

Preliminary Chronic Wasting Disease Test Results Indicate Continued Spread

For those who missed it, Alberta Environment and Sustainable Resource Development (AESRD) updated the 2012 Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) test results in late March 2013. Preliminary results confirmed CWD in 35 members of the deer family (26 mule deer, 8 white-tailed deer, and one moose) (See <http://srd.alberta.ca/fishwildlife/WildlifeDiseases/ChronicWastingDisease/CWDUpdates/Default.aspx>). This marks the first time CWD was detected in moose in Canada.

Previous cases of CWD in moose have been reported in Colorado and Wyoming. There infected moose were only found in areas where moose occurrence overlaps infected deer range. This information, combined with the more solitary nature of moose, may be somewhat good news. It may suggest that transmission in moose populations will likely be restricted and/or slow. It does not, however, diminish the gravity of the situation. CWD transmission to other herding ungulates, such as elk and Alberta's threatened caribou populations, remains a real threat and could spell disaster for the latter given recent population trends.

Kahn, Dube, Bates, and Balachandran wrote in 2004 that CWD appears to have originated in Canada after infected South Dakota elk were imported to a Saskatchewan game farm. They suggested that transmission of CWD to wild members of the deer family may have been an unforeseen and unfortunate result of interactions between infected farmed populations and wild animals. For some Albertans concerns run deep that domestication or commercialization of wildlife could transmit disease or parasites to wild populations. One only needs to remember the mass cull undertaken during Alberta's initial efforts to control CWD outbreaks to understand the risk this disease poses.

While the province has invested considerable time and resources to stem CWD transmission, March's test results indicate that the battle has yet to be won. Confirmed cases of CWD continue to be clustered around the northern portion of the Battle River watershed and the Red Deer River, including its southern tributaries. Since testing commenced in 2005, infection has been confirmed in 162 wild deer, primarily in these two areas of the province. There is evidence of the continuing spread of the disease in these regions as well as in the South Saskatchewan river basin. Results suggest cull programs are unlikely to provide a final solution, as the disease has resurged in Wildlife Management Units (WMU) 150 and 163.

- Wonnita Andrus

