CWD control efforts have resulted in fewer reported cases of this fatal deer disease.

Chronic Wasting Disease Update

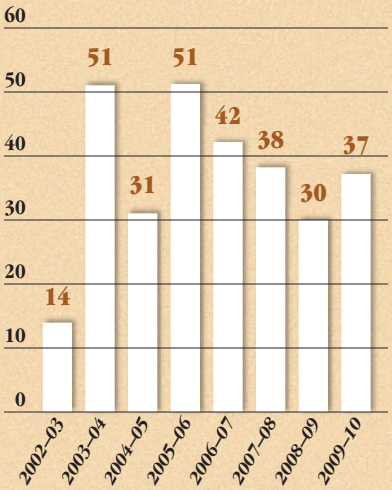
Story and Photos By Tom Beissel

Chronic wasting disease, a fatal brain disease that affects white-tailed deer, was first found in Illinois 8 years ago. Since then, efforts to research and manage the disease have been a team effort between DNR wildlife biologists and scientists from the Illinois Natural History Survey, the University of Illinois and Southern Illinois University, as well as dozens of private landowners, local government agencies and deer hunters.

DNR's experimental management program is designed to reduce deer densities to decrease the spread and prevalence of CWD.

Scientists have made significant progress toward understanding the dynamics of this disease outbreak in north-central Illinois, and efforts to manage CWD have yielded promising results. More than 50,000 deer have been tested for the disease through an ongoing two-pronged surveillance effort. DNR biologists operate firearm deer check stations to collect tissue samples from deer harvested in the seven counties where CWD has been

Illinois number of positives each year



found, while the remainder of the state is monitored by testing thousands of samples collected by cooperators who process deer commercially for hunters. This approach provides DNR with data about the extent of the disease outbreak and the percentage of the deer population infected. This information then is used to guide DNR's CWD management effort.

In the absence of a vaccine or other medical treatment for CWD, DNR has instituted an experimental management program to reduce deer densities in the infected area, with a goal of decreasing both the spread and prevalence of the disease. Scientists believe that this approach offers the best chance of disease control, and many other states are closely watching our progress.

The only conclusive CWD diagnosis involves examination of lymph nodes and brain tissue after death, although behavioral changes (listlessness, lowering of head), weight loss, excessive drinking and urination are common signs of the disease.

In order to accomplish our objectives, DNR biologists have liberalized hunting seasons and created new hunting opportunities in the disease zones. Hunter harvest is supplemented by removing additional deer by sharpshooting after the hunting seasons in known disease areas from which hunters are either excluded or in which hunter harvest is not sufficiently reducing deer densities. Sharpshooting is conducted with landowner permission by specially trained DNR wildlife biologists and Conservation Police officers. A recent opinion survey of northern Illinois hunters and the general public conducted by INHS found solid support for continuing these management efforts.

For more detailed information about CWD, visit dnr.state.il.us/cwd/.

One side benefit of the sharpshooting phase of the program is that DNR donates all venison from harvested deer that are not infected with the disease to the Northern Illinois Food Bank. Through 2009, this effort has resulted in the distribution of more than 127,000 pounds of venison to needy people throughout northern Illinois.

Thankfully, the number of CWD-positive deer identified each year by surveillance efforts peaked in 2005-2006, and numbers have been lower since.

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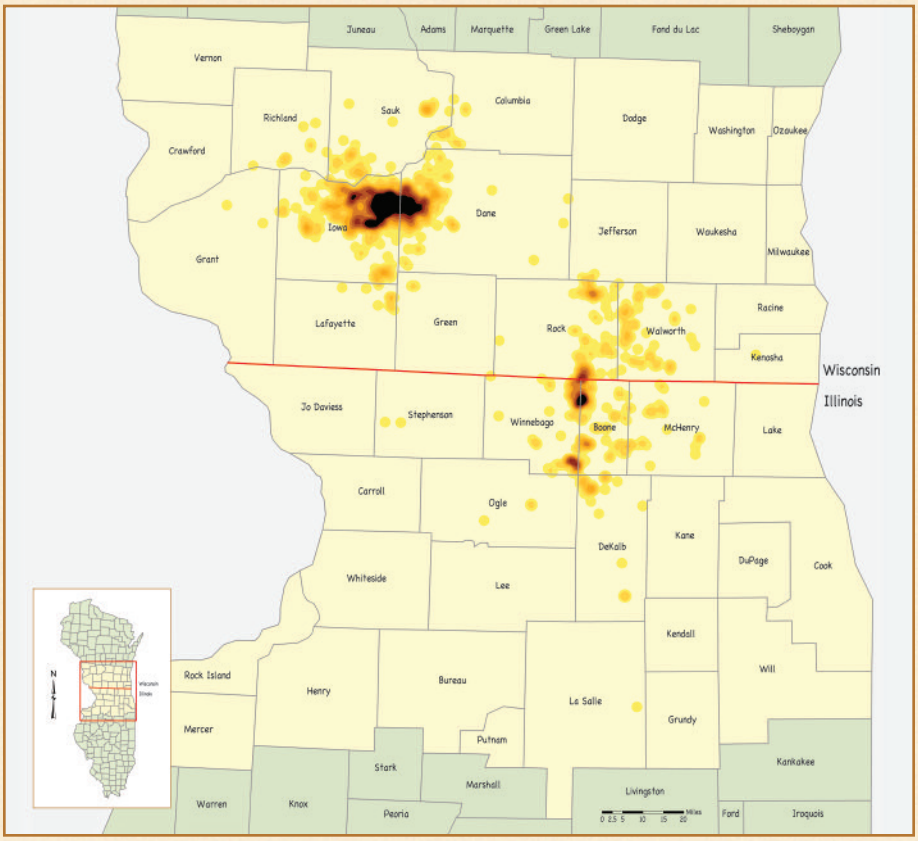

This map indicates the distribution and intensity of the CWD outbreak in Illinois and Wisconsin deer.