



Wild Lands Advocate 14(1): 23, February 2006

CWD Is Out of Control Federal Leaders Respond to Demand for Public Inquiry

Only two federal leaders responded to an urgent letter by conservation organizations and scientists asking for a public inquiry on the commercialization of wildlife, which has led to a chronic wasting disease (CWD) epidemic. The Alliance for Public Wildlife, the David Suzuki Foundation, and Dr. Val Geist, one of Canada's top wildlife scientists, asked federal leaders to commit to an immediate moratorium on the movement of game farm animals and products pending the completion of a Public Inquiry under the *Inquiries Act*.

Canada is facing the greatest wildlife crisis of our time. Among the many symptoms of this crisis, CWD has been repeatedly confirmed outside game farm fences in Alberta and Saskatchewan. The Expert Scientific Panel on Chronic Wasting Disease confirmed that the source of Canada's CWD is "spillover from infected game farms," and "there are no known barriers to stop the disease." *Canada's National Chronic Wasting Disease Control Strategy* (2005) fails to even acknowledge this underlying cause.

Jack Layton of the New Democratic party gave his support for an inquiry, saying, "New Democrats are in complete support of governments having a responsibility to protect the public interest and to ensure that proposals to domesticate wild species be approached with the utmost caution."

Former federal Environment Minister Stephane Dion passed the buck to the Department of Agriculture, which is responsible for the crisis in the first place. Paul Martin's response supported the national CWD strategy, a clear indication that the Liberal party is not interested in dealing with the cause of the problem.

No response was received from the Conservative party, and phone calls were not returned – clearly not a promising sign for the future.

A public inquiry must undertake complete and comprehensive assessments of the privatization and commercialization of wildlife in Canada, produce a final report to Parliament within six months with a plan and budget, and be chaired by an independent commissioner with expert medical and wildlife qualifications.

Parliament has both jurisdiction and responsibility for this industry, and despite a written commitment from Prime Minister Chrétien for comprehensive review and public assessment, none has ever been undertaken. Provincial governments have not only refused, but also blocked legitimate assessment. Premier Klein reneged on his written commitment to legitimate assessment.

Known costs of this disastrous scheme to privatize wildlife stretch into the hundreds of millions. Of immeasurable cost, however, is that CWD is now out of control, directly threatening wildlife and our wildlife economies. By any rational standard, our highest priority must be eliminating the cause. A 1996 study, *The Importance of Nature to Canadians* by Environment Canada, showed that activity based on wildlife contributed \$12.1 billion to the Canadian GDP in that year, equivalent to the \$12.3 billion contributed by all of agriculture.

History documents that domestication has been responsible for fostering, incubating, and spreading perhaps the majority of our most serious pandemics, including small pox and influenza. A massive tuberculosis epidemic on game farms emerged in less than five years, and the CWD epidemic in less than ten years. In 2002, SARS emerged from Asian game farms raising civet cats for "delicacy" markets.





Game farm diseases obviously pose potential threats to humans. Both in-vitro and in-vivo experiments indicate that, while unlikely, transmission of CWD to people may be possible. If that happens and if the disease manifests in people as it does in deer, we could face a pandemic of an undetectable, untreatable, always-fatal disease with incubation periods of ten years or more and with transmission potentially as simple as kissing. CWD is most likely transmitted in bodily fluids such as urine, feces, and saliva.

Game farming in Alberta is surviving only because of public subsidies, even though the Alberta government has admitted it is not a viable industry. Governments are subsidizing a proven threat to public wildlife and to their economies, traditional agriculture, and public health. Game farmers have realized that the venture will never be economically viable. Entire herds have been destroyed, or in some cases, simply turned loose.

This is the single most important wildlife issue of our time, with implications of enormous scope. How Canada resolves this crisis will affect more than just CWD; it will determine the fate of our greatest environmental success – public wildlife.

Reports and letters mentioned in this article and an associated news release can be found on our Web site under Issues/Wildlife/Game Farming.

