

Monroe County task force attempts to keep CWD at bay

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By: PAT MULVANEY Herald Editor

In the high-stakes fight to curtail chronic wasting disease (CWD) among Wisconsin's whitetail deer herd, experts find themselves in an uphill battle. But ask any of them and they'll tell you it's worth the fight.

In Monroe County that fight is being waged by the Monroe County CWD Task Force, a group of representatives from around the county mixed with a number of experts and professionals. It includes scientists, farmers, landowners and concerned recreationalists.

What brings them together is their love of deer and deer hunting, both of which are threatened by the encroachment of CWD into the area.

"We're right on the cusp of the storm of CWD and if it hits this county, things are really going to change," said Bob Micheel, Monroe County's land conservationist and a member of the CWD Task Force.

The disease is inching its way toward Monroe County and has already arrived in two adjacent counties, Vernon and Juneau, where samples taken from a few deer last year tested positive for the disease.

CWD hit the state about 16 years ago and has ravaged the whitetail herd in the southwest counties, where as much as 50% of mature bucks are infected.

The disease is spread from deer to deer through bodily fluids, such as saliva or urine and nobody really knows how long it can stay in the environment.

CWD attacks the deer's brain and affected animals' exhibit symptoms of droopy ears, hanging tongues, drooling, emaciation and strange behavior. It's 100 percent fatal and takes 12 to 18 months to kill the deer.

According to Task Force member Chad Ziegler, who also is Monroe County's forester, seeing an animal in the final throes of CWD is difficult because they are suffering so much.

The best way to fight CWD is to reduce the deer population, which is high in Monroe County, while the number of hunters is declining.

"The harvest isn't high enough to stop the population from increasing," said Ziegler. "We just can't get the hunters to harvest enough antlerless to achieve the goal we have for the management unit."

That means giving hunters more opportunities to thin the herd.

"We need to get people to shoot more deer and find places for those deer to go like a food pantry," said Micheel.

However, in order to do that, meat processors have to be willing to butcher donated animals for the food pantries.

The state offers the processors \$55 per deer to butcher the animals but, so far, only one meat processor in Monroe County, Meat Smith in Tomah, has agreed to get with the program. Two processors on the periphery of the county, Craig's Meats in La Crosse County, and Rocky Top Meats in Juneau County, also will take donated deer but that's still too few and far between to be effective.

"Would you donate a deer if you have to drive 30 miles?" asked Micheel.

But the lack of interest is understandable since processors have to follow strict regulations about commingling deer processing with the butchering of beef and pork, their main business.

It's even necessary to wash equipment between each deer since tainted venison from one deer could contaminate other non-tainted venison. While there has never been a documented case of CWD making the jump to humans, it is still recommended disposing of CWD-tainted venison.

Another remedy to the CWD problem is to keep the animals spread out over the landscape, which is why it is illegal in Monroe County to bait and feed deer. Violators are subject to a \$1,000 fine.

"We've got to get rid of this baiting and feeding because that concentrates the deer in one area," said task force member Rick Case, a beef farmer from southern Monroe County. "We've got to keep them spread out across the landscape and we've got to reduce the number of deer on the landscape. If this gets a foothold in the deer herd it could devastate it."

The danger there is people will quit hunting, putting less pressure on the deer herd and compounding the problem. That in turn affects the huge economic impact deer hunting has on the area.

In order to increase the harvest, the state has instituted a second deer gun season. Besides the regular season in November, there is a holiday hunt that runs between Christmas and New Year's Day.

"We're trying to encourage more deer to be harvested," said Micheel.

The Task Force also is encouraging hunters to test their deer for CWD, but its challenging to get people to grasp the urgency of the situation.

"People love their deer but they don't really give a crap about what's really going on with deer health and the population. They just want to see deer," said Micheel. "But with all the baiting and feeding and the things we do wrong, we'll love our deer to death."

Monroe County CWD Task Force members:

Matt Esser – DNR

Stan Brownell – Conservation Congress (Deer Committee)

Jack Herricks – Farm Bureau – President

David Backman – Fort McCoy

Tim Wilder – Fort McCoy/Landowner

Jim Raiten – Landowner/County Deer Advisory Committee (CDAC)

Rick Case – Beef Farmer

Scott Giraud – Landowner

Wayne Edgerton – Landowner/Quality Deer Mgt. (QDM)

Chad Zeigler – County Forester adm./Landowner

Bob Micheel – LCD Director/Landowner

Population declines due to CWD are real

Dr. Mary Wood from Wyoming Game and Fish presented data on Wyoming's mule deer herd showing how CWD is affecting them at the population level. Some hunting celebrities and other people claim CWD has never caused deer populations to decline.

That is absolutely false. Dr. Wood showed long-term population declines in mule deer herds. The reason is simple. During 2010 to 2014 in Wyoming's South Converse deer herd, adult does that did not have CWD had 79 percent annual survival rates. This is great, but annual survival plummeted to 37 percent for adult does that were CWD positive!

Over time, this leads to population declines, loss of hunting opportunity, and an uncertain future for that deer herd. Critics claim CWD isn't a big deal. Wyoming's actual data clearly shows otherwise.

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Focusing on antlerless harvest is important

Daniel Grear from the USGS National Wildlife Health Center in Wisconsin spoke about how genetic relatedness and deer social behavior affected CWD transmission among individuals and impacted management strategies. In short, deer are very social with a lot of interaction among related individuals.

Much discussion on managing the spread of CWD focuses on yearling-buck dispersal. However, Daniel's data showed that does were 10 times more likely to be CWD positive when there was one CWD positive relative nearby.

This has huge implications for how we manage CWD. Rather than being solely focused on buck harvest for fear of yearling bucks spreading the disease, we need a much larger focus on antlerless harvest to keep deer herds in balance with the habitat and to keep doe family groups from becoming reservoirs for CWD.

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Monroe County - CWD Task Force Recommendations:

- 1. Promote deer harvest levels at or below the “maintenance” level.**
- 2. Encourage CWD testing of all deer harvested.**
- 3. Provide even distribution across the county for CWD testing drop-off sites.**
- 4. Provide even distribution of venison processing sites across the county to encourage donation of venison to food pantries, which would increase harvest.**
- 5. Provide a place to dispose of CWD positive deer carcasses and processed venison.**
- 6. Provide safe CWD disposal sites for all taxidermists & meat processors.**
- 7. Ban cervid (mammals of the deer family) farms.**
- 8. Ban sale and use of urine based cervid hunting products.**
- 9. Ban baiting and feeding of wild cervids.**
- 10. Ban sale & use of cervid baiting & feeding equipment.**
- 11. Ban cervid carcass movement into and out of county.**
- 12. Improve information and education efforts including:**
 - a. Presentations to sports clubs, schools, and**
 - b. municipal boards & committees.**
 - c. Pamphlets**
 - d. Web sites**
 - e. GIS layers**