

Office of the Secretary

[Docket No. 01-019-1]

Declaration of Emergency Because of Chronic Wasting Disease

Chronic wasting disease (CWD), a disease of deer and elk, is part of a group of diseases known as transmissible spongiform encephalopathies (TSE's), a group that also includes scrapie and bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE). While considered rare, the incidence of CWD is on the rise among both wild and domestic cervids. The disease, which occurs mostly in adult animals, is progressive and always fatal. The origin and mode of transmission of CWD are unknown. The disease has become of particular concern due to its fatal nature, lack of known prevention or treatment, its impact on the farmed cervid industry, and its possible transmissibility to cattle or other domestic livestock and humans.

CWD is known to be endemic in free-ranging deer and elk in a limited area in the western United States. Officials have detected it in free-ranging deer and elk in southeastern Wyoming, northeastern Colorado, and southwestern Nebraska. State departments of wildlife are taking steps to conduct surveillance in the endemic areas and to control the spread of CWD in wild cervids.

In recent years, CWD has been found in 14 captive elk herds in Colorado, Montana, Nebraska, Oklahoma, and South Dakota. Some of these herds have since been depopulated. Of the 2,300 farmed elk herds (with a total of 110,000 animals) in the United States, currently only 4 (with a total of approximately 1,000 animals) are known to be CWD- positive. We do not know the full extent of infection in farmed elk in the United States. Limited funds and the absence of a CWD program have allowed the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) to conduct only minimal surveillance and testing, and not depopulation. Presently, herds are placed under State quarantine when infection is found.

While current efforts have been sufficient to depopulate or send to slaughter a number of positive herds, primarily through State indemnity programs and voluntary depopulation, APHIS has determined that this method will not work to eliminate the disease in farmed cervids. First, there is no live animal test for CWD, so it is impossible to determine whether a live animal is positive; nor is there a vaccine to prevent the disease. Second, the incubation period is lengthy, and 3 to 5 years of continued surveillance is needed (with no new infection found) before a herd can be declared free of CWD through quarantine. To date, only 1 of the 14 known CWD-positive herds has been declared free of CWD following