

Chronic Wasting Disease Fact Sheet

What is Chronic Wasting Disease?

Chronic Wasting Disease (“CWD”) is a highly contagious neurological disease that causes degeneration in the brain tissue of affected animals. CWD is similar to mad cow disease, but is known to occur only in the cervid family (elk, deer, and moose). It is characterized by abnormal proteins known as “prions” that cause brain lesions and is fatal to any animal that contracts the disease.

How is CWD transmitted?

CWD may be transmitted directly from infected animals or indirectly from environments that have been contaminated with the feces, saliva, or decaying carcasses of infected animals. CWD prions may persist in the environment for years. Researchers were unable to eliminate CWD prions from a research facility in Colorado that held captive elk and deer despite plowing up the earth and repeatedly treating the area with disinfectants for a six-month period. Several elk that later were introduced to this facility contracted the disease and died. Infection rates have been highest among deer herds that are routinely fed by people and among animals in game farms or captive situations.

Where has CWD been documented?

The disease has been diagnosed in free-ranging elk, deer, and moose in ten states and two Canadian provinces. CWD was first documented in captive mule deer at a research facility in Colorado in the late 1960s and in captive mule deer in southeastern Wyoming in the late 1970s. Based on documented infection occurrences in deer and elk, the disease in Wyoming has since spread northwestward. CWD has not yet been recorded in elk in northwestern Wyoming. However, it has been documented in deer (the disease can be transmitted from deer to elk) as far northwest as Thermopolis, where prevalence of the disease in wild deer increased from 3% to 7% between 2005 and 2006. (See map chronicling the known distribution of CWD in Wyoming as of December 2007 at <http://gf.state.wy.us/downloads/pdf/CWDSummary12-31-2007.pdf>).

What are the symptoms of CWD?

CWD has a long incubation period of 12 to 34 months, so may be transmitted widely through a deer or elk herd before the first physical symptoms of the disease are detectable. Affected animals typically die one to four months after exhibiting symptoms such as listlessness, emaciation (the animals literally waste away), drooping ears, disheveled coats, drooling, and constant thirst.

How do Wyoming’s elk feedgrounds exacerbate the risk of CWD?

Each winter, the Wyoming Game and Fish Department (WGFD) feeds approximately 22,000 elk at 22 feedgrounds (13 of which are located on public land) in northwestern Wyoming at a cost of approximately \$1.5 million per year. An additional feedground, at the National Elk Refuge near

Jackson, is administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. (During the long winter of 2007-2008, the cost of supplemental winter feeding of elk and bison at the National Elk Refuge was almost \$800,000). Elk are fed to improve winter survival rates (thereby maintaining high herd numbers), to keep elk away from ranch haystacks, forage, and livestock, and to compensate for the loss of elk winter range to development.

Dense concentrations of elk at feedgrounds facilitate the transmission of diseases and increase their prevalence. Free-ranging elk herds have a CWD prevalence of approximately 1-3% in the core Colorado-Wyoming area where the disease is endemic. Captive elk herds, whose densities more closely match those of feedground elk, have shown rates of CWD prevalence between 17-59%. Many states now ban the artificial feeding of deer because scientific evidence suggests that such feeding elevates the risk of CWD transmission. High concentrations of animals, close contact between animals, and the contaminated environments that result from these conditions, all contribute to the increased transmission of CWD and other diseases.

Why should we in Wyoming be concerned?

The documented CWD front seems to be moving from the southeastern corner of Wyoming to the northwest at a slow pace. However, in 2007, a mule deer with CWD was documented approximately 80 miles from the nearest elk feedground in northwest Wyoming. Big game and wildlife disease experts have warned that feedgrounds provide nearly ideal conditions for the transmission of CWD among free-ranging elk and that prevalence in chronically infected feedground herds could exceed 50% if feeding programs remain unchanged. Twenty-five elk herds, totaling 120,000 elk, winter in the Greater Yellowstone Area. Given that the distributions of adjacent herds overlap, CWD could become an epidemic in northwestern Wyoming and decimate the area's elk herds. In addition, given the disease's environmental persistence, it could irrevocably contaminate the feedground environments where elk in this area congregate in winter.

What is the Wyoming Outdoor Council doing with regards to CWD?

Offering Concrete Solutions

Phasing out feedgrounds is fundamental to reducing the potential spread of CWD and the prevalence of other diseases such as brucellosis. However, eliminating long-established feedgrounds is complicated by the concomitant need to encourage elk to use historic migration routes to traditional winter ranges, improve winter ranges, and mitigate potential conflicts between elk and ranchers. Recognizing these challenges, the Wyoming Outdoor Council partnered with the Greater Yellowstone Coalition and the Jackson Hole Conservation Alliance in 2005 to produce a plan (<http://www.greateryellowstone.org/media/pdf/brucellosis-solution.pdf>) for phasing-out three feedgrounds in the Gros Ventre Valley, using the former successful closure of the WGFD's North Piney elk feedground as a template. Unfortunately, WGFD has not pursued the proposal. The Council also has worked with a variety of partners to help promote the enhancement of winter forage for wildlife to facilitate the phasing-out of feedgrounds (<http://www.wyomingoutdoorcouncil.org/news/newsletter/docs/2004c/initiative.php>).

Disseminating Information and Submitting Public Comments

The Wyoming Outdoor Council has written articles highlighting the danger that feedgrounds may pose in facilitating a CWD epidemic. In addition, we consistently highlight our concerns with the role feedgrounds play in increasing disease transmission and prevalence when submitting comments for Environmental Impact Statements and Resource Management Plan revisions that focus on public lands that support feedground facilities.

Litigation

In the hopes of reducing the prevalence of brucellosis in feedground elk and forestalling the future spread of CWD, the Wyoming Outdoor Council joined the Greater Yellowstone Coalition, the Jackson Hole Conservation Alliance, and Earthjustice in litigation requesting that the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management conduct environmental reviews (through the National Environmental Policy Act process) to assess the impacts of 15 feedgrounds located on lands administered by these agencies. The Forest Service recently completed such a review, whereas the BLM has agreed to address the feedground issue while undergoing an Environmental Impact Statement for their Pinedale Resource Management Plan.