Testimony of

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HR 1326 Authorizing Critical Conservation and Enabling Sportsmen and Sportswomen Act (ACCESS Act)
Subcommittee on Water, Oceans and Wildlife

Thank you Chairman Huffman, Ranking Member McClintock, and members of the subcommittee for this opportunity to testify today on HR 1362: Authorizing Critical Conservation and Enabling Sportsmen and Sportswomen Act, and specifically Titles X and XI, which deal with chronic wasting disease (CWD) management and research. My name is Nick Pinizzotto and I am the President and CEO of the National Deer Alliance. Founded in 2015, the National Deer Alliance's mission is to serve as the guardian of wild deer conservation and our hunting heritage. Our work on behalf of deer, deer hunters, and the hunting industry is policy-focused, and our current priority areas include wild deer conservation, diseases, hunter access, and state and federal land management. We work on issues that impact all North American deer species and are backed by an impressive board of directors with members representing national deer organizations, the states through the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, and the hunting industry.

Thank you to Congressman Thompson for your introduction of this important legislative package – from CWD response to Pittman-Robertson modernization, this bill will be beneficial to sportsmen and sportswomen across the nation. I'd also like to thank Congressmen Kind and Sensenbrenner and Congressmen Abraham and Veasey for their introduction of two critical bills to address the spread of CWD, both of which have been thoughtfully included in the ACCESS Act. Thank you too Congressmen Scott and Veasey for introducing legislation to modernize the Pittman-Robertson Act.

Threat to an American Tradition

I grew up in rural Pennsylvania, which has one of the strongest deer hunting traditions in the country with more licensed hunters per square mile than any other state. Well before I was old enough to hunt, I can vividly remember how exited I would get when I saw a deer, and how it seemed unthinkable to pass by one along the road without stopping to admire it. My dad did most of his driving while looking out of the side window, which is a trait that I have inherited.

When my dad would return home from archery hunting, I would be waiting for him at the door with countless questions about the hunt. Even when he told me that he didn't see any deer, which was common, I would beg for more information ranging from asking whether he had heard something to did he at least come across some fresh sign. On the firearms season opener, or buck season as we called it, I would get up well before daylight with my dad and uncle as they prepared to head to the woods. Since the first day of buck season was considered a holiday where I grew up, school was closed. From the time they left I would stand by the window watching the road for the truck to return.

With several years of experience standing in that position on opening day, I knew that seeing the truck coming up the hill before 10 a.m. almost certainly meant that something was in the back. I vividly remember one year when my dad and uncle both got bucks on opening morning. The significance of this was my uncle had finally shot his first deer with antlers at 41 years old after more than 20 years of trying. He was so excited when he retold the story that he fluidly used the type of language more typical of a locker room. It

seemed as if it wasn't the first time he had talked in that manner, but it was the first time that I heard it much to my mother's dismay. At that very moment I became a deer hunter forever.

Eventually I got my turn to pursue deer and one of the most significant moments of my life was taking my first buck at the age of 14. To this day I could take you to the exact tree I was standing behind, and I could tell the story about how the morning unfolded in finite detail. I can still see how proud my dad and uncle were of me, and I was proud of myself because I chose my own spot a few days before. Sadly, my uncle passed away unexpectedly a few years later, and opening morning was never the same after that.
One of my prized possessions is an old, faded photograph from 1985 of my dad and uncle together with their deer on that magical day. I believe just about everyone who hunts has a special image or memory like this, and that in one way or another, hunting and the outdoors has had an influence on who they have become. I can't imagine where my life would have led without deer and deer hunting, and I struggle to think about what life would be like going forward without them.

I grew up a bit sheltered from the rest of the world as did the other kids in the area. Everyone we knew hunted, and we just assumed that was the case for the entire country. It wasn't until I expanded my horizons that I eventually learned that only about five percent of Americans hunted. Today that number is less than four percent. Still, that remains enough hunters to implement the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation, which has proven to be the most effective and efficient way to manage wildlife. Unfortunately, the continued prevalence and spread of CWD is not only threatening our deer hunting traditions, but the entire sphere of wildlife management and conservation.

What is Chronic Wasting Disease

CWD is the most significant threat to the future of healthy deer populations, deer hunting, and the hunting industry that we have ever encountered. It is a neurological disease that affects deer, elk, and moose. Infected animals with clinical symptoms become emaciated and exhibit abnormal behavior including lack of fear of people, drastic weight loss, stumbling, listlessness, and loss of bodily functions. It may take more than two years for an infected animal to develop symptoms, but the disease is 100 percent fatal, and there is no known cure.

The origin of CWD is unknown, and it may never be possible to definitively determine how or when it arose. It was first recognized as a syndrome in captive mule deer held in wildlife research facilities in Colorado in the late 1960s. Computer modeling suggests the disease may have been present in free-ranging populations of mule deer for more than 40 years.

CWD belongs to a group of diseases known as transmissible spongiform encephalopathies (TSEs). Within this family of diseases, there are several other variants that affect domestic animals such as scrapie, which has been identified in domestic sheep and goats for more than 200 years, bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) in cattle (also known as "mad cow disease"), and transmissible mink encephalopathy in farmed mink.

CWD is highly contagious, and the infectious agent known as prions may be passed in feces, urine, blood, and saliva. Recent research suggests that infected prions can also bind to soils and vegetation where it can be later taken up by animals. Experts believe prions can remain in the environment for several years if not

decades, so other animals can contract the disease even after an infected animal has died. There is no evidence that CWD can be transmitted to people despite thorough attempts to find a link to similar human diseases, such as Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease and Alzheimer's disease.

CWD is currently known to exist in 26 states, as well as three Canadian provinces, Finland, Norway, and South Korea. Some areas in the U.S. have documented a nearly 50 percent prevalence rate. State wildlife agencies are increasing monitoring and surveillance, which is coming at the expense of other important wildlife programs due to a lack of funding to address the disease.

The Impact of Chronic Wasting Disease on Wildlife Conservation

Beyond the science and administrative aspects of CWD, it is creating significant challenges for the future of deer hunting, and broad wildlife conservation. According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's most recent survey (2016), approximately 80 percent of all hunters pursue big game, and about 70 percent hunt deer. Deer hunting alone generates almost $40 billion to the U.S. economy each year, and it represents nearly 60 percent of total hunting expenditures.

State wildlife agencies are primarily funded by the sale of hunting licenses and revenue generated from the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act, commonly referred to as the Pittman-Robertson Act, after its two key champions: Senator Key Pittman of Nevada and Congressman Willis Robertson of Virginia.

Deer hunters are carrying the financial burden for managing all wildlife. From 2011 to 2016, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service reports that hunting participation declined by 2.2 million, bringing the total number of hunters down to just 11.5 million. More specifically, big game hunting participation dropped by approximately 20 percent, and there is little doubt that CWD has impacted the decision of many to quit hunting deer. From an industry perspective over the same time period, hunting related expenditures were reported to have dropped nearly 30 percent. It is easy to see what a decline in deer hunter numbers would mean for overall wildlife conservation, including management of at-risk species.

Another challenge posed by the disease is that hunters are either uninformed, misinformed, or simply do not want to believe that CWD is a problem. While state and federal wildlife agencies and several non-government conservation organizations have been working hard to provide the best available scientific information, some with impactful communication platforms have been working to portray the disease as a hoax or are trying to greatly minimize its importance. This has caused management strategies to be significantly slowed in some states, and even stopped all together in others.

The Need for Research and Further Monitoring and Surveillance

Simply put, CWD is spreading, and herd productivity is being impacted in multiple locations. Those of us regularly working on the disease often say that the amount we don't know about it outweighs what we do know about it. It is critical for state and tribal wildlife managers to continually monitor and track its spread so that the most effective management strategies can be employed. Furthermore, learning more about the effectiveness of currently accepted best management practices is also important.

Unfortunately, as CWD surveillance and monitoring efforts and associated costs increase, it diminishes the funds available to states for management of other critical wildlife and habitat conservation work. Most state wildlife agencies are having to use funds from other program areas to pay for their growing CWD management needs, and current spending is far below what is necessary. For example, Pennsylvania currently spends approximately $1.35 million but has an identified need is $2.44 million. Montana currently spends approximately $200,000 but has an identified need of almost $700,000.

Knowing the location and extent of CWD is vitally important, as is the need to better understand how it spreads. Learning more about the way the disease spreads will inform more targeted research that may help determine which areas of the country are most at risk. It will also help state wildlife agencies set the most effective regulations to help manage the disease. Many of these decisions are currently made with limited, or the best available science, which has led to frustration among hunters and industry.

Better tools for hunters are also badly needed. For example, if a hunter kills a deer and would like to have it tested for CWD, the cost and convenience of doing so, as well as the amount of time to receive the results from a laboratory, are significant barriers. At a time when the number of hunters is declining, it will be important to make testing for the disease as convenient as possible. While researchers tell us that we are still far away from a simple to use field test, the availability of more research dollars may help develop this important tool more quickly.

While there is currently no evidence that CWD can be transmitted to humans, research on this front should not only continue, but should be expanded. While hunters and wildlife enthusiasts certainly hope that there continues to be no identified connection between CWD and human diseases, it is our responsibility to extensively explore this area.

Modernizing the Pittman-Robertson Act

As I described earlier, a decline in hunters means a decline in both license sales and funds derived from the Pittman-Robertson Act that primarily pay for the cost of state management of all wildlife. The Pittman-Robertson Act generates funds through an 11 percent excise tax on long guns, ammunition, and archery equipment and a 10 percent excise tax on handguns. The revenue from this tax goes into the Wildlife Restoration Account administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Funds are then apportioned annually to state wildlife agencies for wildlife restoration programs and hunter education. To date, more than $20.2 billion in allocations for state conservation and recreation projects has been distributed.

State wildlife agencies and numerous non-government conservation organizations led by the Council to Advance Hunting and Shooting Sports are working diligently to implement bold new strategies to stop the decline in hunter participation and eventually reverse current trends. The broad effort is known as R3, which is aimed at recruiting new hunters, reactivating those who stopped, and retaining current hunters. Despite this effort, a continued decline is expected without adequate support for the initiative.

The growing concern about CWD has certainly not helped the effort to implement successful R3 initiatives. The combination of a documented spread of the disease and the spread of inaccurate or misleading information has people on edge, including hunters who are already casual participants in the activity. The

National Deer Alliance supports H.R 877, the Modernizing the Pittman-Robertson Fund for Tomorrow's Needs Act, introduced by Representatives Austin Scott and Marc Veasey.

Allowing state fish and wildlife agencies to use Pittman-Robertson funds for outreach, communication, and education of hunters and recreational target shooters, including focused efforts on the recruitment, retention, and reactivation of hunters and recreational shooters through R3 initiatives, is imperative. It is important to note that this legislation would not increase taxes on existing user fees. It is simply the right thing to do, and the right time to do it.

Conclusion

In summary, CWD is an unprecedented threat to healthy deer herds, our hunting traditions, and the North American Model for Wildlife Conservation. This 100 percent fatal disease is continuing to spread across the country and is now confirmed to exist in more than half of our states. Hunters, particularly those that pursue big game, generate the bulk of the funding that is used for the management of all wildlife, including threatened species. A further decline in hunter numbers means a further decline in the purchase of hunting licenses and equipment. That's a losing formula for deer, hunters, or anyone who enjoys our country's invaluable wildlife resources.

The National Deer Alliance exists to advance the interests of deer, hunters, and the hunting industry, and the Authorizing Critical Conservation and Enabling Sportsmen and Sportswomen Act, particularly Titles X and XI, is supported by our mission. I appreciate this opportunity to provide testimony to the Subcommittee on Water, Oceans and Wildlife and look forward to your questions.