

Deer farming not a threat to wild population

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Stories in The Indianapolis Star in recent months have painted a one-sided picture of the deer-farming industry in Indiana and other states. The image has been one of reckless businesses that contribute to the spread of wildlife disease.

As a doctor in veterinary pathobiology who has been active in the field of wildlife disease for 40 years, this painting couldn't be further from reality.

Chronic wasting disease, or CWD, is an ailment that affects a small number of deer and does not appear to be a threat to humans. Complicating matters, however, is the fact that there is not an approved live test for CWD.

In a recent article, Star reporter Ryan Sabalow claimed that farmed deer "endangers wild deer" by being a disease vector. If anything, it's more accurate to say the opposite.

CWD can be spread by animal-to-animal contact among wild herds. It also can be in plant matter, such as alfalfa, which is transported between states as hay.

Farmed deer is another — theoretical — way that CWD could spread from one state or area to another. But there already are controls in place to mitigate this risk.

Federal regulations require that deer shipped interstate must have a certificate of veterinary inspection. The U.S. Department of Agriculture last month released guidelines for a herd certification program to certify herds that are low-risk for CWD. (Certification programs have been present in states for over a decade.)

At least five years of mortality testing with no evidence of CWD are required before herd owners can achieve certified status and be eligible to move their animals interstate. Herd owners must have fencing in place, individually identify animals, and conduct regular inventories. Other programs include certification and accreditation for tuberculosis and brucellosis.

Deer farms are smartly regulated, and with monitoring there's far more that we know about farmed deer than wild deer. One-hundred percent of captive deer are tested for CWD. However, in the wild, less than 1 percent of deer are tested, explaining the unfair perception that CWD is an issue with deer farms.

In fact, there are many areas of the country that have no deer farms and yet CWD is prevalent. CWD is found in free-ranging deer, but not in captive deer, in 10 states. In

contrast, there are about five states where CWD has been found only in captive deer/elk but not their free-ranging counterparts. (There are about 10 states where CWD is found in both.)

Moreover, the disease is fortunately rare in both wild and farmed deer. Records collected by the USDA from 1998 to 2012 show that CWD occurs in only about four in 1,000 wild deer, and it is actually twice as prevalent in wild deer as farmed deer.

No deer farmer would ever want to import diseased deer. It would destroy his business and his hard work; his herd likely would have to be eradicated. In short, there's no incentive to cut corners.

Unfortunately, the facts don't matter to politicians seeking cheap political points. Recently, six congressmen who are sympathetic to anti-hunting, animal-rights causes sent a letter to the USDA asking for a nationwide ban on interstate transport of live deer.

This move will hurt deer farms, many of which are family businesses, without having a practical effect. Texas has not allowed importation of white-tailed or mule deer since 2005, yet that did not stop CWD from getting into wild mule deer along the border with New Mexico, a state where private deer farming is banned.

The fact that CWD is in wild populations means that no amount of regulations will prevent or eliminate the disease. A practical way forward should include practical regulations. The USDA's herd certification program is a good measure. A blanket ban on interstate commerce is not — and neither is misinformation.

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