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CWD in Wild Deer No Accident!

By Vivian Pharis, AWA Board of Directors

Albertans should be truly alarmed about the future of Alberta's wildlife with three cases of chronic wasting disease (CWD) now found in the wild near Oyen, just north of Medicine Hat. That this has happened is no accident and Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA) holds the Alberta government fully responsible for it. For 25 years, scientists and Alberta's conservation community have warned our government of the many pitfalls associated with domesticating wildlife, yet we have been ignored.

In 25 years we have seen every dire prediction about this industry come true, and still our government throws millions of taxpayer dollars at it in an attempt to make game farming viable. This year alone has seen \$10 million in direct subsidies for "alternative agriculture" and another \$38 million for a prion research centre. Now the ultimate tragedy has happened – game farming's most dangerous disease has been transmitted into our wildlife.

This is a sad time for wildlife, a sad time for hunters, and a time of shame for the Alberta government. It is also time to take stock of what has happened in promoting an industry that had no basis in agriculture and no sustainable markets, and that has carried with it a litany of highly predictable woes. AWA has previously asked the government to free this province from wildlife domestication by minimally compensating game farmers and disposing of their stock in a quick, safe manner. We again demand that the Alberta government take this action.

We also demand that Alberta immediately set out a proper, scientifically sound procedure to deal with CWD in wild deer. AWA sees a reliance on eradication by the hunting community – which is the way our government is choosing to handle CWD in the wild – to be inadequate and very dangerous.

Instead, we need scientists to set out a plan and professional wildlife biologists to oversee it. This means the Fish and Wildlife arm of Sustainable Resources Development needs to be infused with funds and authority to take action. Such action must be in concert with similar action in Saskatchewan. If the two provinces do not work concertedly and efficiently on professional eradication programs, all of western Canada's wild deer species, and perhaps other species, are at risk from this erratic and virulent disease.

AWA has no confidence in Alberta's current stated process to deal with deer culling in the Oyen region. It is well known that CWD, unlike BSE, is transmissible by animals in close proximity as well as through the soil. While hunters may submit heads for CWD testing, they will be leaving gut piles and bones in the field, where CWD may be passed on to wildlife through direct contact or contact with contaminated soils.

Hunters may also transport contaminated carcasses and thus introduce CWD to clean sites. Professionally handled eradication will undoubtedly remove entire bodies and dispose entirely of any that indicate CWD. The hunter cull method may be a cheap way of being seen to deal with CWD, but it could also be the most dangerous way.

AWA sees that the only responsible route forward for the Alberta government is to eliminate game farming as quickly as possible and to enter into an aggressive, scientifically developed joint plan with Saskatchewan to eradicate wild ungulates in contamination zones. This must be done quickly, or, as evidence from the U.S. and Saskatchewan shows us, CWD will steadily spread.

Wyoming has now given up trying to contain CWD in the wild. Saskatchewan, despite testing about 15,000 wild animals, has seen CWD spread to 68 known cases in just five years. CWD was first found in





research facilities and then in the wild in Wyoming and Colorado,. By 1996 it had been detected on a game farm in Saskatchewan, supposedly introduced from a contaminated game farm in South Dakota.

By 2002, CWD had spread to game farms in five states and two provinces, and to seven jurisdictions in the wild, including Saskatchewan. By 2005, CWD has spread in the wild to ten states, to four separate sites in Saskatchewan, and to the Oyen region of Alberta. It is now on game farms in two provinces and twelve states.

In the U.S., tens of thousands of wild deer are being slaughtered in an attempt to curtail infection. Colorado wildlife managers are saying, "For the first time, herds won't be managed for hunters and wildlife watchers, but for chronic wasting disease." Eradication programs are apparently not checking its spread.

In Colorado, where CWD is infecting wild deer herds on both sides of the Continental Divide, the epidemic is being called "an unimaginable blow to wildlife and local economies." There, it is predicted to have a devastating effect on communities reliant on an influx of hunters each fall. Unless significant action is taken immediately, Alberta is poised to follow Colorado.

Since CWD has just been found in wild moose in Colorado, we know that no members of the deer species are safe. So far, it has not jumped into bovines or humans, but lab tests indicate that the potential is there to make this sort of leap. This means it is doubly important to act now, to act at our scientific best, and to act in cooperation with our neighbour, Saskatchewan.

