In December, I had the opportunity to speak to the U.S. Senate Committee on the Environment and Public Works on an important issue facing our country, Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD). This disease is discussed scarcely and understood even less, so you may have not heard of it. CWD is a contagious neurological disease that affects cervids, elk, deer and moose. It causes a degeneration of the brain in infected animals resulting in emaciation, abnormal behavior, loss of bodily functions and possibly death. This disease can move slowly through deer population putting at risk traditional hunting grounds, as well as captive cervid farms which, together, bring $40 billion to the United States every year.

Under the direction of Senator John Barasso, the U.S. Senate has approved America’s Conservation Enhancement Act which will improve many of the programs that protects our wildlife. Within the bill is a section that establishes a CWD Task Force which will foster cooperation between federal, state and non-governmental partners to further research surrounding the disease. Even though CWD was first found in the United States in the 1950s, we still understand little about how it spreads resulting in implementation of poor policy to tackle, contain and control the disease.

With very little funding for research, it is no wonder we lack many conclusions in the science surrounding CWD. This means policies in place are based on emotions, not sound judgments. It is important to point out any additional studies on this prion-related disease will add value for research of known human diseases and other domesticated livestock. Regardless, all policies,
especially those on agricultural operations, must be fact-based which ensures certainty within the market. Funding being appropriated towards the research of this deadly disease is a measure that is long overdue.

Many states operate under laws and regulations much different from one another. In West Virginia, captive cervid farms are regulated by the West Virginia Department of Agriculture (WVDA). These farms raise whitetail deer and elk, plus exotic reindeer and fallow deer. Wild whitetail deer and elk populations are regulated by the West Virginia Department of Natural Resources (DNR). While the WVDA and DNR work closely together on many projects, we sometimes disagree on what the goal is surrounding CWD. As part of my testimony, I asked for a representative from a state agency overseeing farmed cervid programs be included in the CWD Task Force; which was granted.

It may be a while before we are confident with a live test for CWD, but we can use simple techniques to slow the spread. This includes furthering education and communications programs. My staff and I are already working with the WV Deer Farmers Association to encourage their members to bury all captive cervids deep enough out of the reach of potential scavengers. A similar request has been made to the Department of Highways for cervids hit on roads. The time of pointing fingers and reacting with emotions is long past. We must work together to find real policy solutions that protect traditions and grow agriculture for future generations.

In the meantime, deer farming is an opportunity to diversify our economy and potentially use land that is no longer viable. I understand the concerns surrounding these operations, but West Virginia has never had a farmed deer test positive for CWD. Therefore, policy should seek to find balance between protecting our wild herds and allowing new businesses to develop. I am hopeful the federal government will be able to bring all the stakeholders together to further research and work towards sound solutions.

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The West Virginia Department of Agriculture protects plant, animal and human health through a variety of scientific, regulatory and consumer protection programs. The Commissioner of Agriculture is one of six statewide elected officials who sits on the Board of Public Works.

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