



Animal and Plant  
Health Inspection  
Service

December 08, 2021

1400 Independence  
Avenue SW  
Washington,  
DC 20250

Dear Honorable Tribal Leaders:

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) greatly values partnerships with Tribal Nations and communities. Our Agency strives to keep Tribes informed of actions that could have an impact on tribal members and resources. For this reason, Wildlife Services (WS) would like to expand our partnership and hear directly from you.

APHIS WS is a program within USDA whose mission is to provide Federal leadership and expertise in resolving wildlife conflicts to allow people and wildlife to coexist. Wildlife, a valuable and dynamic resource, can pose risks to human health and safety. We strive to reduce wildlife damage and risks to the lowest possible levels while simultaneously conserving wildlife by using effective, biologically sound, environmentally safe, and socially responsible methods.

In 2021, APHIS monitoring found that approximately 40% of white-tailed deer (WTD; *Odocoileus virginianus*) serum samples collected in 4 states (Michigan, Illinois, Pennsylvania, and New York) contained SARS-CoV-2 antibodies. Since this APHIS finding, other studies identified SARS-CoV-2 in deer in other states, including Oklahoma, West Virginia, Ohio, and others. SARS-CoV-2 is the virus that causes COVID-19 in humans. The presence of antibodies in WTD means the deer were previously infected with this virus. Knowing this, along with findings that WTD can be infected with SARS-CoV-2 and transmit the virus to other deer, more research would help us understand how this might affect human and animal health. Using funding provided by the American Rescue Plan Act (ARP), APHIS and its partners will conduct a phased, multi-year study to understand the impacts of SARS-CoV-2 in WTD to human and animal health. The goals are to determine the impacts of SARS-CoV-2 in WTD populations in the United States and if WTD can serve as a reservoir for the virus, potentially leading to new virus variants that may impact the health of WTD, other animals, and people.

During the first phase of this project (Phase 1, 2021-2022), WS will partner with state fish and game agencies, and hopefully Tribal Nations to collect nasal swab and blood samples from hunter harvested WTD as opportunities are available. Testing these samples will help us better understand the distribution of SARS-CoV-2 in WTD. Later phases of this project will focus on targeted sampling based on information and findings from Phase 1. This will allow us to determine the potential risks to people (e.g., establishment of a wildlife reservoir, strain evolution, altered transmissibility/pathogenicity) and ways we can mitigate these risks.

Knowing the prevalence of SARS-CoV-2 in WTD on Tribal Lands would be an important factor to understanding the potential impacts to Tribal health, and Tribal culture and natural resources. It would also help us understand the full distribution of SARS-CoV-2 across North America. This information is important to accomplish the goals of this project – to identify and reduce the associated risks that may impact the health of WTD, other animals, and people. For additional information

regarding health concerns associated with SARS-CoV-2 spreading between people and wildlife, including hunting please go to "[Guidance to Reduce the Risk of SARS-CoV-2 Spreading between People and Wildlife \(cdc.gov\)](#)".

We invite all Tribal Nations to a Webinar hosted by WS to provide additional information on this project. We look forward to hearing your comments, concerns, and potential ideas for conducting SARS-CoV-2 sampling in WTD on Tribal Lands.

Respectfully,

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**Zoom Webinar Information:**

**Date:** 12/16/2021

**Time:** 01:00PM to 2:00PM EST

**Meeting ID:** 161 671 8956

**Name of Meeting:** Whitetail Deer Surveillance on Tribal Lands

**Web Join URL:**

<https://coreshield.zoomgov.com/join/1616718956?pwd=YU9HMDlicDBKZIZ5amw3MIRXbnVJUT09>

**Zoom Join URL:**

<https://coreshield.zoomgov.com/j/1616718956?pwd=YU9HMDlicDBKZIZ5amw3MIRXbnVJUT09>

**Meeting Password:** ZKgh9P3ea

**Dial-in information:**

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If you have any questions, please feel free to contact the following individuals:

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