



U.S. Senate Testimony

Committee on Environment and Public Works

12/4/2019

Thank you, Chairman Barrasso Ranking Member Carper and committee members, for the opportunity to discuss with you today a very serious issue facing our nation, Chronic Wasting Disease.

As the Commissioner of the West Virginia Department of Agriculture (WVDA), I believe the establishment of a CWD Task Force is a measure that is long overdue. I will note, I am one of 12 statewide elected Commissioners of Agriculture and as such, I report directly to the citizens of my state. There is a lot of concern surrounding the CWD, especially from our many sportsmen, as well as our captive cervid farmers. Because I am elected, I have the unique opportunity to help shape legislation and policy surrounding issues like CWD. What my staff and I have found many of our colleagues from other states operate under laws and regulations much different than our own.

In West Virginia, captive cervid farms are regulated by my Department. These farms raise whitetail deer and elk, plus exotic reindeer and fallow deer. Wild whitetail deer and elk populations are regulated by the WV Department of Natural Resources (DNR), which reports directly to the Governor. Originally, captive cervid farming was under the DNR, but that authority was transferred to the West Virginia Department of Agriculture in 2015. While the WVDA and DNR work closely together on many projects, we sometimes disagree on what the goal is surrounding CWD.

In February of 2019, I asked USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Services (APHIS) to conduct more research regarding CWD. I was concerned there was pressure being placed on legislators to make and enforce laws that were not based on science. For farmers to grow, they must have sound, fact-based regulations that ensures certainty for their operations. This includes operations like captive cervid farmers.

APHIS responded with an initial literature review which I have attached to this testimony. It is clear from the current state of research we do not have certainty in the science of CWD and the ability to make sound judgments. I am encouraged that research is ongoing, but more is needed, and it does need to be better coordinated to maximize limited research dollars.

Currently, West Virginia has 36 captive cervid farms. This is a growing industry in our state, as well as nationally, with the sale of deer urine alone reaching 16 Million Dollars in 2016. For West Virginia, deer farming is an opportunity to diversify our economy and potentially use land that is no longer viable under modern agricultural practices and could restore value to abandon mine lands. Despite a lot of concerns surrounding these operations, we have never had a farmed deer test positive for CWD.

West Virginia has long supported the cooperative CWD Voluntary Herd Certification Program. Currently, 30 of 36 WVDA licensed deer farms participate with 28 currently certified by complying with program standards. The goal of the program is to reduce the spreading of the disease and decrease risk to farmed deer, improve confidence for the trade of farmed deer and deer products, and reduce the risk of transmission and environmental contamination from CWD positive herds. Those who participate must implement animal identification, containment fencing, and CWD testing of deer over 12 months of age that die for any reason. Interstate movement of farmed captive cervids depends on program participation, compliance with program requirements, and herd certification status.

It is important to point out that any additional studies on this prion-related disease will add value for research of

known human diseases and other domesticated livestock.

I have a hunch that the spread of CWD is mostly carried out by scavengers. Infected cervids, if left unattended, will be at the mercy of scavengers. The viable prion living in the lymphatic system or nervous tissue is then consumed and the prion passes through the digestive tract and eventually deposited miles away. This could explain why the disease has appeared in very tightly closed and monitored herds, or in areas not adjacent to a known infected area.

Therefore, I believe a closed study of infected carcasses and scavengers would yield tremendous insight. But at the end of the day, it may be a while before we are confident with a live test for the disease. That is why more research is needed as we slow the spread of the disease.

In the meantime, we can use potentially simple techniques to slow the spread. This takes properly funded education and communications programs. For example, I have strongly suggested to the WV Deer Farmers Association to bury all captive cervids farmers deep enough out of the reach of potential scavengers. I then made a similar request to the Department of Highways in order to ensure cervids hit on roads are quickly and properly disposed of. There is simply too much speculation and non-science interpretation of research affecting the business of disease control.

In closing, I have three recommendations for the committee.

The first is to appoint at least one experienced and respected captive cervid farmer to your taskforce.

The second, funding for a coordinated education and information campaign between the state agencies, agriculture groups, and hunters.

Last, that recommended legislation, if any, resulting from this task force be specific and not left up to interpretation.

Thank you once again for this opportunity, I will gladly answer any questions the committee may have.