

May 25, 2018

Mr. Kevin Shea
Administrator
USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS)
4700 River Rd, Riverdale, MD 20737

Dear Mr. Shea,

We, the undersigned groups representing dozens of conservation organizations and millions of American hunters and conservationists, are pleased to provide the following comments on proposed changes to the Chronic Wasting Disease Herd Certification Program Standards published on March 29, 2018, in the Federal Register (Vol. 83, No. 61, Pages 13469-13470). [Docket No. APHIS-2018-0011]

Deer hunting is the most popular hunting activity in the United States, with 9.2 million Americans participating annually, contributing more than \$20 billion in economic activity, state and local taxes, and Pittman-Robertson excise taxes. Deer hunters play an essential role in the “user pays, public benefits” framework of the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation. Not only do we consider chronic wasting disease (CWD) a serious threat to our nation’s wild deer herds and rich hunting heritage, its continued spread places the entirety of state-led wildlife management in peril. As such, we strongly support efforts to control CWD in captive cervids given the risk it poses to free-ranging cervids. This is especially important given that CWD continues to spread in both wild and captive cervid populations, and there is heightened concern about possible human health implications of CWD.

We believe stronger measures are warranted to more effectively control the spread of this disease within captive cervid populations. This is evidenced by the fact that 94 deer farms in 16 states have tested positive for CWD, with nine new detections in FY 2018 alone. Further, ongoing CWD detections in low-risk herds (those with no CWD detections in age-eligible mortalities over a five-year period) are concerning. Clearly, the existing Program Standards are not meeting their intended goals. As the lead federal agency tasked with slowing the further spread of CWD, we contend that USDA APHIS must take proactive and meaningful steps. Below are our concerns and suggested revisions to the 2018 Program Standards.

Standards are Inconsistent with Stated Goal

We believe the 2018 Program Standards are inconsistent with the stated goal of controlling the incidence and spread of disease as they remain voluntary and fail to include all effective disease control options. Including all available control options would enable states participating in the national Herd Certification Program (HCP) the ability to select preventative measures they deem appropriate to mitigate CWD risk above those required by the Standards. While we recognize that USDA APHIS does not have the authority to regulate intra-state transport of captive cervids or to mandate post-mortem testing of all cervids, it can encourage states to take actions that further decrease risk of disease transmission as it has done in previous versions of the Standards.

The 2018 Program Standards should be based on sound epidemiologic science and include all effective disease control options. Nearly all of the more stringent guidelines contained in the 2012 Standards were deleted from the 2014 Standards and replaced with more liberal guidelines. These deletions increase the risk of CWD spread, facilitate the perpetuation of CWD in captive cervids and the environment, and increase risk of CWD transmission from captive to wild cervids. This is not consistent with a credible disease control program, and more stringent recommendations should be included.

Species Covered by Standards

The 2018 Program Standards do not include all susceptible members of the Cervidae family. This is troubling given the recent detection of CWD in free-ranging reindeer (*Rangifer tarandus*) in Norway as well as experimental infection in Reeves' muntjac (*Muntiacus reevesi*). We recommend all species of the family Cervidae be included in the Standards.

National CWD Database

We find it especially troubling there is no mention of the National CWD Database in the 2018 Program Standards. Now, more than ever, we need a robust database to collect CWD information at a national level. We strongly recommend the continued collection and reporting of national data by USDA APHIS on CWD prevalence, spread and distribution.

Live Animal Movements

We strongly oppose the proposed allowance to move live CWD-Positive, CWD-Exposed and CWD-Suspect animals from an origin facility. Moving animals that are, or may be, CWD-positive greatly increases risk of disease spread and should not be allowed. In addition, movement of any cervids that have been traced back to a CWD-positive facility should be prohibited.

Monitoring and Quarantine Provisions

The National CWD HCP requires five years of monitoring to achieve certification as "low risk" for CWD as well as mandatory monitoring after reaching certified status. Given the growing number of CWD detections in herds monitored beyond five years, we suggest extending this monitoring period to 10 years. We are equally concerned that the five-year quarantine requirement for captive cervid facilities following a CWD detection is inadequate. This also should be extended to 10 years, realizing even then that some of these herds likely will become CWD positive.

Fencing Requirements

Given the alarming number of documented escapes of captive cervids and the potential interaction between wild and captive cervids at fences, we recommend double fencing with a minimum 10-foot separation between fences as a mandatory program standard. We also recommend reinserting the fencing appendix from the previous standards.

Surveillance

As with previous versions of the Standards, there remain significant loopholes with respect to surveillance which greatly increase risk of disease spread. Notably, post-mortem testing of animals going to shooting facilities that are not under common ownership is not required. This loophole could be closed if all breeding operations and shooting preserves were required to participate in the CWD HCP and test all cervids regardless of origin. We encourage replacing the term “recommends” with “requires” as it relates to visible animal identification numbers. Visual identification is one of the most useful tools in locating and identifying escaped captive cervids and a key element of an effective disease control program.

Physical Inventories

We recommend physical inventories of captive cervid herds be conducted annually rather than every three years as proposed. Many captive cervid facilities buy, sell or trade large numbers of animals, meaning that many animals would not be included in inventories conducted every third year. Accurate physical inventories are vital to disease surveillance and management.

Penalties for Non-compliance

The proposed 2018 Program Standards do not specify mandatory penalties or suspension of herd certification status for non-compliance such as lapses in record keeping, fence failures, escapes, and failure to maintain unique animal identification. Unless non-compliance issues are clearly defined and enforced, compliance and enforcement will vary from state to state, and the program will not accomplish its intended goal of reducing the spread of CWD.

Antemortem Tests

The revised Program Standards recommend two antemortem tests for CWD, of which both are known to produce false negatives. The Standards recommend a biopsy of rectal anal mucosal associated lymphoid tissue (RAMALT) for white-tailed deer and a biopsy of medial retropharyngeal lymph nodes (MRPLNs) for elk. We are concerned these tests will provide captive cervid owners with a false and misleading sense of security regarding disease prevalence and increase risk of disease spread to both wild and captive herds. Therefore, we recommend designating RAMALT as an experimental test and not one that can be used to release cervid facilities from quarantine prior to five years. The MRPLN should apply only to herds of less than 20 animals that do not experience mortality for testing within the five-year quarantine period.

Depopulation

We believe immediate depopulation of CWD-infected captive herds should be a core requirement of the 2018 Program Standards. By not requiring immediate depopulation, the proposed program standards allow for continued environmental contamination and increased risk of disease spread. Further, we recommend that shooting preserves be ranked higher in priority for indemnification funding given their size, habitat features and duration during which some animals may remain in these facilities before harvest. We also are concerned that only HCP herds are eligible for indemnification funds when non-HCP herds likely pose a greater risk for CWD infection and spread.

Indemnification Funding

We are in strong agreement that managing CWD-Positive, CWD-Suspect, or CWD-Exposed herds in the revised Program Standards should not be predicated on the availability of indemnification funds, especially in situations where on-site depopulation is the preferred method for mitigating known or suspected disease risks. We suggest placing the burden for indemnification on the captive cervid industry either through a mandatory self-insurance program or through the establishment of a fund supported through sales of live cervids and cervid parts (e.g., semen and embryos).

In closing, we respectfully request that you give full and proper consideration to the above concerns and recommendations. We believe these Program Standards – if properly strengthened – provide the greatest opportunity to limit the spread of CWD and minimize the biological, social and economic impacts to both wild and captive cervids – and the future of North America’s hunting heritage.

We would welcome the opportunity for a subset of the signatories below to meet with you and your team to determine how we may work together more closely to fight the most significant threat to North America’s wild deer in modern history.

Respectfully,

Archery Trade Association
Bear Trust International
Boone and Crockett
Congressional Sportsmen’s Foundation
Council to Advance Hunting and the Shooting Sports
Izaak Walton League of America
Mule Deer Foundation
National Deer Alliance
National Shooting Sports Foundation
National Wildlife Federation
National Wild Turkey Federation
North American Grouse Partnership
Pheasants Forever / Quail Forever
Professional Outfitters and Guides of America
Quality Deer Management Association
Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation
Ruffed Grouse Society and American Woodcock Society
Texas Chapter of The Wildlife Society
Texas Wildlife Association
Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership
U.S. Sportsmen’s Alliance
Whitetails Unlimited
Wild Sheep Foundation
Wildlife Forever

Wildlife Management Institute
Wildlife Mississippi