

Wildlife conservation group calls for summit on chronic wasting disease

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A North American wildlife conservation group will call on Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to hold an emergency summit about a neurological disease afflicting deer, elk and moose populations.

After speaking at a forum Thursday at the University of Manitoba, Darrel Rowledge, a director for the Alliance for Public Wildlife, said the organization is about to submit a letter to the prime minister, premiers and the national chief of the Assembly of First Nations calling for a meeting.

Rowledge is worried about chronic wasting disease (CWD), described by the Manitoba Wildlife Federation as being on the "doorstep" of western Manitoba. Concern was heightened this year after a troubling study acknowledged the fatal disease could be transferred to humans who eat the infected venison.

"We're not containing the spread of this disease," Rowledge bemoaned. "All of the proven means of moving it around, in live animals, in product, in equipment and, potentially, in hunter carcasses, are still allowed. The policies and the protocol that allow that movement, they violate the public interest."

The Alliance for Public Wildlife produced a "white paper," released earlier this year, on the dangers of CWD.

In the opening of their letter calling for an emergency summit, a parallel is made

between CWD and another, more well-known, prion disease called mad cow, which devastated the Canadian beef industry for years.

In 2003, a single case of mad cow disease, found in Alberta, prompted the United States and approximately 40 other countries to immediately shut their borders to Canadian beef.

Rowledge warns borders could close again over CWD, especially now that research suggests people can die from CWD, like mad cow.

"CWD is the largest ever biomass of infected prions in global history. It's not close, it's massive, and we're not containing the epidemic."

In Canada, CWD was imported to Saskatchewan in 1996 through infected elk. The virus has since spread to dozens of other game farms and, subsequently, free-ranging white-tail and mule deer, in that province and Alberta.

The disease has not entered Manitoba yet.

To prevent the possible spread, no animal harvested "in an endemic area," such as Saskatchewan, can cross into Manitoba unless the spinal column and head is 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, but the rest of the meat can.

Hunters who shoot game in the farthest reaches of western Manitoba are required to submit samples for testing.

A provincial spokesperson previously told The Brandon Sun the province is reviewing CWD prevention efforts based on new research. One option that may be implemented is expanding the zone where hunters must submit samples to the very southwest corner of Manitoba.

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