

Is it Safe To Hunt?

By David Stalling
Bugle Magazine

Deer hunting may be as sacrosanct in Wisconsin as dairy farming and the Green Bay Packers. More than 900,000 people hunted deer in Wisconsin last year, contributing more than \$25 million to state wildlife programs through license fees and pumping an estimated \$900 million into local economies. But a poll conducted last May indicates that 248,000 people—36 percent of the state's deer hunters—may not hunt this fall. Why? Fear of Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD), a form of transmissible spongiform encephalopathy (TSE) that infects deer and elk.

Hunters worry that CWD could jump the species barrier, infecting humans with another deadly type of TSE called variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (vCJD). Recently, Wisconsin health officials found a possible correlation between a deer hunter who died of vCJD back in 1993 and two of his friends who, within six years, also died of rare brain disorders: they all partook of venison feasts. There is no definitive link between the deaths and CWD, but the news may further the resolve of many hunters to stay out of the woods this fall.

"If more than one-third of hunters do not hunt, imagine the impacts on the economy and on wildlife management," said Gary Wolfe during a Chronic Wasting Disease Symposium held August 6-7 in Denver, Colorado. A longtime elk biologist, former Executive Director of the

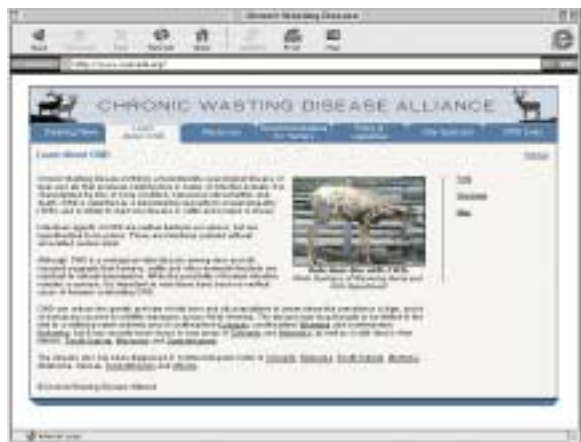
Elk Foundation, and Boone and Crockett Club Professional Member, Wolfe now heads up the Chronic Wasting Disease Alliance—a cooperative venture founded by the Elk Foundation, Mule Deer Foundation and the Boone and Crockett Club.

"We need to be honest with the public, and tell them what we know," Wolfe said. "But we need a consistent message; we need to keep this disease and its risks in perspective, and not overreact."

Here is Wolfe's perspective: the risk of getting into an automobile accident on the way to the trailhead; getting shot, thrown off a horse, or having a heart attack while hunting, are all far greater than the risk of contracting a human variant of CWD.

"Nothing in life is risk free," Wolfe said. "I plan to minimize risk and continue to hunt."

People are sometimes justifiably cynical of attempts by scientists and government to placate the public. After all, British officials spent 10 years assuring people that another form of Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathy (TSE), known as Mad Cow Disease, could not jump from bovine to humans, but it happened. However, the science on CWD is thorough and, according to nearly a dozen scientists at the CWD sym-



Precautions and questions/answers are provided by the Chronic Wasting Disease Alliance at www.cwd-info.org.

posium speaking as part of a panel called "Assessing the Potential for Interspecies Transmission," reassuring.

Beth Williams, a professor of veterinary sciences at the University of Wyoming who first discovered CWD in 1977, examined the susceptibility of cattle exposed to CWD by intracerebral inoculation, oral inoculation, and by contact with CWD-infected cervids in endemic facilities. Three of 13 cattle inoculated intracerebrally developed evidence of CWD, Williams reports. However, cattle exposed via more natural routes of exposure have shown no evidence of CWD.

In parts of Wyoming and Colorado where CWD has existed for more than 30 years, an average of less than 6 percent of deer are infected. Infection rates for deer in endemic areas of Colorado vary from less than 1 percent to 13 percent. CWD is far less prevalent in elk than deer. Less than 1 percent of elk found in areas where the disease occurs in northeastern Colorado are infected. If you hunt in these areas, the chances of killing an infected animal are slim. If by chance you do, there is currently no scientific evidence that CWD has or can spread to humans, either through contact with infected animals or by eating meat of infected animals. The Center of Disease Control states: "The risk of infection with the CWD agent among hunters is extremely small, if it exists at all...it is extremely unlikely that CWD would be a food borne hazard."

In presentation after presentation, researchers concurred that cattle are difficult to infect with CWD in intentional, controlled situations, and nearly impossible under natural conditions. Sheep, mice and raccoons could not even be infected on purpose. As for humans? Chances are greater that you'll be hit by lightning. Precautions seem wise, and cynicism may be justified, but to not hunt at all?

"I hunt elk in an endemic area of Colorado," Wolfe said. "I'm not planning to have any elk brains with my scrambled eggs for breakfast; but I'm going to continue to hunt in my favorite place. Certainly, I'll take precautions to minimize any risk. I'll be careful, but I'm going hunting." ■

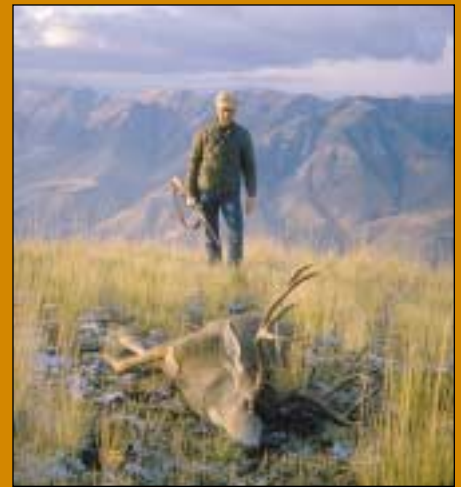
Editor's Note: David Stalling is the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation's conservation editor. This story appears in the November-December 2002 issue of Bugle, and is reprinted here courtesy of the Elk Foundation.

PRECAUTIONS

When Taking the Field This Fall

Public health and wildlife officials advise hunters to take the following precautions when pursuing or handling deer and elk that may have been exposed to CWD:

- Do not shoot, handle or consume any animal that is acting abnormally or appears to be sick. Contact your state game and fish department if you see or harvest an animal that appears sick.
- Wear latex or rubber gloves when field dressing your deer or elk.
- Bone out the meat from your animal. Don't saw through bone, and avoid cutting through the brain or spinal cord (backbone).
- Minimize the handling of brain and spinal tissues.
- After field dressing an animal, wash hands thoroughly and clean knives and saws with strong chlorine bleach.
- Avoid consuming brain, spinal cord, eyes, spleen, tonsils and lymph nodes of harvested animals. (Normal field dressing coupled with boning out a carcass will remove most, if not all, of these body parts. Cutting away all fatty tissue will remove remaining lymph nodes.)
- If you keep the entire skull (for a European mount), you should insure all meat is removed, wearing rubber or latex gloves while doing this, and soak the head in strong chlorine bleach.
- If you have your deer or elk commercially processed, request that your animal is processed individually, without meat from other animals being added to meat from your animal.



Q. What are the Symptoms of CWD?

A. Cases of CWD occur most commonly in adult animals, but also in yearlings. The disease is progressive and always fatal.

The most obvious and consistent clinical sign is weight loss over time. CWD affected animals continue to eat but amounts of feed consumed are reduced, leading to gradual loss of body condition. Excessive drinking and urination are common in the terminal stages.

Behavioral changes also occur in the majority of cases, including decreased interactions with other animals, listlessness, lowering of the head, blank facial expression and repetitive walking in set patterns. In elk, behavioral changes may also include hyper-excitability and nervousness. Excessive salivation, drooling and grinding of the teeth also are observed.

Q. Can I get my deer or elk tested for CWD?

A. In general, yes. Most states with CWD in wild deer and elk populations are offering hunters an opportunity to have their game tested for CWD. To learn where to get your animal tested or if you have specific questions regarding the status of CWD in the area you are planning to hunt, please contact the state game and fish department.