**New Alabama bill may contribute to spread of CWD**

[**https://wildlife.org/new-alabama-bill-may-contribute-to-spread-of-cwd/?utm\_campaign=new-alabama-bill-may-contribute-to-spread-of-cwd&utm\_medium=rss&utm\_source=rss**](https://wildlife.org/new-alabama-bill-may-contribute-to-spread-of-cwd/?utm_campaign=new-alabama-bill-may-contribute-to-spread-of-cwd&utm_medium=rss&utm_source=rss)

**April 21, 2025 by**[**Olivia Milloway**](https://wildlife.org/news/?_sfm_writer=67127#search-filter-results-56635)

**Alabama bill restricts state’s ability to manage deadly prion disease in farmed deer**

The Alabama House of Representatives has passed a bill making it harder for scientists to detect chronic wasting disease on deer farms in the state.

Passed on April 15, [House Bill 509](https://legiscan.com/AL/text/HB509/2025) prohibits any state agency from killing, testing or stopping the transfer of captive cervids due to disease from farm to farm, with few exceptions. The bill also designates cervids, including white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*),as the personal property of the breeder.

Over 200 breeders in Alabama provide white-tailed deer to high-fence hunting operations, which breed deer selectively for large antlers and body mass. Hunters pay a premium to enter fenced-in areas to hunt the animals.

A major concern for both captive and wild cervids across the country is chronic wasting disease (CWD), a fatal neurological disease that has been circulating in the U.S. since the 1960s and was first detected in Alabama’s free-ranging deer population from a sample collected from the northwest part of the state in 2022.

Republican bill sponsor Jeff Sorrells said that the legislation was in response to an [emergency rule](https://abc3340.com/resources/pdf/83ec3afd-06e6-4366-bdb1-fb5a08563251-123024filingClean2202.1671.pdf) filed by the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (ADCNR) that came at the end of 2024, putting restrictions on deer breeders within CWD management zones.

“This bill has nothing to do with hunting. It is more about government overreach of a valuable resource for the state of Alabama,” he said in an [interview](https://abc3340.com/news/local/bill-limiting-state-testing-killing-of-deer-at-breeding-facilities-passes-alabama-house-chronic-wasting-disease-alabama-department-of-conservation-and-natural-resources) with ABC 33/40.

**Concerns over spreading disease**

The bill prohibits testing of individual cervids unless CWD has been detected within a farm or an animal has been transferred from a farm where CWD was detected. An amendment to the bill further restricts the state’s regulatory power, adding that the state can’t prohibit transfer of a deer if it’s tested negative for CWD from a live test, been genomically bred to be resistant to the disease, or is from a double-fenced facility.

While promising, live animal tests for CWD [aren’t approved](https://www.aphis.usda.gov/nvap/reference-guide/control-eradication/cwd) by the U.S. Department of Agriculture due to their lack of reliability. Deer with a CWD-resistant genotype contract the disease at slower rates, but scientists are concerned that deer could still be infected at lower rates and shed prions into the environment while appearing healthy.

ADCNR Conservation Commissioner Chris Blankenship issued a [statement](https://www.outdooralabama.com/articles/statement-conservation-commissioner-chris-blankenship-hb-509-concerning-deer-breeders) asking legislators to vote no on the bill “This bill should be disturbing to all ethical sportsmen, hunters and citizens in Alabama,” he said in the statement.

The Alabama Chapter of TWS wrote its own [letter](https://tws1.my.salesforce-sites.com/servlet/servlet.FileDownload?file=015Qj000008WUrBIAW) opposing the bill. “This legislation threatens our state’s $2.0 billion hunting industry, which is vital to most of Alabama’s rural economies and ADCNR’s conservation funding,” the chapter wrote.

TWS and the Southeastern Section of TWS signed on to another [letter](https://tws1.my.salesforce-sites.com/servlet/servlet.FileDownload?file=015Qj000008WUPlIAO) to oppose the bill in collaboration with the National Deer Association, Boone and Crockett, the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership and the National Wildlife Federation. This letter pointed out the bill’s threats to wildlife professionals’ ability to do their jobs. “This bill compromises the public trust, as well as professional wildlife management in the state,” the letter said.

**Removing wildlife from the public trust**

Scientific dissent on the bill falls into two main areas of concern: potential for unfettered spread of CWD within Alabama and the privatization of public wildlife resources.

Daniel Greene, a Certified Wildlife Biologist® and president of the Southeastern Section of TWS, is a wildlife research biologist working in the private sector worried about the implications of HB509. “It really goes against the heart of the Public Trust Doctrine,” he said. “In our system of wildlife management, individuals or corporations can’t own wildlife.”

A map of the united states with red and yellow dots

AI-generated content may be incorrect.Distribution of CWD in North America as of April 11, 2025. Credit: [U.S. Geological Survey](https://www.usgs.gov/media/images/distribution-chronic-wasting-disease-north-america-0)

The public trust doctrine means that the state manages wildlife—like deer, migratory birds or game species—for the benefit of all citizens, he said. By classifying wildlife as personal property, Greene fears there will be “severe implications” for the state’s ability to control wildlife diseases such as CWD. “The privatization and ownership of deer could increase the overall CWD risk to wildlife at very broad spatial scales,” he said.

Greene is also wary of the efficacy of fences to keep bred deer separate from wild populations. “A fence isn’t a permanent barrier to prevent that disease from spreading,” Greene said. Animals can shed prions into the environment for months before testing positive, including through urine, which is bottled and sold to deer hunters as a lure. Soil can remain infectious for years. Trees can also take down fences during severe storms, and deer inside a fence can touch noses with a deer outside.

Scientists’ fears go beyond CWD transmission among deer, though. “Even though this bill is heavily focused on cervids, it includes game birds and fur-bearers as well,” Greene said. “We haven’t entirely figured out what that means because it’s fairly vague as written.”

Greene said that separating the business part of the operations from the wildlife policy in future bills will help safeguard the health of wildlife going forward.

**Prevention is the only strategy**

Angie Larsen-Gray, a Certified Wildlife Biologist® and graduate of TWS’ Leadership Institute, is a forest wildlife ecologist with a research organization that works with the forest product sector and the Conservation Affairs Committee Chair for the Southeastern Section of TWS. Originally from Wisconsin, she has seen the massive economic toll that CWD has taken on her home state. “There are some steps you can take for prevention,” she said. “It is nearly impossible to get rid of it once it’s there.”

Regardless of whether the state senate passes the bill and it’s ultimately signed into law, Larsen-Gray thinks the advocacy work of wildlife professionals is important. “Having a record that TWS was against this is valuable,” she said.

TWS’ Conservation Policy Manager Kelly O’Connor said that this bill is among several attempts to limit state wildlife management agencies from managing white-tailed deer and, in turn, CWD outbreaks. After a CWD outbreak in Texas breeding facilities in 2021, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) halted the transfer of white-tailed deer between breeding facilities. After industry pushback, a few bills were introduced to the state legislature aiming to reduce the authority of TPWD on deer breeding but ultimately did not pass.

[SB323,](https://legiscan.com/AL/bill/SB323/2025) the companion bill in the Senate, is now in the Senate Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry Committee for review

***Header Image:****White-tailed deer are susceptible to chronic wasting disease, a fatal and highly contagious neurological condition. Caption:*[*Kenneth Cole Schneider*](https://www.flickr.com/photos/rosyfinch/7357955398/in/photostream/)