

TB Hindsight puts CWD action in focus

BY PAUL W. JACKSON

What would have happened 10 years ago, wondered Ernie Birchmeier, if Michigan had taken the same approach to bovine tuberculosis as it took recently when it found a case of Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) in a privately owned cervid facility in Kent County?

"We all know how good hindsight can be," said Michigan Farm Bureau's livestock specialist. "But it's no good at all if we can't use it to see the future. Right now, the future looks pretty bad if we take the same approach to CWD that we did for TB. We need to use everything at our disposal to stop the disease now, because we don't need to spend another 10 years and way more than \$100 million on a nasty disease. We know the actions taken will hurt some of our members, but this is the right thing to do."

The response to finding one CWD-positive deer on a privately-owned cervid farm in northern Kent County just before Labor Day was predictable, at least in part because of what the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and Michigan Department of Agriculture (MDA) learned from dealing with TB all these years. Both departments, for many years, have had a response plan in place should CWD pop up, and that plan included prohibition of feeding and baiting if the disease were found in Michigan or within 50 miles of the state border. The plan also is being followed to the letter on the cervid farm where the single animal was discovered. Every animal was destroyed, and tracebacks were begun to try to find every other animal that may have been exposed to the infected white-tail. Surveillance of cervid farms has been increased, as has wild deer monitoring, according to Mike Bailey, supervisor of the DNR's species and habitat section.

"We're taking 300 samples from nine townships in northern Kent County, and 300 samples from adjacent counties," he said. "We're taking samples from road kill and issuing disease-control hunting permits to people in those nine townships who request them. We'll also collect heads from the early antlerless season" (Sept. 18-22, which includes private land hunts in Kent County).

The DNR also offers a 70 percent discount on antlerless deer licenses in Kent County, and will give a free replacement deer license for any deer brought into a check station that appears to have symptoms of CWD, as determined by the DNR personnel at the check station. Bringing dead deer into a check station in those nine townships is mandatory.

Many farmers who grow for bait and feed markets - or gain extra income from culls - hope that all those efforts turn up no sign of CWD in the wild deer herd. Hart vegetable grower Gerry Malburg hopes the ban will then be lifted. But, that probably won't happen.

Malburg, who said he'll leave sugar beets he normally sells as deer bait to rot in the ground, is one of the people who will be hurt by the ban, but he understands why the action has been taken, and why Michigan Farm Bureau supports it. He was active in Farm Bureau policy making when delegates voted to call for a baiting and feeding ban statewide. But it still hurts him and many other farmers who took advantage of the cultural practice of hunting over bait and made a little extra cash. Of course, like deer, some farmers became dependent on bait and feed.

"I don't think people realize the extent of the deer feed business," Malburg said. "The timing is just terrible. I know one guy who has 150 acres of sugar beets and no home for them. I've already cancelled a \$25,000 bag purchase, and I'm small compared to some growers. This is a multi-million dollar industry

in Michigan, and now the people who raise the crops are stuck with them. There also are a lot of small and big stores throughout Michigan that rely on this as their shot in the arm to get through the year." In time, there may be ways to compensate those growers, but no one's breath should be held. It's just as likely - or more likely - that no indemnity will come, because Michigan's budget can't handle it. Besides, farmers who lost cucumber crops when the state destroyed them to stop Downy mildew were never compensated for their losses. Nursery owners who lost ash trees to Emerald Ash Borer never got a check from the state.

Commodity groups and the entire ag industry are working hard to find markets for the crops, Birchmeier said. Farm Bureau is working with Michigan State University's Product Center to encourage farmers to use the Product Center's MarketMaker program to match crops with buyers. Sugar beet growers in the Thumb have asked Michigan Sugar Company to buy the extra beets that would have gone to bait and feed markets. There was no word at press time if the company would take action. However, with a potentially record beet crop this year, there are concerns about the processor's capacity to handle additional beets. So, it appears bait growers will have to put up with the pain and take some losses for the overall good of the state. The cervid farm, however, gets indemnified at market value, up to \$3,000 per animal.

"There is a difference between how indemnification is paid for animals and crops," said Steve Halstead, Michigan's state veterinarian. "There is indemnification on livestock in this situation because the (DNR) director ordered them destroyed. For a crop in this case, the grower still has options. It's not bait until it's sold as bait, and it could be used for something else."

Sacrificing crops for the greater good (as was the contention with Downy mildew and other crop diseases) isn't so easy to swallow when you're the one making the sacrifice, but if CWD were left to take its own course, there would be graver consequences than one season's crop loss, said Steve Schmitt, DNR wildlife veterinarian and supervisor of the state's wildlife disease lab.

"What we've learned from the 11 states and two Canadian provinces where this was found is that once you get it, you probably won't get it out," he said. "It's very difficult to control its spread, and so the name of the game is prevention."

Given enough time, CWD will destroy a deer herd if left unchecked, Schmitt said, and that has economic and social consequences well beyond the present action.

In time, of course, there will develop new uses and markets for products that are used to bait and feed deer, although it seems doubtful that the market for suburban backyard deer feeding will dry up anytime soon.

"We won't go knocking on doors, but if we're notified about someone feeding deer, we will enforce the law no matter who they are," Bailey said.

People caught baiting or feeding will be issued a ticket, and will appear before a prosecutor who will use his or her own discretion about whether to impose fines or jail time.

Cervid industry lockdown

There's no ambiguity about punishment for the privately owned cervid industry, however. Cervid farms and ranches are banned from moving animals anywhere, and again, the timing is bad, said Alex Draper, president of the Michigan Deer and Elk Farmers Association.

"There is no good timing (to find CWD in the privately-owned or wild herd), but this is the worst time," he said. "What hurts us most is not the hunting, but getting animals to breeders. We're coming into the prime time for breeding, and they have us under 24-hour watch since the deer (in Kent County) was found. The cervid industry is the scapegoat, and would be whether CWD was found in the wild or on a farm, but thank God they found it on a farm and not in the wild, or we'd be going through even more dramatic damage control."

Every member of the Association, Draper said, is certified, tests for disease commonly, has electronic ID tags in each animal's ear, and undergoes DNR inspections of fences and facilities. The Kent County farm, he said, is not a member of the association.

"The reason we got into the certification process was because we needed the potential to sell out of state," he said. "But now, so much for getting the borders opened. There's still no reason not to, especially when you consider that Wisconsin (which has CWD in its wild deer herd) can move animals, and they're not even required to do TB testing."

A traditional supporter of testing and certification for privately owned cervids, Draper said the response to one animal with CWD on a non-certified farm has been overblown.

"I think to ban all movement in the whole state is not proportional to the problem," he said. "And to throw in a bait ban, the deer industry will take a hit for that."

Hunters who thrill over the deer industry will, like the farmers, have to adjust to changes and move on, Bailey said. But this in no way will destroy deer hunting in Michigan or lead to a larger herd more susceptible to disease.

"I don't think we'll lose much of the deer harvest because we can't bait," he said. "We used to kill a lot of deer before baiting was common practice, and there are a lot of deer out there. The majority of calls we're getting (at the DNR) indicates that most people understand and support it because this is the prudent thing to do."

"We're concerned that there will still be plenty of hunters who bait, either because they didn't know about the ban or ignore it, but in time the ban will be good for the wild herd," Birchmeier said.

"I attended some meetings this year with the hunt clubs in the Northeast, the ones who had put out big piles of feed," he said. "When the feeding and baiting ban was instituted in the Northeast and they stopped what they were doing, they reported that the deer actually reverted back to being deer. Instead of coming out at night to feed, they reverted back to normal deer behavioral patterns and hunters were able to take them again without the piles. The whole point of that lesson is that when you feed deer like cattle, they change their behavior and in some cases get cattle diseases (TB). But when you don't, they return to their normal patterns."

The root of the problem some people have with the recent decision, Birchmeier said, is mainly because "an entire generation of hunters only knows one way to hunt, and that's over bait. But I think as they learn how to hunt without it, they'll learn that a hunt can be just as successful, and likely more fulfilling, than using bait."

If, and when, the baiting ban is lifted depends largely on how clean the state's deer herd comes out after this hunting season. But it's not certain if baiting will ever return to ubiquity in Michigan.

Suspicious that baiting will never find favor again, hunters have expressed the opinion that the DNR has never liked baiting and feeding, and the single CWD case was a good excuse to ban the practice. And while Birchmeier said Farm Bureau is sympathetic to members who will lose money this year, in this case, perhaps the culture needs changing.

"If we had changed the culture that led to TB, maybe we wouldn't have had to hurt so many farmers whose herds were depopulated, and maybe we wouldn't have created conditions that led to deer-damaged crops," he said. "The state didn't need any of that."

What the state needs now, Schmitt said, is time, because even though a wild herd can thrive today with CWD, over time it cannot.

"In states where it has been found, they have not seen a dramatic reduction in the herd, but it's only been here a few years," he said. "Over 50 years, you could see a dramatic decrease, up to 70 percent. You might see no decrease in the first 25, but in the next 25, it could be drastic."

And so, the drastic response the DNR took will have to be given time. There are few other choices. And despite the harm done to bait and feed growers, private cervid owners, and the perceived harm to hunters, Birchmeier said it's the right thing to do.

"Farm Bureau policy calls for a ban on baiting and feeding, and we understand that the policy catches some of our own members in the net," he said. "But I think, in time, we'll all be better off because of this. Sometimes a little pain now saves us a lot of heartache later. The cliché is that 'an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.' In this case, it might seem like a ton of prevention, but it's designed to prevent a whole state from having to endure the cure."