

Pass the Cervid Harvesting Preserves? No Thank You.

Hunt farms, what the Alberta Elk Commission and its lobbyist prefer to call “cervid harvesting preserves” (CHPs), are facilities where you can pay to shoot an animal that is held captive in an enclosure. “Cervid harvesting preserve” is a classic example of doublespeak, or language that deliberately obscures the meaning of words. It’s not obvious to anyone not in-the-know what a cervid is (an animal in the family *Cervidae*, such as elk or deer), and using the word “preserves” makes us think of some sort of jam. The reality of these CHPs is much more insidious, much more unethical, than what the name suggests.

Since at least 2020 the Elk Commission has lobbied the provincial departments of Agriculture, Economic Development, and Environment/Parks to legalize hunt farms. Wherever you stand on hunting, we should all be able to agree that shooting an animal that is locked up in a pen and can’t run away is unethical. That’s the concept behind CHPs; so-called hunters pay thousands of dollars to go to a farm, shoot a bull elk, and hang its head on their wall at home as though they tracked it down and killed it in a fair chase. Hunt farms are geared towards people who want to feel as though they have power over nature, without

actually putting in the effort. CHPs are currently legal and prevalent in Saskatchewan and several American states.

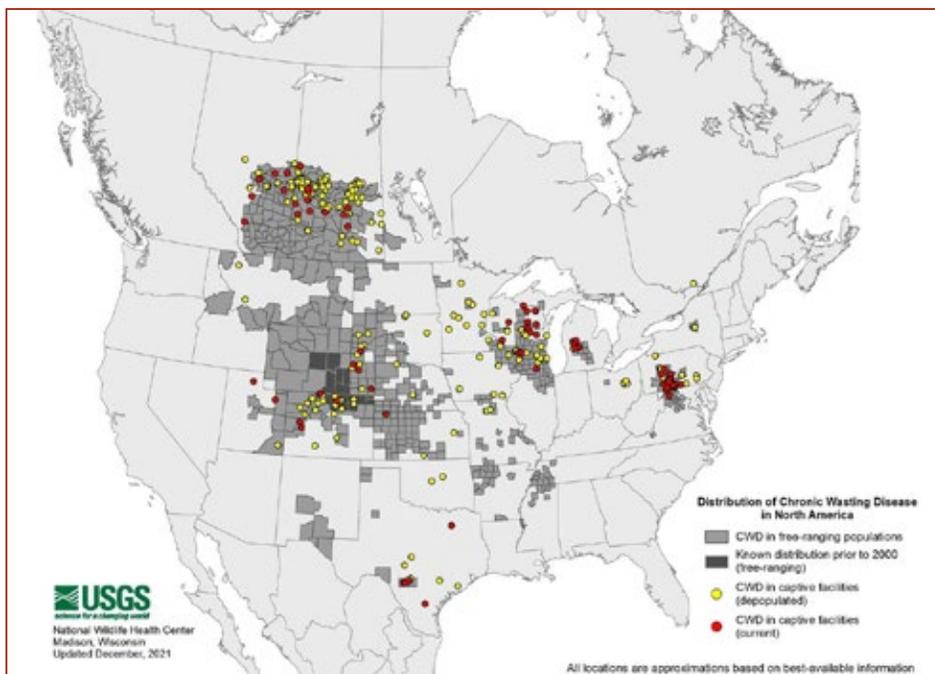
In addition to being unethical, any facility that raises cervids in captivity poses a threat to wildlife conservation. Animals raised on farms are kept in much closer proximity to one another than they would be in the wild. This supports the spread of diseases like chronic wasting disease (CWD), a prion disease similar to mad cow disease (bovine spongiform encephalopathy). The first cases of CWD in Canada were discovered on game farms, where cervids are raised and slaughtered for meat or antler velvet. CWD has since been passed on to and spread in wild cervid populations in North America. This is no coincidence. CWD is passed on very easily from animal to animal through direct contact or through soil that has been contaminated by fluids from an infected animal. The prions responsible for CWD are known to remain infectious in the environment for at least two years, providing ample opportunity for the infection to spread. The disease can take years to present symptoms in an infected animal and is fatal. In Canada, CWD has been found in wild deer and elk in Saskatchewan and Alberta, and wild deer in Manitoba. If the

disease reaches Alberta’s remaining threatened woodland caribou herds, the effects could be terminal for our hope to restore these iconic species on the land.

The ethical concerns and threat of disease affecting wildlife should be cause for us to worry about the possibility of legalization of CHPs in Alberta. There is also some concern that people who eat infected meat may one day be able to develop the disease. Although there have been no confirmed cases of CWD in humans, preliminary research suggests that macaques (a close genetic relative of humans) may be able to get sick from ingesting infected meat. In the current age of disease pandemics, we must take this possibility more seriously.

In Alberta, there was a push to legalize CHPs in 2002. Ralph Klein’s Progressive Conservative government turned it down. The Alberta Elk Commission has reincarnated that demand. Concerns about the legalization of CHPs were exacerbated when the government of Alberta released a public survey on wildlife management and hunting. The survey asked if the government should “explore innovative tools to improve hunting opportunities on public and private lands.” AWA is participating in a committee composed of hunting and conservation groups to consider how best to oppose both game farms and the legalization of CHPs in Alberta.

- Devon Earl



The Current Distribution of Chronic Wasting Disease in North America CREDIT: BRYAN RICHARDS/U.S. NATIONAL WILDLIFE HEALTH CENTER