



WISCONSIN'S WORLD OF CWD

BY PATRICK DURKIN

Those who hunt southern Wisconsin aren't surprised when hunters in other states criticize herd-reduction plans and testing programs after wildlife officials find chronic wasting disease in their deer woods.

Many of them didn't want to believe CWD was a threat in February 2002, when the Department of Natural Resources documented Wisconsin's first three cases west of Madison, the state's capital.

Even now, 17 years later, many hunters still ignore CWD, even after Wisconsin's diagnostics laboratory confirmed a record 1,063 cases in 2018, including 397 from Iowa County – the state's most infected area.

Since CWD's discovery in Wisconsin, the state has documented a nation-leading 5,258 cases.

Iowa County, which carried 100 deer per square mile of habitat in some areas 20 years ago, turned up 107 CWD cases – a 1.4 percent infection rate – in 2002 after

mandatory tests of hunters' deer provided 7,632 samples. In 2018, relying on voluntarily submitted samples, the DNR tested 1,499 deer in the county – five times fewer than in 2002 – and found 397 cases, a 26.5 percent infection rate.

Yet those 1,499 tests were only 29 percent of the 5,216 deer that hunters registered in 2018. If testing had been mandatory, the DNR likely would have found 1,000 more CWD cases. It also means about 1,000 hunters and their families ate venison without knowing – or caring – it carried the disease.

Still, Iowa County has produced 2,666, or 51 percent, of the state's 5,258 total CWD cases. No other county comes close, even though their cases surpass most states' totals.

And yet no Wisconsin county has produced more stalwart opposition to science-based CWD management than Iowa County. In fact, when hunters in other states resist CWD-control efforts,

DID STATE LET CWD OFF THE MAT?

they often repeat claims originating in Iowa County. A 2010 falsehood by one leading critic lives on: “Management techniques that include eradication and herd reduction have proven unsuccessful here in Wisconsin.”

What the critic didn’t mention was his group’s successful efforts to torpedo CWD management. Their opposition included door-to-door petitions with red-highlighted maps to show farmers and other landowners which neighbors closed their lands to DNR staff and CWD-control efforts. The pressure wasn’t subtle. One farmer they failed to intimidate was Steve Harrington, of Arena. Harrington said it was common to see opponents driving past his farm to “monitor” hunters on his 400 acres during winter hunts.

INITIAL SUCCESS

Even so, many hunters and landowners used the longer gun seasons, unlimited permits and “earn-a-buck” rules that require harvesting at least one antlerless deer before buck hunting to reduce deer numbers and control the disease from 2002 through 2006.

In addition, many landowners let DNR staff shoot deer at night over bait sites that targeted sick deer. In early 2007, DNR shooters culled 987 deer, of which 80 percent were antlerless. That accounted for just 1.7 percent of the 2006-07 deer kill in CWD zones, but 23 of those deer carried CWD – a 12.5 percent infection rate.

Iowa County’s infection rate in 2006 was 2 percent for deer shot by hunters.

The “sharpshooting” program’s success, however, only hardened opponents, who attacked the agency and urged local and state lawmakers to fight disease-control and herd-reduction efforts. For

example, opponents pressured the DNR to drop earn-a-buck rules in 2005 as a goodwill gesture, and in return “guaranteed” hunters would shoot more antlerless deer than ever.

That didn’t happen. The previous year, 2004, Iowa County’s gun hunters registered 2,699 bucks and 5,463 antlerless deer with help from earn-a-buck restrictions. In 2005, without those restrictions, the totals fell to 2,749 bucks and 3,932 antlerless deer; and in 2006 the totals slipped further to 2,640 bucks and 2,755 antlerless deer.

With less pressure on antlerless deer, herds began rebuilding. The DNR reinstated earn-a-buck rules in 2007, but lawmakers responded by slashing funds for CWD testing and research. The chairman of the Assembly’s Natural Resources Committee, Rep. Scott Gunderson, called CWD spending a “boondoggle.”

CWD funding ranged from \$4.8 million in 2004 to \$5.8 million in 2007. After Gunderson and other Republicans took control of the Assembly, they cut CWD funding by 52 percent to \$2.8 million in 2008, and to \$2.4 million in 2009.

Gunderson and others later pressured the DNR to kill a four-day antlerless gun season in October, eliminate the extended gun seasons in November and December, and ax a landowners’ winter hunt that ran through March 31.

ABANDONING PLANS

DNR biologists Carl Batha and Don Bates, both now retired, coordinated the CWD program during its first decade. They contend hunters and other efforts were controlling CWD until lawmakers forced the DNR to start backing off in 2005. DNR data show CWD prevalence

rates in the “Southern Farmlands” region stayed at 1 percent from 2002 through 2006, with the DNR averaging 25,858 CWD tests annually.

After lawmakers slashed CWD funding in 2007, the agency tested only 7,192 deer in the Southern Farmlands. CWD prevalence in the region rose to 2 percent in 2007 and 3 percent in 2010.

In November 2010, with help from “Sportsmen for Walker” groups opposing CWD management, Wisconsin elected Scott Walker governor. Walker told audiences he was tired of sitting in a stand without seeing deer, and promised to appoint a “deer trustee” to evaluate the DNR’s deer program.

Walker never hunted until eyeing the governor’s race at age 40 in 2007, but bought deer licenses every year from then through 2017. He never registered a deer. Nor did he urge hunters to test their deer for CWD during his eight years in office. His administration slashed CWD funding to an average of \$1.14 million annually from 2012 through 2018, basically half of its \$2.21 million average from 2008 through 2011, and a quarter of its \$4.8 million average from 2004 through 2007.

In 2011, the Legislature outlawed earn-a-buck. In 2012, Gov. Walker appointed James Kröll, of Texas, as the state’s “deer czar.” By 2014, at Kröll’s recommendation, the governor’s DNR appointees imposed a “passive approach” to CWD.

RATES ESCALATE

Meanwhile, CWD only worsened.

In 2014, Dane, Iowa, Sauk, Rock and Richland counties generated 312 CWD cases from 2,926 hunter-killed deer, a 10.6 percent infection rate. Those counties in 2018 generated 899 CWD cases

from 5,024 hunter-killed deer, a 17.9 percent rate.

CWD prevalence is worst from south-central Iowa County northward to southwestern Sauk County and southeastern Richland County. Rates in adult bucks (age 2½ and older) in that area vary from 43 to 56 percent, while rates in adult females vary from 23 to 35 percent.

Prevalence charts on the DNR’s CWD website illustrate the increases. They also show disease rates flat or slightly rising from 2002 through 2006 – as Batha and Bates note – then escalating through 2017. Data for 2018 aren’t available.

Behind all those numbers are hunters and their families.

Wade Anding, of Milwaukee, owns and hunts land in Iowa County, and feels beaten. All three bucks his group shot in 2017 and 2018 had CWD. One was so emaciated its hair was falling out, and Anding could put one hand around its neck.

“This is the future of deer hunting in Iowa County and western Dane County,” Anding said.

Likewise, Tyson Hall, 36, of Cross Plains, Wisconsin, killed three bucks the past two years; two in Richland County and one in Iowa County. All three carried CWD. When his bucks tested positive for CWD, he gave the venison to a friend to use as cat food. “I won’t eat it, and I definitely won’t feed it to my baby boy,” Hall said. “With a possible 30- to 40-year incubation period for the disease, it’s not worth the risk.”

Doug Duren, 61, of Cazenovia, helped increase CWD monitoring by providing a self-serve kiosk and dumpster for carcasses on his family’s farm. He said hunters left at least 50 CWD samples at his kiosk, and dumped over 175 boned-

SUCCESS IN ILLINOIS

Illinois detected its first case of CWD in Boone County in November 2002. The Illinois Department of Natural Resources (DNR) increased hunter opportunities in the months that followed and additional CWD positives were found. The following year, Illinois DNR supplemented hunter harvest with targeted removals, as needed, to better evaluate the status of CWD in the local area. Through these management strategies, Illinois DNR has been able to keep CWD at bay, maintaining a prevalence of approximately 2 percent ever since. While no methods have been proven to stop the geographic spread of CWD, success seen in Illinois and other states, provides hope that Pennsylvania might be able to keep the number of infected deer low and slow the spread of disease to new areas.

out carcasses in the dumpster. They also shared their stories with Duren:

– “We had a group of five guys shoot four bucks, and all tested positive.”

– “Twenty-four of 43 deer we killed tested positive. All antlered bucks were positive, along with many does and some fawns. Fawns!”

– “We’ve had seven out of 11 test positive so far.”

– “We love to hunt big bucks, but it’s getting harder to justify why we do it, since most of the time there’s a good chance no meat comes from it.”

– “The only justification we use now (for hunting) is that we’re removing diseased animals from the landscape.”

CONCLUSION

One hopes that skeptical hunters in states new to CWD keep those facts and accounts in mind when scoffing at the always-fatal disease. Skepticism was common in Wisconsin after the DNR documented 205 CWD cases in five counties in 2002, and it hardened after the agency again found 205 cases in 2006, this time across eight counties.

But only the “true believers” kept scoffing after the DNR found 1,063 cases in 2018 across 26 counties.

Meanwhile, across the border, Illinois also discovered its first CWD case in 2002. Unlike Wisconsin, though, Illinois stuck with its disease-management plan. It has documented 736 cases in 18 years, an average of 41 annually.

Illinois’ success documents the fact Wisconsin’s CWD plan didn’t fail. It was simply abandoned after a promising start. **en**

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COVER PAINTING BY DOUG PIFER

“Who’s the New Guy?” is an artistic rendering that might happen wherever bowhunters have planted 3-D targets to ready themselves for the coming fall seasons. Although the target lacks the emotion of its inquisitors, which at this time of the year welcome bachelor companionship, its form – and maybe its headgear – is enough to draw attention, even curiosity. Whitetails have a snoopiness about them. It often gets them in trouble, but it also teaches them the ways of the woods. It’s all harmless while they sport velvet, but everything is different when those antlers harden!