible for taking steps to manage CWD. The Game Commission's management actions are informed by the best available science combined with public input. Unfortunately, these necessary actions may negatively impact or disrupt some people's experiences with deer in areas where CWD has been found.

There are three main objectives in the Game Commission's CWD management efforts: 1) prevent human-caused spread of CWD, 2) prevent CWD infections in new areas from becoming established, and 3) limit sample prevalence in areas where the disease is already established.

The actions taken and resources needed when a CWD detection is found in a new area are extensive. For example, Disease Management Area 5, or DMA 5, was created as a result of detecting CWD in a captive facility that was about 50 miles from any other CWD detection. Because of this single detection, a new DMA had to be established. Now, all hunters and the public in that area have to abide by additional regulations and restrictions. To increase CWD surveillance and testing, head collection bins were deployed and road-kill contracts initiated. And just as importantly, numerous communications and outreach activities occurred including a public meeting, mailing of letters and postcards, newspaper articles, social media posts, and direct phone calls to landowners. A new extraction station had to be created to handle the additional samples because the DMA was so far from other CWD locations. CWD isn't just a problem because of its effect on deer and elk. It is also extremely costly in terms of agency resources and staff time.

Beyond responding to new CWD detections, the Game Commission maintains a robust CWD management program. The cost of the CWD program has quadrupled over the past five years to over \$2.5M+ annually. Each year, we are collecting samples and testing more than 10,000 deer and elk from across Pennsylvania. Cooperation of Pennsylvania's hunters combined with the Game Commission's commitment of staff and financial resources makes this level of testing possible. Communications also are critical to CWD management. The public relies on the Game Commission for credible and up-to-date information on CWD. In addition to the obvious communications capabilities of webpages, social media, and news releases, the

Game Commission direct mailed more than 20,000 postcards and letters to hunters affected by CWD DMAs in the last year.

The Game Commission also maintains a robust CWD research program. With the support of the Wildlife Futures Program and the Penn State Co-op, we are currently conducting CWD research that is used to direct our CWD management decisions. Additionally, a major part of the \$9.8M Wildlife Futures Program has been investigating novel surveillance techniques like RT-QuIC and CWD detection dogs.

Our location here in Bedford County is at the heart of Pennsylvania's CWD infections. Along with portions of Blair and Fulton counties, this area is part of an Established Area. Approximately 90% of the CWD detections found in free-ranging deer have come from this area. Each year, the sample prevalence here has continued to increase. This past hunting season, 17%, or 1 in 6 hunter-harvested adult deer tested positive for CWD (in Bedford County, it was 25%). Antlerless allocations have been increased in the associated Wildlife Management Units as increasing harvest is the only management method available. And like the slow, insidious spread of CWD we have seen, these efforts will also take time before effects can be seen.

Responding to wildlife diseases is one of the Game Commission's most important roles, and CWD management will require a sustained, long-term commitment of resources to be effective. As we have seen across the state, we cannot separate wild deer and captive deer when it comes to CWD management. It is essential that we consider deer a "collective herd." The Game Commission has worked cooperatively with PDA and other agencies in these efforts and continues to be ready to provide our expertise and resources to address CWD when and where needed. No one agency can do it all. However, the current legislation prohibits our ability to support PDA in their effort to combat CWD. This is unfortunate because the PGC has subject matter expertise related to wildlife populations and disease management through veterinarians, biologists and game wardens working with landowners and hunters to protect natural resources.

The Game Commission has taken up the fight against CWD because Pennsylvania residents' value healthy wildlife populations. Stakeholder support and participation will make our efforts successful. The Game Commission will continue to use the best available scientific information to respond to CWD as we fulfill our mission to manage and protect wildlife and their habitats, while promoting hunting and trapping, for current and future generations.