



The voice of fish and wildlife agencies

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**Statement for the Record
Submitted by the Association of Fish & Wildlife Agencies
Washington, D.C.**

**Hearing before the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
House Committee on Natural Resources
“Preventing Pandemics through US Wildlife-borne Disease Surveillance.”
April 28, 2022**

The Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (“Association”) is the professional organization that represents the collective voice of the fish and wildlife agencies in all 50 states, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and District of Columbia (“state agencies”). These agencies exercise primary statutory authority for management of fish and wildlife as public trust resources within their borders. We thank the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations (“Subcommittee”) for its leadership to address the ongoing, ever increasing challenges related to wildlife disease surveillance. As more than 60% of human diseases and 75% of all emerging diseases have origins in wildlife, the capacity of state fish and wildlife agencies to monitor and address these threats in coordination with their federal partners is of foremost concern.

As the Subcommittee is well aware, the economic burden of suppressing wildlife-borne diseases, particularly those with zoonotic potential, can increase exponentially once they become established. With limited resources and capacity, current fish and wildlife disease surveillance and response efforts are typically driven by crises, often lacking consistent funding and logistical support. Therefore, an adequately funded wildlife disease surveillance network is needed to provide coordinated, timely, and effective responses designed to address these critical needs. Further, this network should leverage and enhance existing resources and expertise in an effort to build sustainable resilience and capacity.

The Association has long promoted the National Fish and Wildlife Health Initiative¹ to establish and sustainably fund a coordinated network of federal, state, and university wildlife disease laboratories. We are committed to improving the coordination of measures that ensure fish and wildlife health, while recognizing and respecting the missions, jurisdictions, and abilities of state and federal fish and wildlife managers and their agencies. We support the following programs and initiatives designed to build capacities, detect and manage emerging and increasingly varied fish and wildlife disease challenges, and effectively mitigate and suppress the significant economic, social, and cultural impacts associated with fish and wildlife diseases:

¹https://www.fishwildlife.org/application/files/7715/3980/9208/national_fish_and_wildlife_health_initiative_toolkit_AFWA_2008.pdf

1. Increase and sustain funding for existing federal and state fish and wildlife disease laboratories;
2. Encourage Congress to provide new and sustained federal funding to establish and/or enhance fish and wildlife disease surveillance capacities in those regions of the United States lacking such resources;
3. Encourage Congress to provide increased and sustained federal funding for state, federal and tribal fish and wildlife agencies to train and coordinate their operational workforces to deliver effective fish and wildlife health programs; and
4. Encourage Congress to provide increased and sustained federal funding for aligned university research and training programs to assure that their enormous capacities are harnessed in support of targeted fish and wildlife disease surveillance and management efforts.

Efforts to establish a national framework are increasingly vital in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and the emergence of potentially zoonotic diseases, including the continued spread of Chronic Wasting Disease (“CWD”). While no cases of CWD have been documented in humans, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (“CDC”) warn of its zoonotic potential and the World Health Organization emphasizes the importance of keeping prion diseases from entering the human food chain.² States have borne the brunt of the costs for surveillance and management actions designed to curb the spread of CWD by redirecting funds from other programs and are in dire need of increased resources and federal coordination. Congress already has the ability to take action by fully funding the CWD provisions authorized in the *America’s Conservation Enhancement Act* (P.L. 16-188, “ACE Act”) and increasing funding for CWD cooperative agreements administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (“USDA”) Animal Plant and Health Inspection Service (“APHIS”). While the Fiscal Year 2023 appropriations process is underway, we encourage Federal partners to expeditiously establish the CWD Task Force directed by the ACE Act. Further, in accordance with the Association’s Best Management Practices for Prevention, Surveillance, and Management of Chronic Wasting Disease³, we encourage a prohibition on the movement of live farmed cervids.

We applaud the United States Geological Survey (“USGS”) and the National Wildlife Health Center (“NWHC”) for their support of a collaborative One-Health framework with state agencies, including development of the Wildlife Health Information Sharing Partnership (“WHISPers”). While there are some ongoing concerns with data ownership, privacy, and sensitive data release related to Freedom of Information Act requests as well as capacity for data entry, the Association is encouraged by the commitment from USGS to continue collaborating with state, federal, tribal, academic and NGO partners as they continue to develop WHISPers. To

²[https://www.cdc.gov/prions/cwd/index.html#:~:text=Chronic%20wasting%20disease%20\(CWD\)%20is,States%2C%20Norway%20and%20South%20Korea.](https://www.cdc.gov/prions/cwd/index.html#:~:text=Chronic%20wasting%20disease%20(CWD)%20is,States%2C%20Norway%20and%20South%20Korea.)

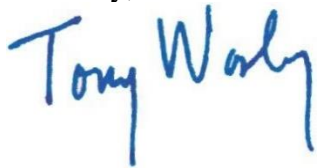
³ [AFWA_CWD_BMPS_12_September_2018_FINAL.pdf \(fishwildlife.org\)](#)

that end, the Association transmitted a letter to USGS⁴ with recommended improvements and elements that should be considered for the system to be successful, of which the recognition of state agencies' statutory authority and unique roles and responsibilities is most critical.

The increasing emergence of zoonotic diseases, exemplified by the COVID-19 pandemic, demands increased attention to wildlife health and wildlife disease prevention, surveillance, and response. With the statutory authority and obligation to manage the public trust species within their borders, state agencies are the front line of defense to prevent, surveille, and combat wildlife-borne diseases. While wildlife can be negatively impacted by diseases, they can also serve as sentinels for environmental contaminants and infectious diseases affecting humans and domestic animals. Human and domestic animal health can impact wildlife and ecosystem health, and vice versa.

We again thank the Subcommittee for its attention to this increasingly vital issue, and we are glad to offer our assistance on these or any other matters relevant to the management of our n nation's fish and wildlife resources. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact Kurt Thiede, Government Affairs Director, at kthiede@fishwildlife.org or at (202) 838-3468.

Sincerely,



Tony Wasley
President

⁴https://www.fishwildlife.org/application/files/3316/5238/0451/AFWA_support_for_WHISPers_March_2022_Final_2.pdf