

Texas Animal Health Commission

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New Chronic Wasting Disease Surveillance Regulations Proposed for Free-Ranging and Captive Elk in Texas

Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD), a fatal, degenerative brain wasting of elk, white-tailed and mule deer, has not been detected in Texas, but maintaining surveillance for the condition is essential for animal disease response and trade purposes. The Texas Animal Health Commission (TAHC), the state's livestock and poultry health regulatory agency, has proposed new regulations to ensure adequate CWD surveillance of captive and free-ranging elk moved within the state. The TAHC will accept comments on the proposed elk rules through November 9, and the TAHC commissioners will consider the rules for adoption at their December 8 meeting in Austin.

"White-tailed deer and other deer species have been under existing CWD surveillance programs through the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) and the TAHC," said Dr. Bob Hillman, Texas' state veterinarian and TAHC executive director. "The TAHC also offers voluntary CWD herd status programs for captive deer and elk to qualify the animals to be moved to other states. Furthermore, the TAHC has had importation rules in place for several years."

"Elk are not considered to be native to Texas, and although they are under the regulatory umbrella of the TAHC as exotic hoof stock, we did not have legal authority to require CWD testing of this species until House Bill 3330 went into effect September 1," said Dr. Hillman. The newly enacted legislation not only provides the needed authority, but also sets a Class C misdemeanor penalty for noncompliance. "We have worked closely with an elk industry task force, to develop a CWD program for elk being moved within the state. This will not only provide the disease surveillance we need, but it will also assure the health and marketability of these magnificent animals."

"The TAHC commissioners, at their September meeting, proposed the regulations that contain the four components necessary for adequate CWD surveillance of elk being transported from their premises: authority to conduct inspections of facilities, animals and records when necessary; movement record keeping; animal identification; and testing. If adopted, the proposed elk regulations would replace existing TAHC rules that are limited only to record keeping and the identification."

The proposed CWD elk regulations:

- Distinguish captive elk as those contained behind a fence at least seven feet high and free-ranging elk as those without the confines of a high fence.
- Require that any elk being moved or transported within the state have a visible, official identification device (ear tag) approved by the TAHC.
- Specify the content of reports that are to be completed and submitted to the TAHC within 48 hours of moving elk. Buyers and sellers of elk are to maintain records of elk movement for at least five years, and the TAHC is to be allowed access to ranch facilities and records when necessary for disease surveillance.
- Set the number of CWD tests that are required prior to moving elk from a herd. The statistical test numbers are based on whether the elk are free-ranging or captive, and the number of animals being moved. In free-ranging elk herds, an average of one elk must be tested for every 10 moved. For captive elk herds, the testing rate is higher; one elk is to be tested for every five moved.

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Add one/Elk Proposed Regulations

Under the TAHC's proposed regulations, elk would be test-eligible at 16 months of age or older, and tests conducted in a herd would be valid for a year. Animals tested must be euthanized or harvested, allowing for the collection of brain tissue for laboratory examination.

"The captive elk herd testing is at a higher rate, as these animals are usually maintained in closer confines for long periods of time, creating a greater risk of transmission, if disease is present. CWD is manifested in infected mature deer and elk, and as the degenerative disease progresses, the animals may stagger, drop weight, lose bodily functions, grind their teeth, and salivate excessively," said Dr. Hillman. "Because captive elk are sold and traded commercially, we also want to maintain the highest credibility for this industry, assuring high health standards."

"Some groups of elk will be exempt from the CWD herd testing," explained Dr. Hillman. "No testing of the herd is necessary if elk are being moved directly from the premises (farm or ranch) to a state- or federally inspected slaughter plant. Tissues can be collected for laboratory submission at the slaughter plant."

Also exempt from testing are captive elk herds that have "Level A" status (one year) in the TAHC's voluntary CWD monitored herd program. Owners of enrolled herds maintain annual inventories, identify animals individually, and ensure that testing is conducted when death losses occur in animals 16 months of age or older.

"Although we have not detected CWD in deer or elk in Texas, we must remain vigilant and prepared to address the disease," said Dr. Hillman. TAHC regulations are in effect to address a CWD-infected deer or elk herd. Actions would include, but not be limited to long-term quarantine, epidemiological investigation of animals moved into and from the herd, and the humane euthanasia and testing of suspicious and high-risk animals," said Dr. Hillman.

Comments on the TAHC's proposed regulations must be submitted in writing by emailing: comments@tahc.state.tx.us, or by mailing them to: TAHC Comments, Box 12966, Austin, Texas 78711-2966. Comments must be received by November 9. Copies of the text of the proposed regulation may be obtained on the TAHC web site at <http://www.tahc.state.tx.us>. To have a copy faxed or mailed, call the TAHC at 800-550-8242, ext 710.

CWD was first recognized in 1967 in a research facility with captive wild deer in Colorado. Since then, the disease has also been detected in free-ranging elk in Colorado, in free-ranging deer and elk in Wyoming, South Dakota and New Mexico, and in free-ranging deer in Utah, Wisconsin, Illinois, West Virginia and New York. In Colorado and Wyoming, infected moose also have been found.

CWD-infected captive elk herds have been detected and depopulated in Oklahoma, Kansas, Colorado, Nebraska, South Dakota, Montana, Minnesota and Wisconsin. Infected captive deer herds have been depopulated in Minnesota and Wisconsin, and in Michigan and New York. As of March 2009, the USDA reported that infected captive elk herds existed in Colorado and Minnesota. A captive deer herd was under quarantine in Wisconsin.

Dr. Hillman said researchers believe CWD is transmitted when infected elk or deer are in close contact with others, or when their bodily wastes containing the disease-causing abnormal proteins, or "prions" contaminate feed or water. Once susceptible animals are exposed, deteriorative changes occur in the animal's brain, eventually causing death.

"Hunters should always avoid sick, staggering or strange-acting animals," said Dr. Hillman. "A number of diseases, including rabies, could cause erratic behavior. To date, there has been no evidence of spread of CWD to humans, but hunters should always take precautions when processing wild animals. Wear gloves, goggles and cover the nose and mouth to avoid blood splatter in wounds or the face. Wash thoroughly after handling an animal carcass. Make reports about staggering or erratic animals to the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department or the Texas Animal Health Commission."