

Chairman Cox
Opening Statement
House Committee on Natural Resources, Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee
Chronic Wasting Disease: The Threats to Wildlife, Public Lands, Hunting, and Health
June 25, 2019

Good afternoon and welcome to the Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee hearing on Chronic Wasting Disease: The Threats to Wildlife, Public Lands, Hunting, and Health. I want to thank all of our witnesses for giving their time and resources to be here today so we can better understand this important issue.

The last time this Committee held a hearing on chronic wasting disease was in 2002. At that time, the disease had only been detected in five states in the U.S. Seventeen years later, chronic wasting disease has spread to a total of 26 states—as you can see on the map behind me.

For those of you who are not yet familiar, Chronic Wasting Disease, or CWD, is a highly contagious and deadly disease that infects deer, elk, moose, and reindeer, a group of animals referred to collectively as cervids. The disease degrades the infected animal's neurological system, frequently leaving large holes in the brain. There aren't obvious symptoms for a year or two after infection, but when they begin, they often show up as excessive drooling, drastic weight loss, and unquenchable thirst. The animal stumbles, can't coordinate its limbs, and loses its fear of people and its energy until the body eventually shuts down.

Unlike most diseases we're familiar with, however, the culprit behind CWD is not virus or a bacteria—it's a small protein called

a “prion” that is found mostly in the brain. Unfortunately, there is still a lot we don’t know about prions—and that’s what makes this disease so difficult to manage. There is no vaccine, no cure, and no treatment. Once an animal gets the disease, there is no turning back—the rate of death is 100%.

Chronic wasting disease is not the first time we have seen a prion disease. Several years ago, the mad cow disease outbreak—which was responsible for over 230 human deaths—was caused by a prion. In that case, the disease was able to jump the species barrier from cows to humans when people ate meat that had been contaminated. If a person contracted mad cow disease, it was 100% fatal. To try to get rid of the disease, the UK had to oversee the slaughter and disposal of 4.4 *million* cattle, costing the beef industry and the economy billions of dollars.

Fortunately, we don’t yet know of any cases in which CWD has crossed the species barrier to humans. But experts in the scientific community, one of which we will hear from today, have concerns that it very well could. In fact, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that people don’t eat meat that has been infected with chronic wasting disease. Despite that warning, the Washington Post just reported a couple weeks ago that up to 15,000 CWD-infected deer are estimated to be consumed each year. That could translate into more than a hundred thousand meals of tainted meat annually.

For the hunting community, which is largely dependent on a healthy deer and elk population, chronic wasting disease is an important—if not *the most* important—issue affecting them today.

One of our witnesses will offer his perspective into just how much the disease is impacting both deer hunting and conservation as a whole.

At this point, the most effective strategy we have for managing CWD is preventing the disease from spreading even further. State wildlife agencies are on the front lines of the fight against the disease, but without additional research and funding, their options are limited. Even states without known cases of CWD like my home state of California must be prepared to manage the spread of the disease. Today, we will hear from two different states that have been working to contain it, and still face many challenges along the way.

There is no question that CWD is an issue that affects us all. Fully addressing CWD requires a bipartisan effort, so I want to thank my colleagues on the other side of the aisle for joining me in highlighting this issue and exploring areas in which we can make some headway in slowing the momentum of this disease down. It is my hope that we will continue to work together and seek solutions for fighting this disease. Our health, our wildlife, the hunting community, and our economy depend on it.