

## Manitoba Wildlife Federation sounds alarm over chronic wasting disease

By: Ian Froese

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A progressive and fatal neurological disease afflicting deer, elk and moose populations is on the "doorstep" of western Manitoba, the Manitoba Wildlife Federation cautions.

Since chronic wasting disease (CWD) was imported to Saskatchewan in 1996 through infected elk, the virus has spread to dozens of other game farms and, subsequently, free-ranging white-tail and mule deer, in Saskatchewan and Alberta.

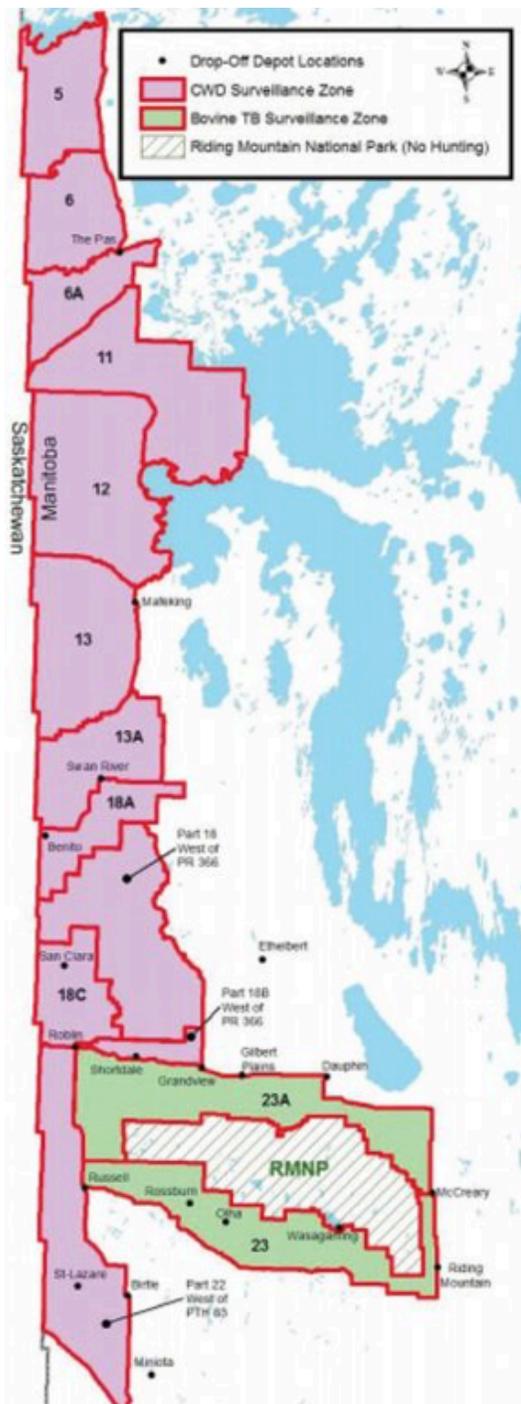
To date, the disease has not crossed into Manitoba, but reported cases in North America of mass animal extinctions and a troubling study released this year have raised concerns.

In the report, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency acknowledged the fatal disease could be transferred to humans who eat infected venison. It was previously considered unlikely people could be exposed to the disease.

The finding comes after feeding diseased venison to macaques, which died as a result. (Macaques are monkeys with a similar genetic makeup to humans.)

Brian Kotak, managing director of the Manitoba Wildlife Federation, said the new findings are worrisome.

It draws yet another parallel between CWD and another devastating prion-caused



**PROVINCE OF MANITOBA**

In red, the chronic wasting disease surveillance zone is aligned with the western edge of Manitoba. The bovine tuberculosis surveillance zone, in green, surrounds Riding Mountain National Park.

disease called mad cow, or bovine spongiform encephalopathy, which devastated the beef industry for years.

"We represent a very large group of people, of hunters and their families, who consume wild game on a regular basis," he said. "We have no idea what the risks are to humans, first of all, whether or not they are ingesting meat from animals that might have chronic wasting disease and whether or not that has a long-term impact on people's health."

The organization is leading the charge in Manitoba to increase awareness of the disease. It will host a public forum next month in Winnipeg. A session will likely be held in western Manitoba later this year, Kotak said.

Afterward, Kotak said the organization would likely write to provincial and federal governments to request greater monitoring, to prevent the disease's spread. He added MWF would like to assist in developing any prevention plans.

The province isn't blind to this fatal disease of the central nervous system.

A number of years ago, the province banned urine-based products for hunting, and no animal harvested "in an endemic area," such as Saskatchewan, can be brought to Manitoba unless the spinal column and head removed (and the head submitted to a processor within five days). The hide, hooves, mammary glands, entrails and internal organs also cannot be transported back.

Kotak suggested the current regulations, which still permit meat to be brought in,

don't go far enough.

"I don't think it would completely cover off our hunters to ensure their health and their safety."

He added hunters are mandated, in the farthest reaches of western Manitoba, to submit samples for testing, but is unsure how often it happens.

"I know from general knowledge there is concern (about this disease)," Kotak said, "especially from hunters who do hunt close to the Saskatchewan border."

In a statement, the province said it annually tests more than 300 samples from deer and elk.

"Our information indicates that compliance is very high," a provincial spokesperson explained.

"In addition, the province is currently reviewing and working to strengthen our CWD prevention programming based on concerns brought to light with new research."

The province was unable to confirm late Friday which research it is referencing.

Options to bolster prevention efforts, a spokesperson wrote, include expanding the surveillance zone to the very southwest corner of the province.

CWD can spread through bodily fluids and the excretions of infected animals.

As an example, Kotak said prey eating the carcasses of diseased animals could carry the disease. The virus can also seep into the soil, potentially infecting crops.

The province suggests hunters take regular precautions when field dressing an animal, including wearing rubber gloves and minimizing the handling of brain, eye or spinal tissues.

On a government website, the province indicates more than 2,300 deer and 1,400 elk have been analyzed — all tested negative.

The first public forum will be held Nov. 2 at the University of Manitoba's Wallace Building in Winnipeg, Room 223.

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