

CWD outbreak: we've got this covered

We always knew it would show up someday, but it was still a big disappointment when it finally arrived.

On November 7, 2017, while the Montana Fish and Wildlife Commission and senior FWP officials were listening to a presentation on chronic wasting disease (CWD), FWP Wildlife Division administrator Ken McDonald received a text: Scientists had detected CWD in a mule deer shot 40 miles south of Billings, near the Wyoming border.

It was the first case in Montana history of the fatal disease in a wild population.

By the end of the day, FWP had formed a CWD incident command team and was carrying out the response plan we had developed earlier in the event of an outbreak.

For years, Montana has been surrounded by states and provinces where CWD exists in wild or farmed deer or elk. From 1998 to 2016, FWP tested more than 17,000 wild deer, elk, and moose for CWD. We found no positive results, but we knew it was only a matter of time. The infected deer turned up after we renewed surveillance in 2017.

CWD disease is fatal to deer and elk. So far, there have been no cases in the United States of it affecting humans who eat meat from infected animals.

FWP developed a response plan in 2005 with help from a citizen advisory committee that included representatives from the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, the Mule Deer Foundation, ranchers, and others. The plan, revised in 2017 with help from a new advisory council, calls for interagency cooperation among FWP and the Montana Departments of Livestock, Health and Human Services, and Environmental Quality, as well as county commissioners, Indian tribes, and other partner agencies and organizations.

In accordance with the plan, we rapidly instituted a special hunt in the area where the initial deer and three others that later tested positive for the disease were harvested. We conducted another special hunt in north-central Montana after a deer, harvested north of Chester along the Hi-Line, also tested positive.

FWP wildlife biologists, wildlife technicians, game wardens, and other employees worked with landowners, meat processors, counties, and other state agencies to provide information about the

hunts, set up check stations, enforce regulations, and gather lymph node samples from harvested deer. Some 1,400 hunters participated in the hunts.

The hunts were designed to obtain a statistically valid sample of deer so our scientists can determine CWD prevalence in the areas where the disease was detected. Testing harvested deer will help us determine what percentage of the population is infected and to what extent the disease has spread. This information will help wildlife managers develop an accurate and efficient long-term disease-management strategy for the affected areas.

Unfortunately, once CWD afflicts a deer or elk population, it can't

be eradicated. But by quickly instituting the two sampling hunts, we increased the odds of keeping prevalence low and preventing the disease from spreading. It was an extraordinary achievement under such short notice, and I am extremely proud of our employees for their fast, efficient, and professional response to this disease discovery.

Proud, but in no way surprised. Responding to and managing disease outbreaks is exactly what FWP is set up to do. We anticipate, plan, execute, and evaluate. We've

dealt with outbreaks of brucellosis in bison and elk, epizootic hemorrhagic disease in deer, pneumonia in wild sheep, whirling disease in wild rainbow trout, avian cholera, botulism, Newcastle disease, West Nile virus, and parasite infestations on the upper Yellowstone River fisheries. And we're well prepared to respond to future outbreaks of these and other diseases.

CWD is now in Montana, and the state will need to learn how to live with it, just as other states and provinces have done. FWP will continue targeted surveillance where we think CWD is likely to show up. We'll keep talking to other state and provincial conservation agencies to find out which management strategies work best. We'll carry out special hunts and other management actions, while continuing to learn from and contribute to CWD science, so we can do everything possible to limit the spread of this disease to Montana's deer and elk populations.

—**Martha Williams**, Director, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks



GRIM REALITY FWP veterinarian Jennifer Ramsey removes brain tissue from a deer head, part of the agency's rapid response to a recent CWD outbreak.