

CHRONIC WASTING DISEASE

Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) occurs in mule deer, white-tailed deer, and a few elk and moose in eastern and east central Alberta. The disease is associated with protein changes in the brain that result in weight loss, behavioural changes, and premature death within 2 years of being infected. Recent field data from long-standing infected populations in Saskatchewan, Colorado, and Wyoming indicate a shift towards younger deer, lower productivity, and fewer adult males. Theoretical models and field data indicate CWD has significant effects on age/sex profile and long-term productivity and survival of local deer populations.

From September 2005 to April 2020, Alberta detected 2,658 cases of CWD in wild cervids in 53 Wildlife Management Units (WMUs) spanning the length of eastern and east-central Alberta from south of Cold Lake all the way to the US border.

CWD continues to expand westward from Saskatchewan along specific watersheds, primarily the North Saskatchewan, Battle, Red Deer, South Saskatchewan, Bow, and Oldman river systems. Overall prevalence in hunter-harvested cervids rises each year, reaching 11.2% in 10,400 heads tested in 2019/20 (17.5% in 5,632 mule deer, 3.9% in 4,295 whitetails, 1.3% in 231 elk, and 0.9% in 232 moose). However, local prevalence in deer is much higher in many WMUs, particularly in mule deer males. Additional information is available on the CWD web pages.

The CWD Surveillance Program shifted focus for 2020 to better support game management decisions. The following is proposed for 2020/21 hunting seasons:

Mandatory requirement to submit DEER harvested in the following WMUs: 150, 151, 156, 158, 163, 200, 206, 208, 226, 228, 234, 236, 242, 244, 250, 252, 258, 260, 500, 501, 506, 728, and 730 (see attached map).

Mandatory requirement only for MULE DEER in the following WMUs: 102, 104, 106, 108, 110, 112, 130, 132, 134, 136, 210, 212, 220, 222, 304, 305, 310, and 312. Our data over the last 20 years clearly indicate that CWD occurs primarily in mule deer in Alberta and thus they provide the best surveillance sample for tracking the disease.

Hunters and outfitters play a vital role in CWD surveillance. As in previous years, the CWD program accepts the head of any cervid legally harvested in Alberta. Deer heads submitted for testing and reports of emaciated deer help define the area where the disease occurs. Hunters who take advantage of increased hunting opportunities and remove deer from CWD high risk areas contribute to fewer deer on the landscape and less opportunity for disease transmission. The cooperation and assistance of all stakeholders and interested parties is important and greatly appreciated.

Logistical timelines limit lab testing capacity to a maximum of ~2500 heads per month. While most cervids are harvested in November, it generally takes until March to get all the heads tested.

Please check the Fish and Wildlife disease web pages prior to the fall hunting seasons to get additional information regarding the 2020/21 CWD surveillance program.

