THE CANADIAN AGRI-FOOD POLICY INSTITUTE

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# What We Heard:

Dialogue on Chronic Wasting Disease and the Canadian Agriculture and Agri-food Sectors: Current Knowledge, Risks and Policy Options



## **Executive Summary**

Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) presents real risks to trade in agricultural products, for food security among Northern, remote, and First Nations communities and the future of all cervids including already threatened species such as the Boreal Caribou, not to mention the potential risks of human transmission.

There is an extreme urgency to prevent the further spread of this devastating disease to threatened boreal caribou populations and to provinces with, as yet, no known cases. More resources are needed for research and to prevent the further spread of the disease through: monitoring, testing, surveillance, enforcement, and communications. CAPI has highlighted actions that should be seriously considered in the fight to prevent further spread of CWD, including a pan-Canadian approach with improved governance using a One Health approach, boosting prion research, winding down all cervid farms with remediation on those contaminated and implementing buffer zones with the potential for aggressive culling to prevent the spread of the disease.

## Background

In December 2019, CAPI commissioned a paper with University of Alberta economists Dr. Vic Adamowicz and Dr. Ellen Goddard and colleagues, who together with a team of scientists, wildlife experts and environmentalists prepared a report on "Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) and the Canadian Agriculture and Agri-food Sectors: Current Knowledge, Risks and Policy Options". The goal of the report was to synthesize current knowledge around CWD and identify the implications for the agriculture and agri-food sector, including analyzing potential risks and policy options needed to address this animal disease. Given the growing awareness of the link between plant, animal and human health and the importance of a "One Health" approach in light of COVID, this disease and the measures needed to address it become even more evident and urgent now.

#### Issue

Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) is a prion disease that affects cervids (deer, elk, etc.) and has been increasing in prevalence in both wild and farmed populations in the U.S. and Canada as it continues to spread. It is now endemic in parts of Alberta and Saskatchewan where there is growing prevalence in the wild population. Several groups are especially concerned about its spread including wildlife resource managers, hunters, outfitters, Indigenous people, academics and government officials. There is growing fear of the potential risks to trade in agricultural products, for food security among Northern, remote and First Nations communities and the future of all cervids including already endangered species such as the Boreal Caribou, not to mention the potential risks of human transmission. Federal agencies such as the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA), the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) and Health Canada (HC) each have their respective roles in regulating cervid farms and preventing contaminated carcasses from entering the food chain as well as the trade in farmed cervid products. However, jurisdictional responsibilities add complexity to controlling the spread and mitigating potential risks as the provinces differ in the measures and approaches they take for monitoring, testing, and surveying the disease among both the farmed and wild populations,<sup>1</sup> with some being more stringent than others.

It is in this context that CAPI commissioned the above-mentioned report, held consultations with government officials, academics and scientists followed by a small dialogue by invite only in February 2021 to discuss potential issues and options. This brief summarizes CAPI's concerns and policy recommendations that follow from these discussions.



<sup>1</sup>Environment and Climate Change Canada, Parks Canada, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, Transport Canada, Crown Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada, Indigenous Services Canada, Natural Resources Canada, The Canadian Forest Service are all also necessary partners in effective management of wild animal diseases. However they do not have the mandates or resources to cover the activities where their jurisdictions overlap and are not working collaboratively to figure out work arounds.

## What We Heard

- There is increasing prevalence and spread of CWD in the wild cervid population in a number of U.S. states and in Alberta and Saskatchewan, but the public's awareness is declining.
- There are many dissenting views among stakeholders and Rights holders as to the measures needed to prevent further spread.
- Current measures include surveillance and monitoring through testing of hunter harvests, banning interprovincial movement of cervids, cervid products and hunter harvests.
- There is increasing public support for management through testing of hunter harvests.
- But measures vary by province, depending on whether CWD is endemic or not.
- In some provinces, such as Ontario, mandatory testing of all farmed cervids is required when slaughtered.
- For cervid farms, CFIA administers a Voluntary Herd Certification Program (VHCP) that will provide compensation for depopulation if a positive case is found. Once soil is contaminated on farms, it can take many years to remediate, turning the farm asset into a liability.
- The number of cervid farms and the number of farmed cervids continue to decline.
- Trade can and has been disrupted with Norway banning hay from jurisdictions with CWD, and the trade in antler velvet has already been disrupted, leading to a decline in the industry.
- A major concern is with Indigenous communities who rely on hunting for food security as well as significant cultural connections.
- Moreover, there is serious concern that CWD, if left unchecked, will spread to boreal caribou, an already threatened species.

- While one long term research study shows lack of transmission to cattle, further studies are needed to evaluate the risks to beef operations and to agricultural trade more generally.
- Scientific research being conducted in Canada and the U.S., while not as yet peer reviewed, demonstrates transmission to macaques and on to bank voles through macaques where mutations and full-blown infection occurred.
- From a human transmission point of view, scientists argue it is not unlikely that human transmission may be found in the near future.
- Given the diversity of stakeholder views and jurisdictional issues across provinces, it has been difficult to reach consensus on many aspects of CWD disease prevention and control policies and measures so there is no broad national approach.
- A White Paper prepared by the Council of Chief Veterinary Officers made recommendations as to possible options to prevent the spread in farmed cervids around zoning, herd certification and joint response activities by CFIA, wildlife and agriculture agencies in regions not previously known to have CWD. The recommendations should be implemented as soon as possible.
- Provincial Chief Veterinary Officers who attended the CAPI CWD dialogue commented that the speakers did an excellent job outlining the challenges associated with this complex problem and managed a fruitful discussion afterwards. The dialogue demonstrated the wide variety of viewpoints on this issue as well as some of the agendas at play but highlighted why efforts to halt the spread have failed.



### Recommendations

Based on the information gathered from the report, consultations and the CAPI dialogue, it is clear that:

- There is an extreme urgency to prevent the further spread of this devastating disease to the threatened boreal caribou populations and to provinces and territories with no known cases. Canada's reputation in global markets, biodiversity, the health and welfare of Canadians and its economic future is at stake.
- More resources are needed for research on the disease and particularly how to best control it including the effects on biodiversity, understanding the species barriers, potential vaccines and the remediation of infected soils. In the meantime, more resources are also needed to prevent its further spread through monitoring, testing, surveillance, enforcement and communications to the public and interested stakeholders.
- Strong leadership is needed at the national level to initiate a collaborative, multidisciplinary, cross jurisdictional discussion among necessary stakeholders and Rights holders from provincial/ territorial agriculture and natural resource departments, wildlife and conservation organizations, the academic community, and First Nations and Indigenous communities to develop a pan-Canadian approach and consensus solutions. Given Canada's failure up to now to prevent the spread of this devastating disease, creative solutions are needed urgently in consultation with all Rights holders and stakeholders;

- Given the current SARS CoV-2 pandemic and the increased awareness of the risks and destruction from animal diseases and their impacts on human and economic health, there should be no further delay in Canada to prioritizing solutions for CWD, and broader wildlife health issues.
- Policies and measures will have to be multilayered, targeted at surveillance and monitoring of wild cervid populations (licensing, hunter harvesting, testing of heads) and in certain areas the creation of buffer zones in which all cervids would need to be culled for as long as necessary to stop spread.
- Efforts need to be stepped up to insure farmed cervids are no longer contributing to disease amplification in the wild (i.e. Voluntary Herd Certification programs, testing at slaughter, soil remediation, additional fencing, non-restocking following outbreaks and compensation for exiting the activity).
- The recommendations of the CCVO should be implemented as soon as possible. This includes augmenting the current CFIA response to investigate, control movement, depopulate, compensate, clean and disinfect infected premises when CWD is detected in cervids on farms located in regions, provinces or territories not previously known to have CWD, combined with an intensive wild cervid harvest and testing in the surrounding area.

Specific actions that should be seriously considered in the fight to prevent further spread in Canada include:

- Launching a national conversation among key Rights holders and stakeholders to develop a pan-Canadian approach and task it with the necessity of coming up with ways to control the spread of CWD.
- 2 Task a group of experts with reviewing Canada's biodiversity strategy in the context of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) in an effort to improve governance and jurisdictional issues and facilitate action.
- 3 Improving the governance of animal diseases using a One Health approach across governments, agencies, universities, research institutions, industry, Indigenous communities and NGOS.
- Boosting prion research to advance our understanding of the nature of transmission, species barriers and the duration of infectivity in soils. This will help Canada find and develop better ways to control and/or eventually eliminate CWD. This would include work with vaccines and other biological methods as well as methods to remediate soil heavily contaminated with prions. Renewed funding for a PrioNet-type national research network addressing CWD and other prion diseases related to the agri-food system is warranted.
- 5 Preparing a contingency plan for when a first case of human transmission is found, which is "not unlikely" in the near future according to experts.
- 6 Closing cervid farms (with compensation) and remediating land on all formerly contaminated cervid farm sites, including banning restocking. Where feasible, the remediation program might include tree planting and biofuel crops to mitigate contamination and provide potential revenue streams for landowners.
- 7 Strengthening testing, surveillance and monitoring across the country on farmed and wild cervid hunter harvests. This may require provincial legislation and greater collaboration between wildlife, Indigenous, conservation and agricultural ministries.
- Preventing interprovincial or international movement of wild or farmed cervids and cervid products by hunters and farmers.
- 9 There is a need for buffer zones between infected areas and non infected areas. Government and agricultural industries should be seeking creative ideas to limit the spread within the buffer zones, including through partnerships with Indigenous communities.
- 10 In the interim, aggressive culling should be considered within a buffer zones and particularly between heavily infected CWD areas and the southern range of the Boreal caribou herd until a better option is found.
- Prevention of spread to those provinces and territories with no prevalence of the disease should also be seen as an urgent priority and could include zoning as discussed in the White Paper by the CCVOs.

While there does not appear to be any good solution and we do not have all the answers, there is a real need for all rights holder and stakeholders to find solutions for this truly wicked problem which has the potential to severely damage Canada's reputation as one of the world's most pristine landscapes and a leading producer and exporter of safe, healthy and high quality food. Without urgent action, we stand to risk harming the health of Canadians, our environment and prospects for future economic growth of Canada's agriculture sector.