

USDA Begins Field Trial for White-Tailed Deer Populations

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service's National Wildlife Research Center (NWRC) is testing a new contraceptive product in Maryland, a gonadotropin-releasing hormone (GnRH), designed to humanely reduce white-tailed deer populations.

NWRC scientists developed a gonadotropin-releasing hormone (GnRH) immunocontraceptive that displays great promise as a wildlife infertility agent. GnRH is a hormone naturally produced at the base of the brain that controls the production of sperm in males and ovulation in females. The immunocontraceptive works by inhibiting the release of these hormones, rendering deer sterile or infertile for up to two years.

Large deer populations, particularly those inhabiting fenced or other enclosed areas in urban or suburban areas where hunting is not an alternative, present serious problems for wildlife managers, landowners, airports and the general public. Problems associated with overabundant deer herds include increased collisions between deer and motor vehicles, increased frequency of conflicts between deer and humans, greater potential for disease transmission among deer, reduction in the general health of deer and increased damage to local native vegetation due to overbrowsing.

APHIS is conducting these trials by providing a single-dose contraceptive to females (does) in an enclosed population of free-ranging white-tailed deer to inhibit reproduction. WS biologists injected, tagged and attached radio telemetry transmitters to approximately 30 does and will compare results to noninjected does in an adjacent deer population for a period of two years to determine the effectiveness of the GnRH vaccine. During this period, normal reproductive activities in treated does is expected to decrease, cause reduced and no interest from the male species and greatly reduce behavioral tendencies commonly associated with the rutting season.

APHIS' NWRC is devoted to the resolution of conflict caused by the interaction of wild animals and society. The center applies scientific expertise to the development of practical methods to resolve these problems and to maintain the quality of the environments shared by humans and wildlife.

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