

Statement of Whit Fosburgh  
President and Chief Executive Officer  
Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership  
529 14<sup>th</sup> Street NW, Suite 500  
Washington, D.C. 20045

**Before the U.S. House Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies**

Chair McCollum, Ranking Member Joyce, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you and this committee.

Chronic wasting disease presents an existential threat to iconic, North American species of cervids – deer, elk, and moose – and I thank you for your attention to this important conservation challenge.

The Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership was created in 2002 to unite and amplify the voice of sportsmen and women in federal policies involving conservation, habitat, and access. We have 60 organizational partners, representing more than 20 million Americans, 100,000 individual members and supporters, and scores of business partners that care about conservation. Our mission is to guarantee all Americans quality places to hunt and fish, meaning that we and our partners are highly invested in addressing the spread of chronic wasting disease.

Since it was first identified, chronic wasting disease, or CWD, has been steadily spreading across the nation. Found first in Colorado in 1967, the disease has now been identified in 26 states, the most recent being Tennessee. Of the thirteen members of this subcommittee, eight of you represent states that are currently fighting to slow and contain the spread of this disease. Of the five remaining, four of you are from states that border a CWD positive state.

To understand the impact of this disease on our wildlife and the conservationists working to protect them, it's important to establish and understand the basic facts of CWD:

- CWD is 100 percent fatal to the deer, elk and moose; there is no vaccine or cure, all animals that develop CWD will eventually be killed by it.
- CWD has spread from Colorado, where it was found in a captive deer facility in 1967, to 26 states today.

- Though CWD spreads slowly in the wild, its spread accelerates when live or dead animals are moved by people to previously uninfected areas.
- Once CWD infects a new area, to include facilities that are exposed to infected live or dead animals, it is almost impossible to eradicate.
- CWD is caused by a prion, which is a misfolded prion that causes fatal neurodegenerative diseases such as Mad Cow Disease and its human-carried form, Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease.
- While CWD isn't known to be transmissible to humans, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends against eating any CWD-positive meat.
- You cannot destroy CWD by cooking meat; the prions remain viable to temperatures of 1,700F, making it impossible to make any part of a CWD positive animal safe to consume.
- The prions that cause CWD are taken up in plant matter, including alfalfa and corn. Norway, trying to control a CWD outbreak in reindeer, now bans the import of any agricultural products from CWD positive areas.
- Smart and aggressive management can greatly slow the spread of CWD and keep it at background levels.

This disease is highly infectious, easily spread, impossible to cure, and has the potential to lay dormant in an environment for years and still be picked up by a viable host. This subcommittee, and Congress as a whole, must quickly take steps to further research this disease and to prevent its spread.

CWD is an existential threat to hunting and, in turn, both the North American Model of Conservation and the critical outdoor recreation economy that many communities and states rely upon. It is important that this subcommittee, as well as the full committee, advocate for the amended spending levels to address the spread of CWD. There has been bipartisan consensus around allocating at least \$15,000,000 in grants for state fish and wildlife agencies, and I urge you to work to support this level of funding in the conference process, whether it is directly through your subcommittee, by committing increased funding to USGS, or by supporting the Subcommittee on Agriculture's amended language to provide these funds to USDA's Animal Plant and Health Inspection Service (APHIS). Surveillance and testing, which would be the primary uses for these grants, are key to controlling CWD. By knowing where CWD is present in a landscape and likely to expand states can take management actions, such as targeted reductions to wild herd sizes, to contain the disease. In addition, with more testing sites it makes it much easier for hunters to have their deer tested for the disease.

More than 80 percent of the hunting public participates in deer hunting, and these hunters contribute more money to conservation funding than any other type of outdoor enthusiast through the purchase of licenses

and gear. The sale of mule deer, white-tailed deer, and elk hunting licenses account for the highest proportion of state fish and wildlife agency funding in many states. Deer hunting contributes nearly \$40 billion to the U.S. economy and roughly \$5.5 billion in state and local tax revenue on an annual basis. The harvested animals provide over 1 billion meals to Americans each year.

However, as CWD spreads the number of licenses and equipment purchased by hunters in or near CWD-positive areas declines as their weariness of adapting to hunting areas impacted by the disease grows. When CWD arrives on a landscape, a hunter can no longer safely eat the venison in her or his freezer without first waiting for the results of a lengthy testing process, further dampening their resolve to invest money and time into a process that may not even yield a meal for them and their family. Right now, the Centers for Disease Control recommends people not eat contaminated deer –the prion that causes this disease cannot be simply cooked out of the meat. No part of an infected deer can ever be suitable for consumption, meaning no meals will come from the harvesting of an infected deer.

The spread of CWD undercuts the important work of the conservation community to promote and grow hunting across the nation. As a community, we work hard to recruit new sportsmen and women, retain existing hunters, and reactivate those who have stopped getting out into the field. One of the fastest growing communities of sportsmen and women are those who hunt to connect with nature and want to develop a deeper connection to their sources of food. An element of the locavore movement, they hunt deer and elk in pursuit of healthy, wild, and natural sources of protein and a truly field-to-table experience. The spread of CWD threatens to decrease hunter participation by scaring off potential, new hunters and frustrates those who are just getting started.

When hunting participation decreases, so too do tag and equipment sales, shrinking an essential revenue stream for fish and wildlife agencies. Similarly, guides and processors lose business and local economies suffer as communities once known for their healthy deer herds are avoided out of fear of CWD.

All of this means state fish and wildlife agencies, who are on the front lines of combatting this disease, are becoming increasingly cash strapped at the same time their efforts to combat the disease should be increasing. It's a vicious cycle that requires the intervention of this subcommittee to break. Hunters have invested billions of dollars into the conservation of our land, water, and wildlife – it is imperative that this committee commit funding to combat CWD to not only keep that tradition alive, but to protect iconic American species and the funding model that supports state fish and wildlife agencies' important work.

When discussing the challenges of responding to CWD, one of the first things fish and wildlife agencies tell my staff and me is that the loss of federal funding has been one of the biggest impediments to their

work. There isn't another revenue stream for them to turn to when the federal government stops supporting this public resource. The work simply stops – though CWD continues to spread.

Despite Congress' track record on this issue, this Congress has taken strong steps forward to correct prior shortfalls in funding to adequately support responses to CWD. We applaud the FY20 Interior-Environment Appropriations bill that prioritized research and prioritized funding for a National Academy of Sciences study, in partnership with the United States Geological Survey and the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, to explore the current body of research, identify and prioritize next steps, and evaluate current management standards and regulations. An amendment to allocate an additional \$1,720,000 to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to research CWD and improve testing methods was agreed upon, and we encourage this subcommittee to advocate for and implement that funding level as this bill advances to conference.

Most importantly, our community applauds the approval of an amendment to the FY20 Agriculture Appropriations bill that increases funding for APHIS grants to state fish and wildlife agencies for CWD surveillance in wild, free-ranging cervids from \$3,000,000 to \$15,000,000, and we encourage your support to implement funding at this level as well. USGS is similarly poised to offer such grants, if funded to do so, and we encourage you to explore increasing their capacity to support research both directly through the work of the National Wildlife Health Center and through grant programs to the states.

I want to highlight a critical term that has seen recent usage in Congress on how these funds should be allocated: "free-ranging cervids." A free-ranging cervid is a deer, elk, or moose that can move freely across private, state, and federal lands and it is critical that this subcommittee prioritizes funding for these populations. These are the cervids that the majority of hunters pursue every year and that are the drivers of the \$40 billion deer hunting economy.

There are, of course, countless wild deer and elk populations that hunters don't pursue that live within refuges and national parks that must be considered as well. Americans enjoy seeing healthy elk and deer in their traditional landscapes in places such as Wind Cave National Park and Grand Teton National Park – both of which now have CWD positive animals – and the disease is slowly advancing towards Yellowstone and the National Elk Refuge. I encourage you to prioritize free-ranging cervids and their role in both the North American Model of Conservation and the economies of your districts and states as you take steps to address the spread of CWD.

I want to once again thank the Chair, Ranking Member, and members of this subcommittee for the leadership you have shown in this year's appropriations bills to address the spread of CWD. Negotiations are in a critical phase this week as these bills are conferenced, and I encourage you to advocate for the

amended funding levels set in the final version of both the House Interior-Environment and House Agriculture Appropriations bills. There has been bipartisan consensus around allocating at least \$15,000,000 in grants for state fish and wildlife agencies to respond to CWD, and we hope a similar – or even higher – figure emerges from the conference process.

These iconic species and the Americans that are invested in their well-being need your support. Your state fish and wildlife management agencies are relying upon Congress to help restore critical funding streams to fight this disease. The sportsmen and women of your districts are counting on you to help protect and preserve this pastime – one that for some has been passed down for generations, and for others a new tradition they hope to share with their own children and grandchildren.

Our organization’s namesake, Theodore Roosevelt, once said that “there can be no greater issue than that of conservation in this country.” On behalf of the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, our partner organizations, and sportsmen and women across the nation, I thank you for your support of this great cause, the critical challenge of chronic wasting disease, in particular, and look forward to continuing working with you.

Testimony of:

Whit Fosburgh

President & CEO

Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership (TRCP)

Point of contact:

Andrew Wilkins

TRCP

529 14<sup>th</sup> Street NW, Suite 500

Washington, D.C. 20045

[awilkins@trcp.org](mailto:awilkins@trcp.org) | 202-639-8727, ext. 17