

US Department of Agriculture ends funding for chronic wasting disease

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Heartland Wildlife Ranch occupies land in northern Macon County where chronic wasting disease was identified in 2010. The free-range deer pen is surrounded by approximately 8 foot fences to contain the animals that once occupied the land. Since the discovery of the disease on the property and in surrounding areas, the Missouri Department of Conservation has killed all captive deer on the ranch. | Carrie Durkee

Chronic wasting disease has been discovered in the wild deer population in Macon County, and residents are concerned about how it will affect the hunting industry in the region. | [Carrie Durkee](#)

BY [Hannah Wiese](#), [John McLaughlin](#)

COLUMBIA — When Missouri confirmed its first case of chronic wasting disease in a captive white-tailed buck at the Linn County Heartland Wildlife Ranch in February 2010, state and federal officials soon agreed on the need to kill all of the deer in an infected 800-acre pasture on the property.

Yet it took nearly a year from the time the disease was confirmed at the commercial hunting operation for officials to move in and start killing all the game, according to a 2011 Animal and Plant Health Inspection

Service report.

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A gunner and two spotters, one using an infrared scope, aboard a Missouri Conservation Department helicopter swept the 800-acre pasture in April 2011 looking for the final few deer but saw none. An inspection of the pasture the following month affirmed that the captive deer were dead — 100 in all.

The 100 dead deer were buried in the infected 800-acre pasture with no additional positives found, said Jason Summers, deer biologist for the Missouri Conservation Department.

Jay Brasher of Utah, who owns the Linn County ranch where the disease was detected, told the Missourian in November that the U.S. Department of Agriculture reimbursed him more than \$100,000 for the captive deer killed on the 800 acres at his fenced hunting operation in Linn County.

“It wasn’t nearly what the animals were worth,” he said.

Captive game at the commercial hunting ranch include red deer, white-tailed deer, Rocky Mountain elk, American bison and sheep, according to [the ranch's website](#).

Before depopulating the infected pasture, ranch staff killed 46 white-tailed deer and four red deer from the enclosed 800 acres to test for the disease. The staff also killed 20 elk cows and an additional 10 red deer from separate enclosures at the facility for testing. No positive results for chronic wasting disease were found.

For a three-day, three-night hunt at a Heartland Wildlife Ranch, prices range from \$1,800 to kill a cow elk to upwards of \$18,500 for a trophy red stag, according to [Heartland's 2011 pricing guide](#).

Bagging a trophy white-tailed buck can cost \$15,500 or more, according to the guide.

After depopulating the infected Linn County pasture, testing 10 miles away at a separate commercial hunting facility owned by Brasher in Macon County found the disease in one white-tailed deer in October, another in December and two cases in March.

The discoveries in Macon County came as the federal government was cutting \$17 million in nationwide assistance used for compensating owners of infected captive deer herds killed in an effort to control the disease, according to the [U.S. Department of Agriculture's 2012 budget](#).

The funding cut also eliminated federal assistance in monitoring for the disease in wild and captive deer, leaving Missouri and other states on their own in the fiscal battle to keep the disease in check.

Now that the disease has jumped into the wild population, [the Missouri Conservation Department plans to step up testing in counties around the two ranches](#) and is pushing new measures designed to contain the disease.

While the state quarantined the Macon County ranch and ordered it depopulated, there's no federal money to help, Sumners said.

Without federal compensation, Brasher said in November that he had considered not killing off deer at his Macon County facility. If he were not to do so, the Missouri Agriculture Department would slap a permanent quarantine on the facility designed to keep the captive deer from leaving the fenced enclosure, according to the department.

Healthy deer, including those in the wild population, can get the disease from nose-to-nose contact with an infected deer, contact with an infected deer's excrement, mere contact with disease-laced soil or other contact with an infected deer, Sumners said.

The [Missouri Conservation Department's Wildlife Code](#) calls for the fencing of captive game such as deer to be 8 feet high and "constructed with material of sufficient strength to prevent escape."

Matt Dunfee, coordinator for the nongovernmental [Chronic Wasting Disease Alliance](#), said "it is highly probable, if not a certainty" that captive deer stick their noses through fencing to make contact with wild deer, particularly during mating season.

Sumners said the fencing at the Linn and Macon County Heartland Wildlife Ranches meets Missouri standards, and the fencing material is woven wire with 4 square-inches of space between the wires. He said confined deer are capable of sticking their noses through the gaps.

In January, a Linn County landowner wrote to the Missouri Conservation Department noting he had seen a white-tailed doe inside a Heartland Wildlife Ranch enclosure jump and clear the 8-foot fencing, according to documents provided by the Missouri Department of Agriculture.

In a return email, Christine Tew, spokeswoman for the Missouri Agriculture Department, told the landowner that a depopulation of the facility was under way and a quarantine was in place to prevent live deer from exiting the commercial hunting operation's property without testing.

The Missouri Agriculture Department announced on May 7 that the depopulation of the infected Macon County commercial hunting facility was complete, with the ranch's staff handling the killing of 366 total cervids, or any of various hoofed animals such as deer and elk, at the 3,000-acre facility since October 2011 — when the disease was first confirmed at the property.

Ten total slaughtered cervids from the Macon County facility tested positive for the disease, and the

operation remains under quarantine. State and federal officials will conduct a final inspection of the facility to ensure the depopulation is finished, according to the Missouri Agriculture Department.

Officials from the Conservation, Agriculture, and Health and Senior Services departments plan to work with Brasher and his staff in developing a five-year management plan, according to the department.

Linda Hickam, state veterinarian for the Missouri Agriculture Department, could not be reached in previous attempts for an interview, and Dane Henry — a veterinary medical officer at the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service — said department policy prohibited him from speaking directly with journalists.

Dunfee said delays in depopulating all of the deer from the two ranches could have compromised efforts in Missouri to keep the disease in check.

If Missouri had killed off deer at the commercial hunting operations right away, the state might have been able to stop the disease from spreading into the wild population, he said.

Billion-dollar deer

The loss in federal funds couldn't have come at a worse time for Missouri, which is moving from detecting the disease to trying to contain it.

Soon after the federal cuts, the state's first wild white-tailed deer tested positive for the disease within two miles of the infected Macon County commercial hunting operation, which would have made Missouri eligible for an increase in federal funding.

Five total diseased wild deer have been found to date, all of which were killed within two miles of each other outside of the Macon County ranch.

Missouri would have been in the same tier of funding as Wisconsin — which lost about \$2 million to fight its outbreak, according to the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture issued funding in three tiers:

- Tier 1 funding, the greatest amount provided, went to states with wild deer infected with the disease.
- Tier 2 funding went to states with neighboring states having wild infections.
- Tier 3 funding went to states with neither wild infections nor neighboring states with wild infections, which received no money.

The Missouri Conservation Department began testing for chronic wasting disease in 2002 and paid for it in-house until 2006, when the federal government pitched in the first time with \$90,000.

By 2007, the U.S. Department of Agriculture had cut its share of Missouri assistance to \$75,000, and in 2010 the amount declined to \$70,000, according to the Conservation Department.

The \$70,000 covered statewide testing prior to finding the disease in Missouri, Summers said. Now that money will have to come from elsewhere in the Conservation Department budget.

“Seventy thousand dollars is no small amount of money,” he said. “While it probably won’t affect chronic wasting disease testing, it could impact something else getting done. We’re still going to do testing, absolutely.”

From where in the department the money will come has yet to be determined, he said. “At this point, I don’t see the cut impacting how we do business.”

The Conservation Department plans to step up its testing of hunter-killed deer during hunting season and has established a six-county perimeter around where the diseased wild deer were detected — outside the infected Macon County commercial hunting facility, Sumners said.

The counties include: Sullivan, Adair, Macon, Linn, Sheridan and Randolph counties.

The department will also sample random deer provided by area taxidermists in northern Missouri, Sumners said. The samples will be mostly bucks, which are more likely to carry the disease, he said. Last year, the department focused on southern Missouri for random taxidermist testing.

Pending approval of control measures for wild deer, Missouri conservation officials will begin taking additional steps by the fall, Sumners said.

[As reported previously by the Missourian](#), the measures being considered include:

- Targeted culling, or selectively shooting deer from within a site known to be infected to slim out the population.

In May, the department approved a ban on recreational deer feeders in a six county perimeter of the infected Macon County ranch, which includes: Adair, Chariton, Linn, Macon, Randolph and Sullivan counties.

The department also approved removing antler-size restrictions in the six-county area to allow for more killing of bucks, which are more likely to carry the disease.

Within the six-county area, the department recommends that hunters not remove whole carcasses or carcass parts, especially the head or spinal column.

Processed and wrapped meat, meat that has had bones removed, other portions of the deer lacking head and spinal cord parts, hides or capes, with all the excess tissue removed, antlers, antlers attached to skull plates or skulls lacking brain and muscle tissue, upper canine teeth, and finished taxidermy products make the exceptions to this recommendation.

“Deer are worth \$1.1 billion to Missouri,” Sumners said, and efforts to protect them will continue.

Risky syndrome

Chronic wasting disease kills cervids — such as elk, moose and deer — and has not yet been proven to affect livestock, house pets or humans, according to the Missouri Agriculture, and Health and Senior Services departments.

Nonetheless, health officials advise against the consumption of diseased deer, especially certain deer parts where the mutated prions — the infectious agent of the disease — accumulate: the brain, eyes, lymph nodes, spinal cord and spleen.

Symptoms of the syndrome are extreme weight loss, tremors, stumbling and excessive salivation, and deer might carry the disease without displaying any symptoms for three or more years, according to the Missouri Conservation Department.

The department recommends that hunters concerned about possible disease transmission wear rubber or latex gloves when field dressing and processing deer.

At the Linn County Heartland Wildlife Ranch, exposed carcass remains were found at five locations during depopulation efforts, according to the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service report.

One location was an above-ground enclosure made of hay bales — which might have been leaching carcass runoff into nearby private land — that shared a fenced enclosure with captive red deer, the report stated. The other sites were uncovered carcass pits.

"Depending on when the infection was introduced," these carcass disposal sites might have been a source of disease exposure, according to the report.

Dunfee said infective prions can remain in the soil for at least three years, and every previous effort to clean an infected environment has failed.

Brasher said he was allowed to place non-native red deer back in the infected 800-acre enclosure and continue his hunting operation. He said in November that the Macon County Heartland Wildlife Ranch was for sale, but that he intended to repopulate the ranch and reopen it to hunting if it doesn't sell.

The ranch carries a price tag of \$16.5 million after the listing was reduced by \$5 million, according to [Open Fences](#) and other land broker websites.

The lack of federal assistance crippled national surveillance for the disease, Dunfee said. "Most states will likely reduce or stop active surveillance" for chronic wasting disease, he said. "We can't stop it."

Supervising editor is [John Schneller](#).