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Deadly deer disease expected to worsen under Michigan's controversial hunting limits

Christine Ferretti The Detroit News

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A controversial restriction on hunting in the Michigan county hardest hit by a deadly deer disease is expected to make the problem worse, a study commissioned by the state shows.

The state's Natural Resources Commission got its first glimpse of data last month from Montcalm County under the plan it approved last year to impose antler point restrictions on hunting in Montcalm, Ionia and Mecosta counties for the first time.

The commission did so in part to fight chronic wasting disease, a contagious, incurable disease that threatens to decimate the state's white-tail deer population and hunting industry. Similar to mad cow disease, chronic wasting disease attacks the brains of deer, causes the animals to act abnormally and prematurely die.

Antler point restrictions, or APRs, have been debated and implemented in fits and starts in Michigan for decades. Hunters are banned from hunting deer unless they have a certain number of antler points depending of the type of license bought from the state regulators and the hunting location in the state.

Hunters in Mecosta, Montcalm and Ionia counties are required to harvest only bucks with at least four or more points that measure at least one inch on one side of an antler. The state tends to require fewer points on an antler in other areas of Michigan.

The restrictions aim to increase the age of bucks and protect them from being hunted until they graduate to another age class with more antlers. The move encourages hunters to target more does and, in turn, reduce the overall herd.

Scenarios both with and without the restrictions show the wasting disease will increase

"exponentially" in the next decade. But with the restrictions, it's significantly worse, according to preliminary findings from the joint study by the Michigan Department of Natural Resources and Michigan State University researchers.

Even so, the Natural Resources Commission agreed to allow the study, only in its initial stages, to go on.

It's a move an activist group contends is "blatantly ignoring science" used for lifting the restrictions in disease zones in Iowa, Missouri and Minnesota, and goes against the responsibility the board is bound to under state law.

"We're going to be dealing with CWD for a long time. This is going to have an impact and make it worse," said Jim Sweeney, an opponent of antler point restrictions and member of nonprofit conservation group the Concerned Sportsmen of Michigan. "They are very reluctant to make a move now that makes it look like they made a mistake."

Sweeney pointed to Proposal G, which was approved by Michigan voters in 1996 and requires the commission to use principles of "sound scientific management" for setting game regulations. Research in other states and Michigan shows the antler restrictions make the disease worse, so scientific principles would argue for ending the restrictions, he said.

"That's where it's falling apart," Sweeney added. "They are falling down on the job."

But state officials insist the study needs more time to fulfill its purpose — collecting a breakdown of herd data that no other state in the country has yet to undertake.

Officials during the July meeting acknowledged the problem was projected to climb faster with the restrictions in place. But said the benefit of completing the study outweighs the spread of the disease in the short-term.

Chad Stewart, deer, elk and moose management specialist for the state Department of Natural Resources, said the relationship between antler point restrictions and the disease hasn't been fully explored. That's part of the reason why commissioners agreed to the three-year study on the slow-moving disease, he said.

"For a two- or three-year investment, we can get a fairly concrete answer to this topic," Stewart said. "Good, bad, neutral, we'll have that information."

Policy critics say the restrictions are counterproductive because they force hunters to

target healthy yearlings and does instead of older deer, where this specific disease is most commonly found.

In Michigan, hunters typically harvest more bucks than does. The study will gauge whether hunter behaviors change with the restrictions in place, targeting more antlerless deer over bucks, and if it's enough to make a difference in management of the disease.

The number of antlerless deer harvested in the study zone increased about 11% from 10,091 in 2018 to 11,230 last year with the new restrictions.

Keith Creagh, who served as director of the state DNR when the measure was first discussed, told The Detroit News that officials, at the time, made a commitment that there would be "no harm to the resource." And if there was, "we would pull the plug on the experiment."

The study is a means of collecting the data needed to draw a sound conclusion, he said.

"What we're doing is a scientific comparison in paired townships to have the science to definitively answer the question," said Creagh, who now serves on the Natural Resources Commission. "It's a huge issue, and it's fundamental that those of us that have that responsibility ... base our decisions on science."

Stewart said the state doesn't yet have a good sense of the age and sex of the deer that remain after the annual hunting season is over.

With the help of specialized software and cameras, the study will allow researchers to collect more field data on deer sex and age ratios. It also will shed light on the impact of the restrictions on the harvest to refine the model "to see if it changes the trajectory over time," Stewart said.

The first cases of the disease in free-ranging deer were confirmed in the Ingham County suburb of Meridian Township in 2015. Five animals tested positive there in a two-year span.

In five years, the state has tested more than 80,000 deer for the disease. Officials have confirmed a total of 189 positive cases from a nine-county area, Stewart said.

"That sounds very small but we're testing those 80,000 deer from all over the state," he said. "In some areas, we're finding one out of 100. In other areas, it's one out of 50 deer. In other areas, we may have tested thousands upon thousands of deer and not found it at all."

Montcalm County has had the most cases — or 117 positive deer — identified to date.

"We continue to find more positive deer in that area, and we suspect because we're finding so many, so frequently, that trend in that area is going to increase," Stewart said.

Just over half the states in the country have reported instances of the disease.

Michigan's cases have been confirmed in northeast Kent County as well as Jackson, Ingham and Gratiot counties. Dickinson County is the sole Upper Peninsula county with confirmed cases.

It's unclear how long the disease stays in the environment once cases emerge.

"Nobody has ever been able to put a cap on it," Stewart said. "Some research has shown it can remain infectious for potentially decades."

Dwayne Etter, a wildlife research specialist for the DNR's wildlife division, presented findings specific to Montcalm County during the resource commission's July meeting, stressing the model, adapted from a database based on deer habitat Missouri, is "not a predictive model."

"It's not designed to plug information in post-haste," he told commission members, adding the state doesn't currently have "robust estimates."

Etter told The News "we're not real confident" in the data provided for the modeling. The study is designed to collect real-time, accurate information.

There's about a 1% prevalence rate in Montcalm County. The model shows it'll go up to 6% with the restrictions and 4.5% without them in about a decade.

Etter said there are two more field seasons to go and results should be available in 2022.

Commissioner Carol Rose expressed some concern during the meeting over having antler restrictions in areas where the disease is present, saying it "seems kind of counter-intuitive."

Creagh told The News he was disappointed that more does weren't harvested last season with the antler restrictions. If the numbers of does harvested don't climb significantly this season, "that tells us very specifically that what we're trying to accomplish is not working and we would need to pull the plug immediately," said Creagh, who urged DNR leaders to come up with risk mitigation measures for the area.

Erik Schnelle, president for the Quality Deer Management Association for Michigan, said his organization is supportive of antler point restrictions as one component of deer management. But he said they aren't the whole answer.

Educating hunters on the importance of targeting more does over antlered deer will be key, he said.

The upcoming season, he said, will be an important measure of how the restrictions in the study area perform. Deer hunting season opens Oct. 1 for archery and Nov. 15 for firearms.

"One season doesn't tell the tale," Schnelle said. "If we hunters do our part and harvest more does, we expect that the lines would look better over time and you would see it get steadily better.

"If all we do is get bucks a year older and don't harvest more does and balance the herd better than (Sweeney) is right, we're not going to do a thing for chronic wasting disease."

Wildlife biologist Bill Porter formerly led a team at the State University of New York that helped eliminate the disease there in 2005. He's also directed a team of Michigan State University researchers studying the disease outbreak in Michigan.

The antler point experiment, he said, is looking at the potential of using hunters to reduce the deer density and, in turn, reduce the disease spread. The computer modeling will explore a half-dozen to a dozen strategies to see what has the best potential.

"We're looking at a variety of strategies from targeting particular age groups, to trying to get a sense of how much reduction in density you would need to bring the disease under a semblance of control," said Porter, who oversaw a team doing modeling for the disease before retiring last month. "Twenty-five other states have tried a variety of things, and nobody has been successful."

Over the last five years, Porter said, researchers have been examining the riskiest places in the state for the disease to crop up, where it's likely to spread and the best strategies to control it.

The analysis of the riskiest areas and where spread is likely should see results within the coming year. The third question likely won't be answered until 2022, Porter said.

A prior MSU analysis based on five years' worth of data from antler point restrictions in 12 northwest Michigan counties did not show an increase in harvesting of deer without

antlers, nor did it bring more hunters to those areas.

Stewart said the state has spent years conducting surveillance to pinpoint the distribution of the disease and better target its response.

In Ingham County, the DNR brought in sharpshooters to remove deer with landowner permission. But for Montcalm, containment efforts are "difficult to manage, if not impossible," Stewart said.

The state also has been more flexible with deer hunting licenses to make hunters more successful and manage the herd. Last year, officials implemented a ban for baiting and feeding in the lower peninsula during hunting season to curb disease spread.

Jimmy Barette of Harrison Township began hunting a few years ago with friends in Tawas and Roscommon County. Efforts like the deer baiting ban, he said, have driven some hunters elsewhere.

"On CWD, I believe it's out there, but it is what it is," said Barette, 22. "It's not as bad as the Michigan DNR has made it seem."

Stewart said if something isn't done about the disease, it will devastate the deer population, industry and gaming agencies. Michigan United Conservation Clubs estimates Michigan's 700,000 hunters generate about \$8.9 billion annually.

"If you're an animal lover or a deer lover, this is not something you want to see in your deer herd at all," he said. "It's a terrible way to die."

cferretti@detroitnews.com

APR Field Study in the Core CWD Area

The Natural Resources Commission requested that the DNR evaluate the impact of antler point restrictions within the five-county Core CWD Area on prevalence and spread of chronic wasting disease, increasing antlerless harvest, and decreasing deer population beginning with the 2020 deer season. For this field study, the five-county Core CWD Area was divided in half. In Mecosta, Montcalm, and Ionia counties, only bucks with at least four points on one antler can be taken with a valid license. In Newaygo and Kent counties, any buck with an antler greater than three inches in length can be taken with a valid license. The data collected will be able to provide estimates on deer abundance and sex/age ratio changes, factors that are likely to contribute to the overall CWD spread. Additionally, deer harvest, hunter numbers, and hunter perceptions of APRs will be assessed. However, due to the relatively low CWD prevalence rates currently observed and the historically slow spread of the disease on the landscape, the study cannot provide estimates on the prevalence and spread of CWD. The DNR has partnered with the Boone and Crockett Quantitative Wildlife Center at Michigan State University to conduct this research. At the end of the project (Fall 2023), the results along with conclusions and management recommendations will be presented to the Commission. Recommendations will include the efficacy of APR regulations as a tool for managing the prevalence and spread of CWD. Additional information on this study available at Michigan.gov/CWD.

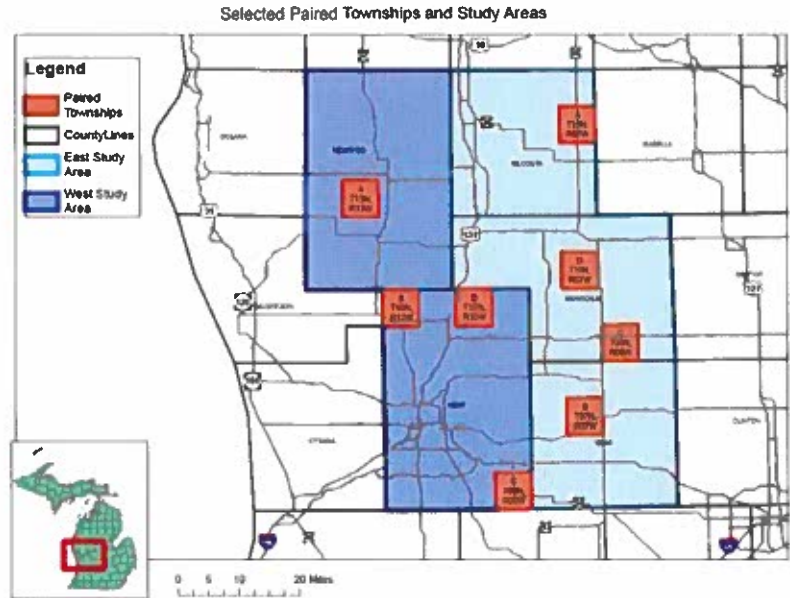
Urban Deer Management Zone for Macomb, Oakland, and Wayne Counties

The archery season will extend until January 31, 2021 for Macomb, Oakland, and Wayne counties in order to manage ongoing human-deer conflicts. Licenses including a deer license, deer combination license, or an antlerless deer license, are valid during the extended season. All rules and regulations for the archery season apply. See Archery Deer Seasons on pg. 22 for equipment regulations.

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Summary of the APR Field Study in the CWD Core Area May 2019

In consultation with deer hunting stakeholder groups, the Natural Resource Commission (NRC) established a resolution requesting the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to develop and conduct a research project to evaluate if mandatory antler point restriction (APR) regulations can be a useful tool in responding to the emergence of Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) in Michigan deer. The current CWD management core area consisting of the five counties of Kent, Newaygo, Mecosta, Montcalm, and Ionia (hereafter referred to as 5-County) offers an opportunity to evaluate if APR regulations can influence deer population abundance and sex/age composition; factors that may contribute to the prevalence and spread of CWD.



Under the NRC resolution, the 5-counties have been set up as a CWD assessment area and the NRC is considering a mandatory APR beginning in the 2019 hunting season. The resolution calls for the NRC along with the Department to use the CWD assessment area to experimentally assess the effectiveness of APRs in assisting with management of CWD. The DNR Wildlife Division has partnered with the Boone and Crockett Quantitative Wildlife Center (QWC) at Michigan State University (MSU) to address this research question.

In consultation with DNR Wildlife Division Biologists and Researchers, the QWC developed a paired comparison of APR and non-APR areas in the 5-County area designed to detect changes in abundance and age/sex distributions over 4 years (2019-2022). The paired sample sites will be selected based on similar habitat, land uses, human density, and apparent/observed CWD prevalence across the APR and non-APR areas. Consequently, this design depends on regulations that split the 5-county area into two segments with APRs implemented in one of the segments and no APRs in the other. Given the need for controlling factors, the optimal split will be Kent and Newaygo counties in one segment with Mecosta, Montcalm, and Ionia being in the other (i.e., an east-west split to avoid variations in land cover/use, human, and deer populations that would occur with a north-south split).

Direct measures to detect change in the spread and prevalence of CWD resulting from APR regulations are unlikely during this study. The Department believes that detecting finite change in prevalence of CWD is beyond the present sampling capabilities using hunter-harvested deer. Additionally, other factors which cannot be accounted for in this study design could influence prevalence and spread of CWD (e.g., natural or human induced immigration of deer). The final product will be a predictive model of potential change in prevalence and spread of CWD under APR and non-APR regulations. These models will incorporate the estimates of deer abundance and sex/age composition derived from this study.

At the end of the project (Fall 2023), the results along with conclusions and management recommendations will be presented to the NRC and interested stakeholders. Recommendations will include the efficacy of APR regulations as a tool for managing the prevalence and spread of CWD.

PROJECT DURATION: Data collection will begin before enacting APR regulations (estimates of deer herd composition with sampling occurring in summer 2019) and 3 years post APR regulation implementation (deer herd response to APR regulations in effect for 2019, 2020, and 2021 hunting season with sampling occurring during summer 2020, 2021, and 2022, respectively). Final data analyses and report writing to be completed by 30 September 2023.

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