



Serving the counties of District 2:

Kaufman, Navarro, Rockwall, Van Zandt and parts of Dallas, Ellis and Collin County

Oh Deer. If you think the problem is bad...

A question that the people of Texas deserve an answer to is "Who would use two state agencies like Texas Parks and Wildlife (TPWD) and Texas Animal Health Commission (TACH) to destroy a growing business sector that contributes to the Texas economy?"

Each year in the State of Texas, billions of dollars are spent on the state's "outdoors" industries. People from around the world flock to the state to explore the outdoors, observe the wildlife, and to fish and hunt. It is one of Texas's many economic engines that have kept prosperity and growth in our state at rates that the rest of the country has struggled to equal. And, while the Davis Mountains or the colossal Texas catfish are probably not going anywhere anytime soon, there is a chance that the state's commercial operations to produce trophy deer that can be bred and/or hunted on high fence ranches might soon be only a memory if the big ranchers, TPWD and TACH have their way.

Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) was first identified in Texas whitetail deer in 2015. CWD is a prion disease much like scrapie found in sheep, or "mad cow" disease. After many years and multiple CWD studies, no impact has been found on humans. It was discovered in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado in the 1960's, and while some animal health experts consider it to be incurable, animals usually die with the disease rather than from it. CWD does not provide any sort of preferential treatment to the whitetail deer it affects, those found in the wild or bred in high fence ranches. But, that does not stop the TPWD and TAHC state agencies from showing preferential treatment of where they look for the disease.

Currently, state law allows for the regulation of wildlife species by state agencies like the TPWD and the TAHC. That is why one of the many "non-recreational licenses" issued by TPWD includes the "Deer Management Permit," issued to Texans who raise, feed, and keep deer while breeding them selectively for traits such as body or antler shape and size. These deer are kept on properties with strict requirements for containment (high fences) and the standard of living for the deer. The cost of keeping and raising the deer falls entirely upon the owner and operator and, so does the cost when TPWD arbitrarily decides to kill every single deer on a high-fenced deer breeding ranch without first determining exactly how many of the deer are infected.

Those events, the mass killing of deer at breeder facilities, are called "depopulations." Depopulations happen when TPWD detects CWD at a breeder facility, and decides that it is better for the state to kill all of the deer at that facility than risk a potential for the disease to spread. Breeders are required to test 100 percent of the deer that die of natural or unknown causes on a breeder facility posthumously, and each deer that leaves a breeder facility is live-tested before they can leave that facility.

Conversely, the token limited wild deer CWD testing only began after the public began to question the TPWD bias against wild deer testing. In those areas, some deer are tested after being killed by a hunter, but there is no cost to a hunter who turns over a deer for testing. Statewide, only less than .25 percent of the state's 5,500,000 wild deer are tested each year, with no effort at all to test live deer.

Herein lies the problem. TPWD has conducted multiple herd killing (depopulation) events of deer breeding facilities since the first time CWD was discovered at a facility. To date, almost 2,600 deer have been shot and killed by the state, for the purpose of "saving the lives of deer." When the deer are killed, they are shot in their pens, which is an extremely inhumane practice. It causes deer to panic and frantically try to escape the pen, oftentimes leading to the traumatized deer injuring themselves and those around them before they are shot by a TPWD employee. These events are traumatic to the animals as well as to the deer breeder.



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The increased regulation and depopulation of breeder herds has resulted in a 32 percent decrease in the number of deer breeder permits issued by TPWD between the year 2015 and 2020. While killing/depopulation of herds is a legitimate management tool for livestock disease control, its use should be the last choice if other tools are available. Especially when TPWD's stated goal is to have as few positive post-mortem tests as possible, even if that number is zero. That means that if they kill 100 deer because one tested positive and posthumous testing reveals no other deer in the herd was positive, TPWD considers the kill a success.

Would anyone want to be around for the next global pandemic if the government adopted a management policy for containment that "depopulates" in a manner similar to TPWD's model for CWD? If CWD is the existential danger to deer that it is made out to be, why does TPWD not treat it as aggressively in the wild as it does in captivity? After all, the deer in captivity are contained behind high fences in a controlled environment. Wild deer roam unfettered. Which poses the greater risk for spread of the disease?

Until 2014 deer breeding had been a growing Texas business sector. Then in 2015 a single case of CWD was discovered in Medina County. TPWD and TAHC immediately began a wide ranging program of requiring all deer breeders to postmortem test a significant percentage of their herd for CWD. That is, they were required to randomly select and kill deer. This resulted in 10's of thousands of healthy deer being killed and almost none tested positive. Meanwhile, wild deer roamed unfettered.

So, who are the winners and losers in this game of wildlife management? Is it all about the deer disease, or is it about the financial impact that deer breeders are having on the hunting industry? Oftentimes, hunters want to hunt on a high fence ranch where the deer have been bred for body shape and antler size. Who cares? Ranchers who sell hunts on their ranches which are home only to wild deer. Deer in the wild can be considered inferior to those bred specifically for hunting. So the battles are laid out between ranchers and deer breeders.

And the answer to the question, "Who would use a state agency to . . ." is that the major benefactors of deer breeder eradication will be the ranches who host wild deer hunting on their ranches. Agencies such as TPWD and TAHC should be umpires, not players in the game. If the problem is CWD, all deer should be tested in equal proportions and treated the same.

When that is not happening, it is time to look at the leadership structure of the agency. In the case of TPWD you need look no further than the list of members appointed to the Commission to see the abundance of ranch owners. That is not a bad thing, so long as they stay in their lane and let the agency be the umpire, not their agent of change.