



# Minister's Wildlife Advisory Council

"Wildlife and their habitats thrive, are resilient, and support and enrich the lives of all British Columbians"

April 12, 2024

Minister Nathan Cullen, Water, Land and Resource Stewardship

Dear Minister Cullen,

## **Re: Capacity for Chronic Wasting Disease Testing in BC**

Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) is now a sad reality for people, deer, and other cervids (i.e., elk, moose, caribou) in B.C. A critical component of your Ministry's response strategy involves enhanced testing in affected areas, as well as supporting management, monitoring, and research to address this issue.

CWD is unlike many 'typical' wildlife diseases: it is currently untreatable and it persists in the environment. CWD may make harvested animals unsafe for human consumption and could be one more stressor for populations already in decline. For communities dependent on wild harvest for food sovereignty, food security, cultural practices, and recreation, CWD is devastating.

One of the most important tools we can offer the people of B.C. is rapid testing. With testing, managers can more accurately pinpoint outbreaks and can offer hunters the confidence that their efforts to provide food for their families will be respected. Currently, we are seeing test results measured in the months. In many cases, this will mean people will consume the meat even against Health Canada's recommendations to not consume CWD positive tissue. We understand that there is movement toward a 2–3 week turnaround time. We see that as a positive step but encourage you to push this even further and support this testing with adequate resources and even more rapid response times.

If test results are measured in weeks and months, not days, it is easy to imagine how and why people may take such risks to their health. If CWD is ever confirmed to cross the species barrier and infect humans, we do not want B.C. to be a test case for human transmission.

To limit the negative impacts and spread of this disease, frequent and timely testing of B.C. cervids is required to understand the dynamics of the outbreak and respond effectively. CWD testing has been ongoing in B.C. for over 10 years but has relied on out-of-province labs with long wait times for results. The BC Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Health Centre (Abbotsford) is now offering to support this work but has identified capacity challenges and will require additional resources to deliver this service effectively.

Timely testing is critical to provide your Ministry staff with information that will guide response efforts. Timely testing is also key to maintaining the support and partnership from the hunting community that provides over 80% of samples to the program.

More specifically, we request that B.C. create a testing program that:

- 1) Provides results to hunters within 7 days of submission;
- 2) Enables a compensatory mechanism of hunters with positive cases so they are not punished for assisting in management—every CWD-positive animal removed from the population should be rewarded! (Consider tag replacement programs that have been applied elsewhere).
- 3) Support operations (e.g., enhanced sampling from non-hunters), monitoring and research (e.g. deer movement studies), based on the actions outlined in Nelson et al., 2023 ("[A Surveillance and Response Plan for Chronic Wasting Disease in British Columbia](#)") and the advice of regional and provincial CWD advisory groups.
- 4) Perhaps most importantly, we encourage you to empower and support front line staff to operationalize the 2023 CWD response plan. CWD and our response to it will remain a controversial issue for years to come—this include actions and inactions. Much like our lessons from COVID-19, we see how an evidence-based, transparent approach will deconflict different sectors of society. A lack of information and shifting baselines sow discontent and mistrust. We are urging similar 'emergency measures' leadership for this critical issue of CWD. Such an approach may mean sampling animals in inconvenient places or times, such as deer living in towns in the spring—which are currently off limits for testing. Indeed, it is in the urban spaces where deer densities are highest, and where contact with people are most likely. If we are not sampling in the towns of southeastern B.C., we are neglecting some of the riskiest areas for transmission of CWD.
- 5) For B.C.'s wildlife populations to be resilient in the face of CWD and multiple-other stressors, there is no greater time to pursue the goals of Together for Wildlife. We will need healthy landscapes and habitats so that cervid populations can recover. We request that the Province hastens its budgetary and time commitments to Together for Wildlife to support wildlife, habitat, and reconciliation.

To implement these recommendations, funding above and beyond BC's current funding levels for wildlife is needed. Your Minister's Wildlife Advisory Council discussed CWD at a recent meeting, and we urge you to work with your colleague the Honorable Pam Alexis to support adequate resourcing and capacity for CWD testing at the Animal Health Centre, in WLRS and other bodies supporting this critical issue.

Sincerely,

Simoogit Hleek (Chief Harry Nyce Sr.) and Nancy Wilkin

Co-Chairs, Minister's Wildlife Advisory Council

Cc: Honourable Pam Alexis, Minister of Agriculture and Food  
Peter Pokorny, Deputy Minister of Agriculture and Food  
Lori Halls, Deputy Minister, Water, Land and Resource Stewardship  
Minister's Wildlife Advisory Council  
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