



The surveillance programme for Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) in free ranging and captive cervids in Norway 2021



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Summary

A total of 21,661 samples of wild, semi-domesticated and captive Norwegian cervids were analysed in 2021. From these, two moose (*Alces alces*) and one red deer (*Cervus elaphus*) tested positive for CWD. The cases in moose were a female moose from fallen stock, 17 years old, found dead in Vinje municipality and a 13 years old male moose euthanized in the municipality of Bamble due to a broken leg. The red deer was a hunted animal, adult female, from the municipality of Etne. All locations are in Southern Norway. The cases detected had disease characteristics as described for the respective species in previous reports, i.e. PrP^{Sc} were only detected in brain tissue, and no prions were detected in lymphoid tissues with diagnostic test.

In addition, 17 reindeer (*Rangifer tarandus*) from Svalbard and 33 wild muskoxen (*Ovibos moschatus*) from the Dovrefjell Mountains were tested and found negative for TSE.

Introduction

Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) was for the first time detected in Europe in 2016, in Norway [1]. This was also the first detection of a natural CWD infection in reindeer (*Rangifer tarandus*) worldwide. The index case in reindeer was located in Nordfjella management area in Southern Norway, and all subsequent positive reindeer until 2020 have been found in this area (Figure 1). The Nordfjella sub-population was eradicated in 2018 [2]. In 2020, one additional reindeer CWD case was discovered at Hardangervidda, which is the neighbouring area/population to Nordfjella.

CWD is a transmissible spongiform encephalopathy (TSE) or prion disease of cervids [3]. It is an invariably fatal neurodegenerative disease with no known treatment. Well-known in North America, CWD has since the 1960's gradually spread to an increasing number of states and provinces (April 2022: 30 states in USA and four provinces in Canada), both in captive and free-ranging cervids [4]. The republic of Korea has also diagnosed the disease after importation of infected elk (*Cervus elaphus nelsoni*) from Canada [5]. With the disease emergence in Norway, naturally susceptible species also include reindeer. Norway have by now three affected species; reindeer, moose (*Alces alces*) and red deer (*Cervus elaphus*), and in the two latter species CWD has been found in old individuals only. From 2018, CWD has also been diagnosed in Finland and Sweden, in old moose [6].

Four cervid species are prevalent in natural free-ranging populations in Norway: moose, red deer, roe deer (*Capreolus capreolus*) and reindeer. Red deer predominate along the west coast, whereas moose and roe deer mainly inhabit other areas of the country. The wild reindeer is found in fragmented sub-populations in the remote alpine regions of Southern

Norway [7]. In addition, Norway has populations of semi-domesticated reindeer that live in a herded condition, though free-ranging. The majority of semi-domesticated reindeer are found in the northern part of Norway as part of the Sami culture, particularly in the county of Troms og Finnmark.

The official numbers (23rd March 2022) of hunted cervids were in the 2021-2022 season: 29,276 moose, 52,806 red deer, 34,300 roe deer (numbers per 30th August 2021) and 5,652 free-ranging reindeer (numbers per 15th December 2021) [8]. Additionally, the semi-domesticated reindeer population counts about 250,000 animals [9]. There are approximately 120 deer farms in Norway; most of them keep red deer, but some farms have fallow deer (*Dama dama*) and occasionally both species.

Testing wild cervids for CWD was initiated in 2002 through the National Health Surveillance Program for Cervids and muskox (*Ovibos moschatus*), operated by the Norwegian Veterinary Institute (NVI) on behalf of the Norwegian Environmental Agency. A passive surveillance programme for CWD in Norwegian wild and captive cervids, coordinated by NVI on behalf of the Norwegian Food Safety Authority, has been running from 2003. In addition, samples from slaughtered semi-domesticated reindeer from several regions in the country have been tested. In 2006 and 2007 the European Commission (decision 2007/182/EC) initiated a survey for CWD where Norway took part, like the EU member-states, testing 700 cervids. Shown in Table 1 is the total number of cervids tested for CWD in Norway from 2002-21.

Since there is no separate program to report surveillance of TSE in muskox, such testing is included in this publication. TSE has never been reported in that species.

Table 1: Number and species of cervids tested for CWD in Norway 2002-2021. Additional 24 wild reindeer from Svalbard are not included in the table (17 in 2021, one in 2020, four in 2019, two in 2018).

Year	Moose (<i>Alces alces</i>)	Red deer (<i>Cervus elaphus</i>)	Reindeer (<i>Rangifer tarandus</i>)		Roe deer (<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>)	Fallow deer (<i>Dama dama</i>)	Unknown Species	Total
			Semi-domesticated	Wild				
2002-15	142	825	966	10	203	13	0	2 159
2016	4 403	2 582	1 739	842	484	15	87	10 152
2017	5 468	4 083	10 940	2 922	1 955	20	271	25 659
2018	6 705	8 428	12 046	3 650	2 124	48	655	33 656
2019	5 935	5 758	12 937*	3 334	1 692	37	454	30 147
2020	6 200	4 272	6 512	3 213	1 832	92	406	22 527
2021	4 525	4 939	6 141	3 520	1 885	28	623	21 661
Total	33 378	30 887	51 281	17 491	10 175	253	2 496	145 961

* Includes two reindeer not specified to wild or semi-domesticated.

Aim

The aim of the programme is to document the occurrence of CWD in the Norwegian cervid populations and TSE in muskoxen.

Materials and methods

The CWD surveillance programme includes testing of slaughtered semi-domesticated reindeer (above 12 months in Southern Norway and above 24 months in Northern Norway), euthanized animals and fallen stock of captive deer and semi-domesticated reindeer (above 24 months) and wild cervids (above 12 months), and wild cervids submitted for necropsy at the NVI. In addition, since the discovery of CWD in 2016, extensive testing of hunted cervids has been implemented. This effort is a cooperation between the Norwegian Food Safety Authority, the Norwegian Environmental Agency, the Norwegian Institute for Nature Research (NINA) and NVI. Apart from cervids, wild muskoxen are also enrolled in the Norwegian surveillance of animal TSE. These animals live in the Dovre Mountains, as the only free-ranging muskox population in Norway.

The routine diagnostics of CWD require testing of brain tissue (*Medulla oblongata*). Due to early detection of prions in lymphoid tissue of reindeer in Norway, such tissue (retropharyngeal lymph nodes) have, since 2016, been included in the testing of all cervid species when available.

A rapid test (IDEXX HerdChek BSE-Scrapie AG Test, IDEXX Laboratories, Westbrook, USA) was used to screen samples from pooled brain and lymph nodes for detection of PrP^{Sc}.

Initially positive ELISA results were retested in brain and lymph node separately, before confirmation western-blot (TeSeE® WESTERN-BLOT, Bio-Rad, Marnes-la-Coquette, France) according to the manufacturer's instructions. All the samples were analysed at NVI, being the national reference laboratory for animal TSEs and a WAOH (founded OIE) reference laboratory for CWD.

Results

In total, samples from 21,661 individual cervids were analysed in 2021, of which two wild moose and one wild red deer tested positive for PrP^{Sc} (Table 1). These animals shared diagnostic characteristics previously detected in their species [10,11].

Semi-domesticated reindeer (6,141) contributed with about 28% of the total of analysed cervids. Moose samples counted 4,525 and red deer 4,939, being the two larger subgroups beside slaughtered semi-domesticated reindeer. The number of tested roe deer, fallow deer and wild reindeer, was 1,885, 28 and 3,520, respectively. Amongst the total number were 623 animals of unknown species. In addition, 17 wild reindeer from Svalbard and 33 muskoxen were tested and found negative.

A total of 73% of the animals were tested by analysing both lymphoid tissue and brain. From the remaining animals only brain or lymphoid tissue had been received and from 26% of the animals only material from brain were tested and from less than 1% of the animals only material from lymphoid tissue were tested.

Table 2 and Figures 2-9 give the numbers, species and geographical distribution of cervids tested for CWD in 2021.

Table 2: Number of cervids tested in the Norwegian surveillance programme for CWD 2021, distributed on species and reason for submission. Additional 17 wild reindeer from Svalbard and 33 muskoxen are not included in the table.

Species	Wild			Captive and semi-domesticated			Total
	Hunted	Diseased, injured or traffic killed	Un-known	Slaughtered	Diseased, injured or traffic killed	Un-known	
Moose	3 739	618	165	1	1	1	4 525
Red deer	4 142	378	98	311	10	0	4 939
Reindeer	3 406	40	74	6003	138	0	9 661
Roe deer	113	1 528	243	0	1	0	1 885
Fallow deer	7	0	0	21	0	0	28
Unknown	119	7	400	91	5	1	623
Total	11 526	2 571	980	6 427	155	2	21 661

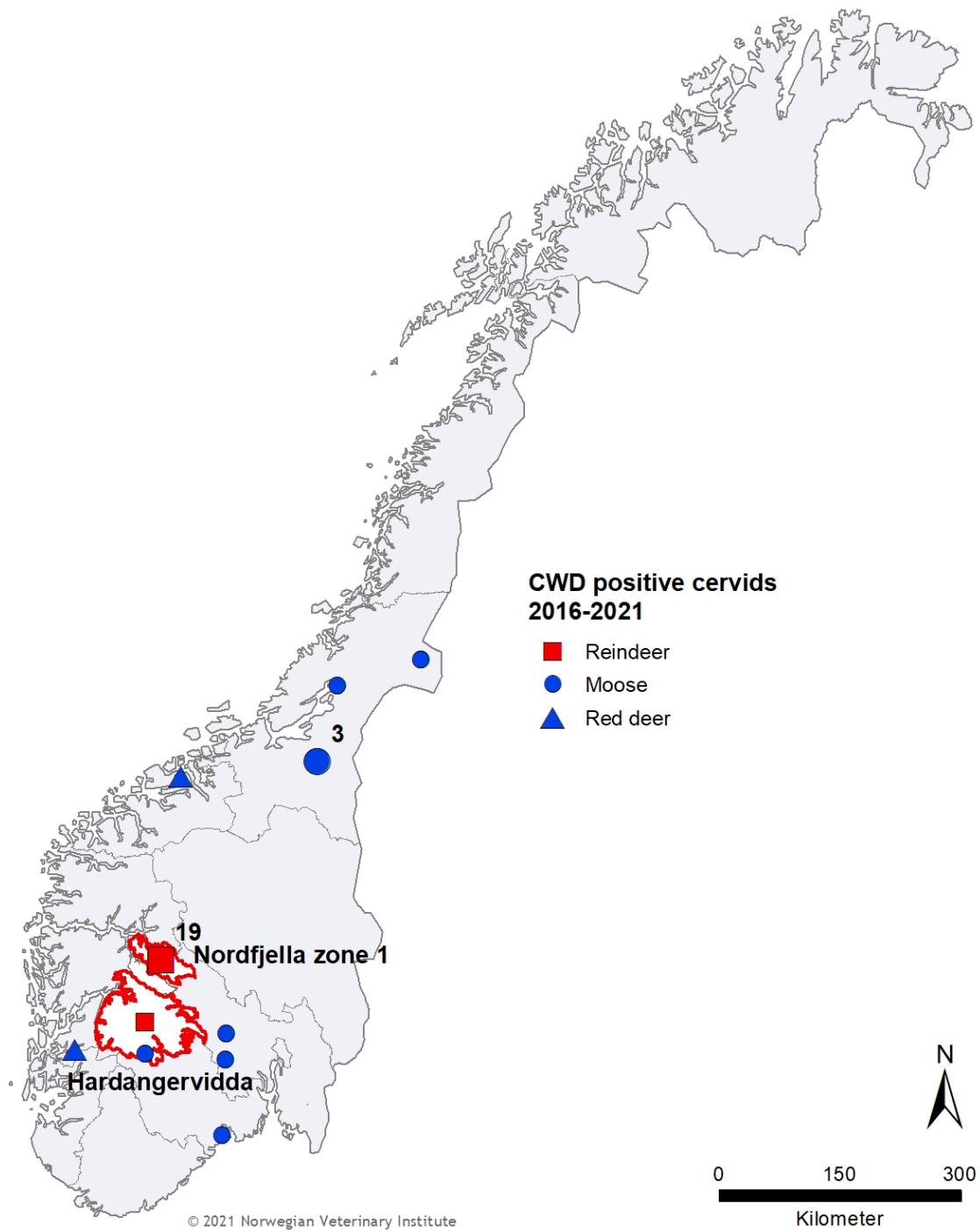


Figure 1: Geographical location of Nordfjella and Hardangervidda (encircled in red), and municipalities in which the CWD positive cervids have been detected through the Norwegian surveillance programme for CWD. Unless a single case, the number of animals at each location is given.

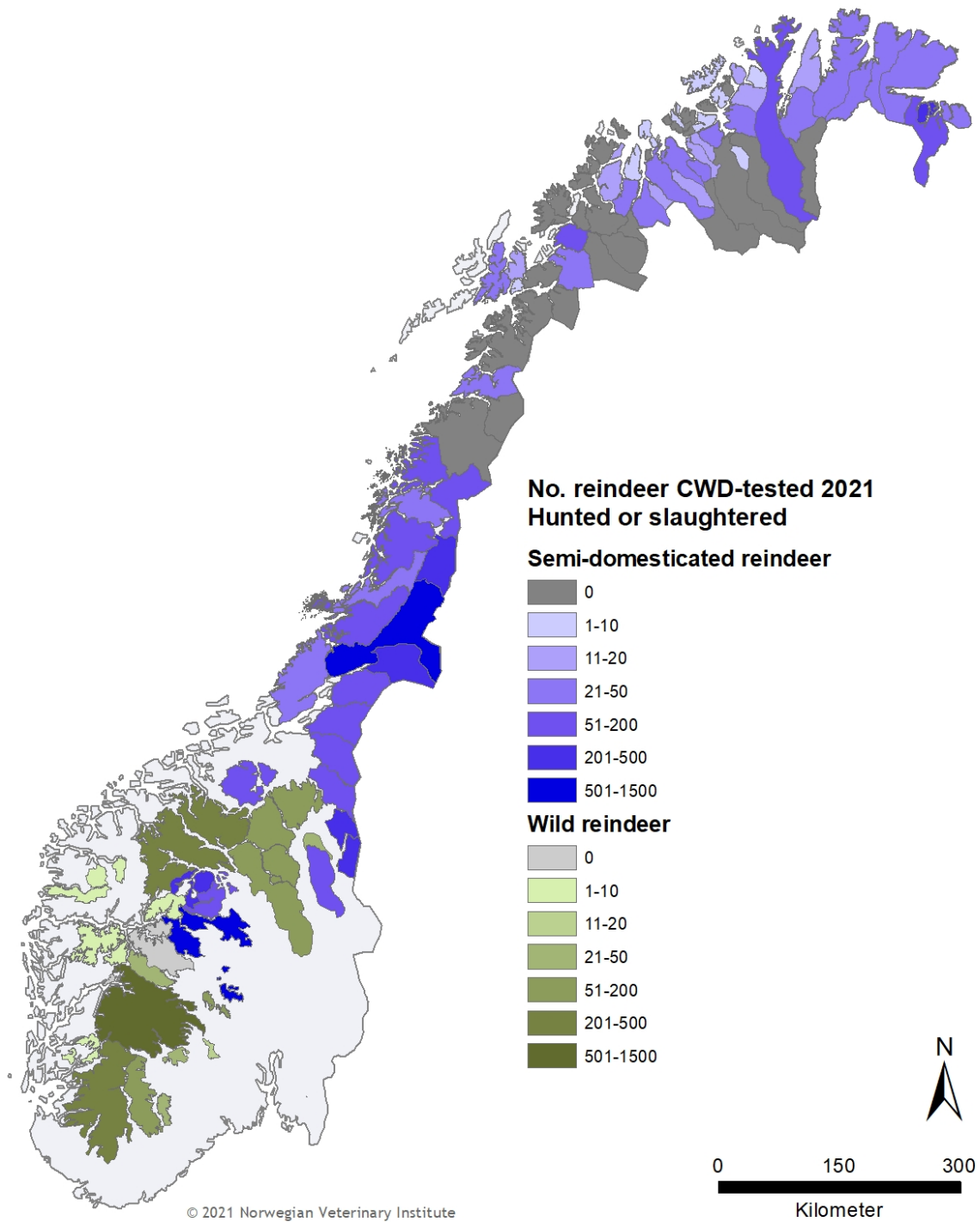


Figure 2: Number and geographical distribution of hunted free-ranging (green) and slaughtered semi-domesticated (blue) reindeer (*Rangifer tarandus*) tested in the Norwegian surveillance programme for CWD in 2021.

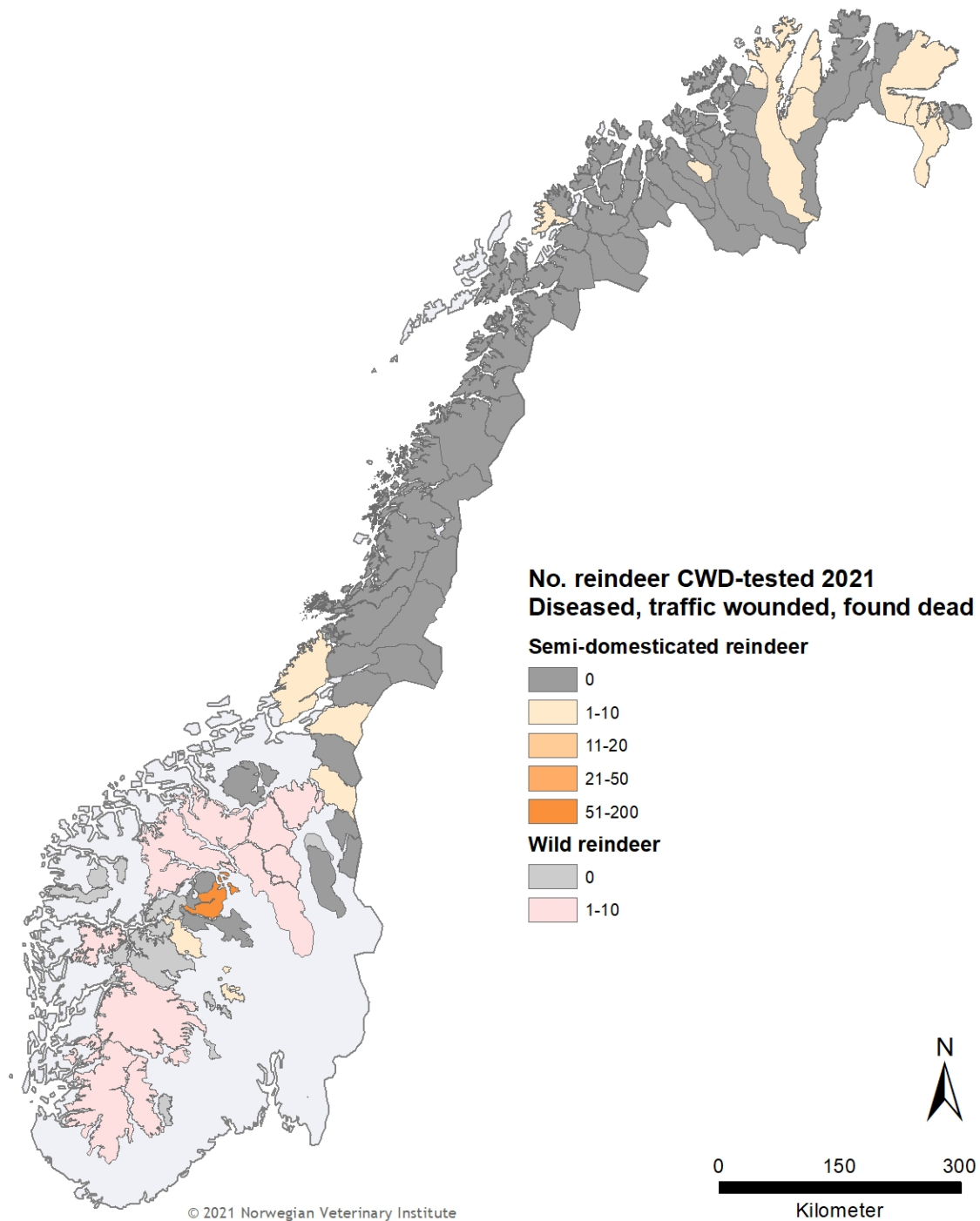


Figure 3. Number and geographical distribution of reindeer (*Rangifer tarandus*), both free-ranging and semi-domesticated, found diseased and euthanised, traffic wounded or dead and tested in the Norwegian surveillance programme for CWD in 2021.

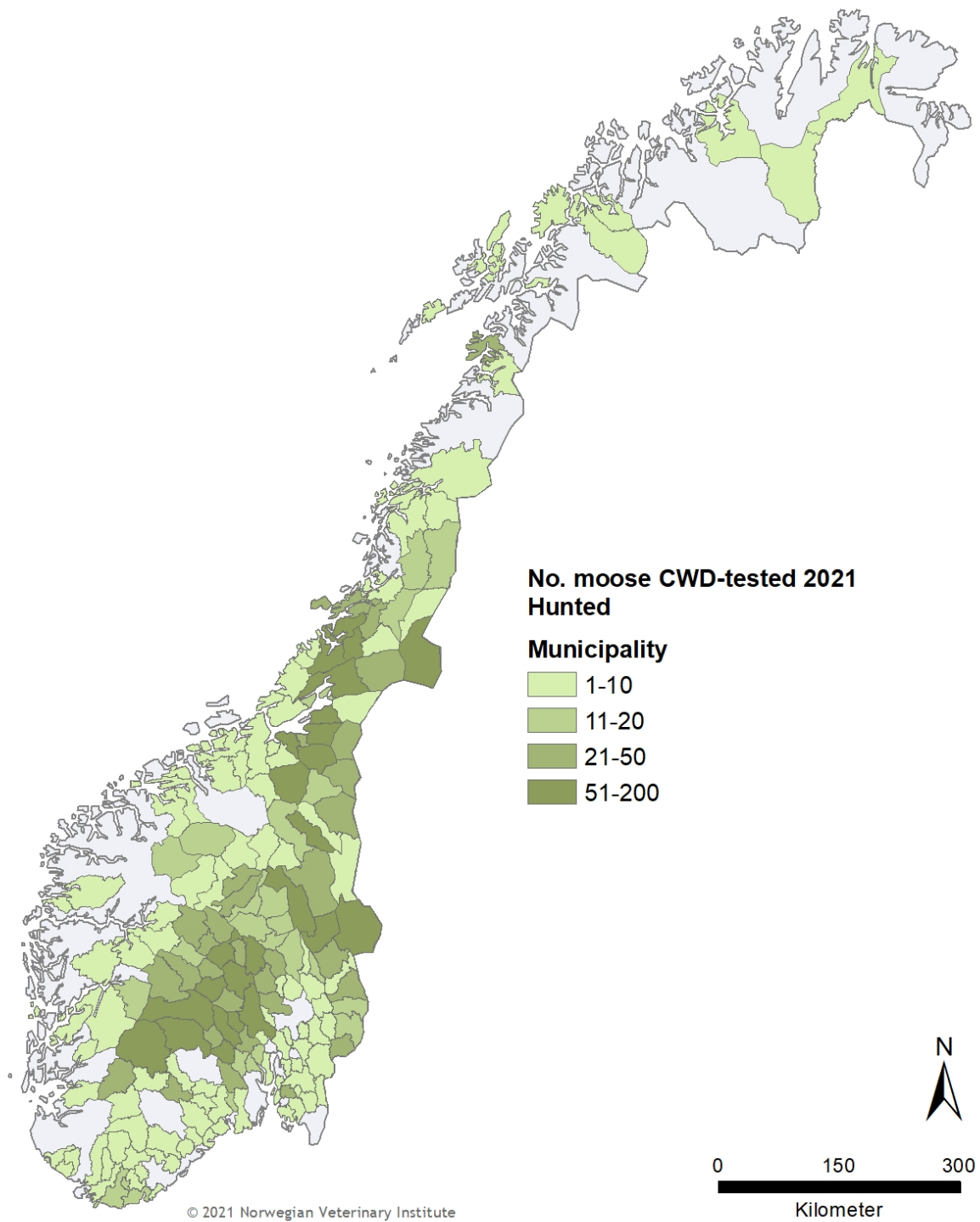


Figure 4: Number and geographical distribution of hunted free-ranging moose (*Alces alces*) tested in the Norwegian surveillance programme for CWD in 2021.

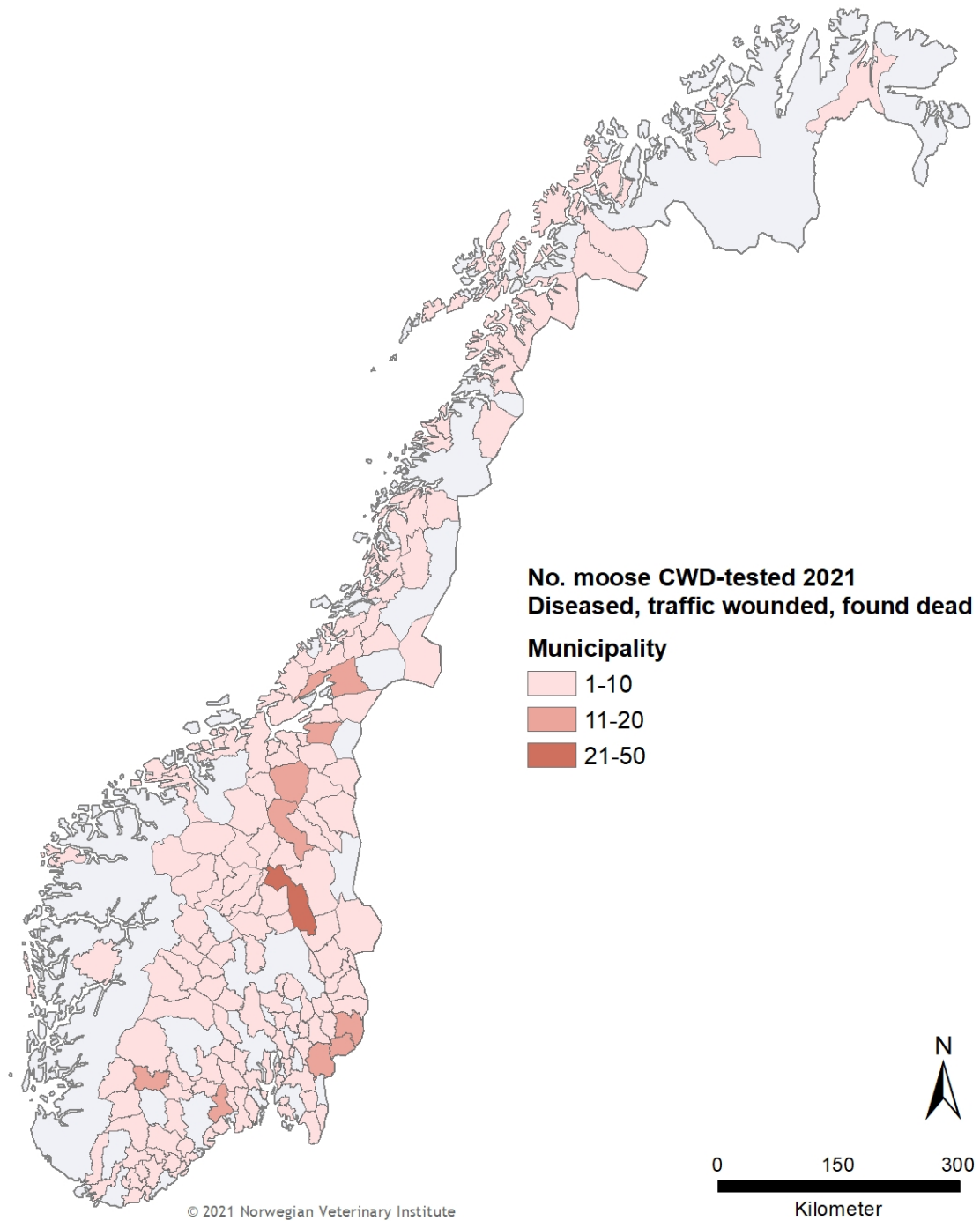


Figure 5: Number and geographical distribution of free-ranging moose (*Alces alces*) found diseased and euthanised, traffic wounded or dead and tested in the Norwegian surveillance programme for CWD in 2021.

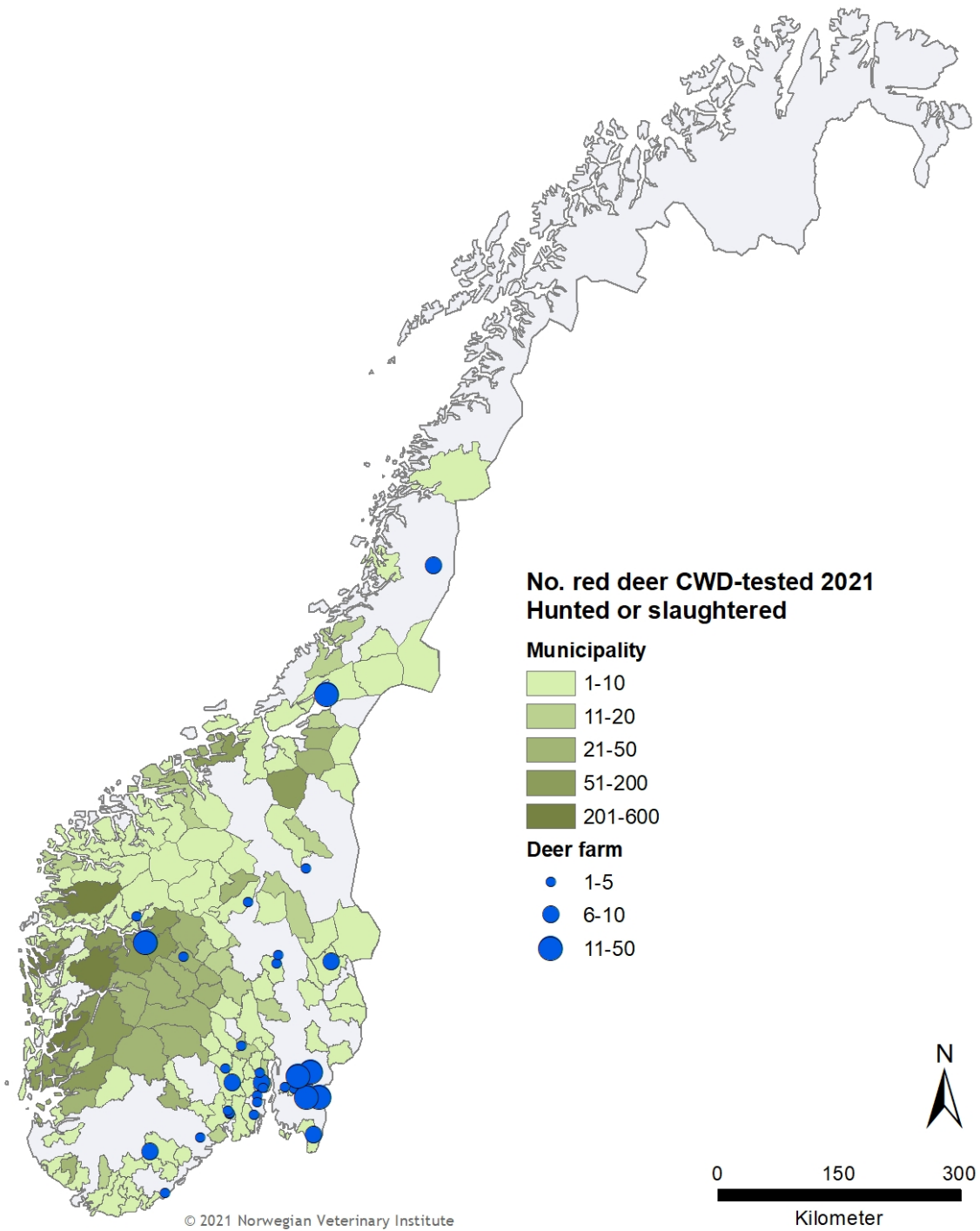


Figure 6: Number and geographical distribution of hunted free-ranging (green) and slaughtered captive (blue dots) red deer (*Cervus elaphus*) tested in the Norwegian surveillance programme for CWD in 2021.

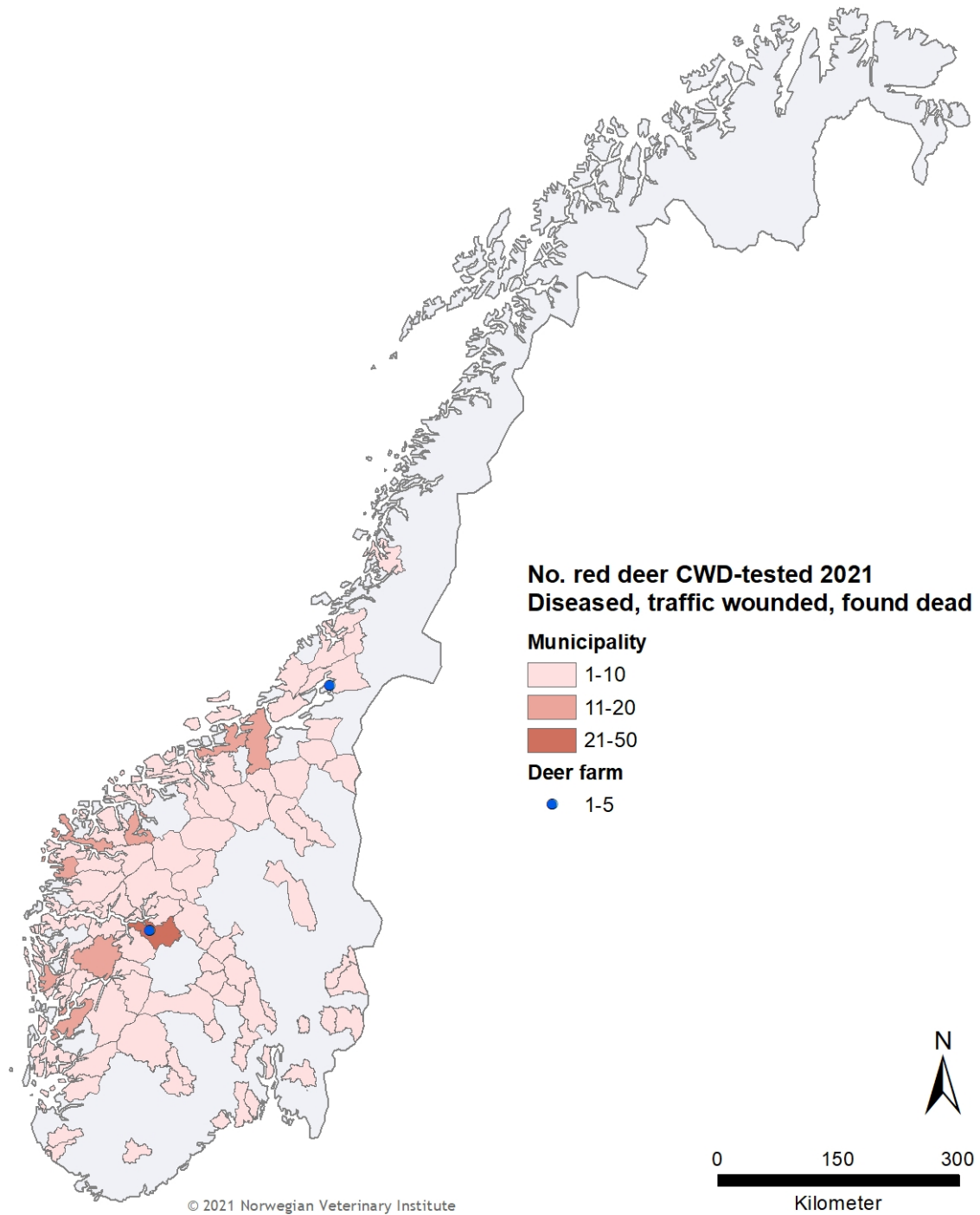


Figure 7: Number and geographical distribution of free-ranging (red) and captive (blue dots) red deer (*Cervus elaphus*) found diseased and euthanised, traffic wounded or dead and tested in the Norwegian surveillance programme for CWD in 2021.

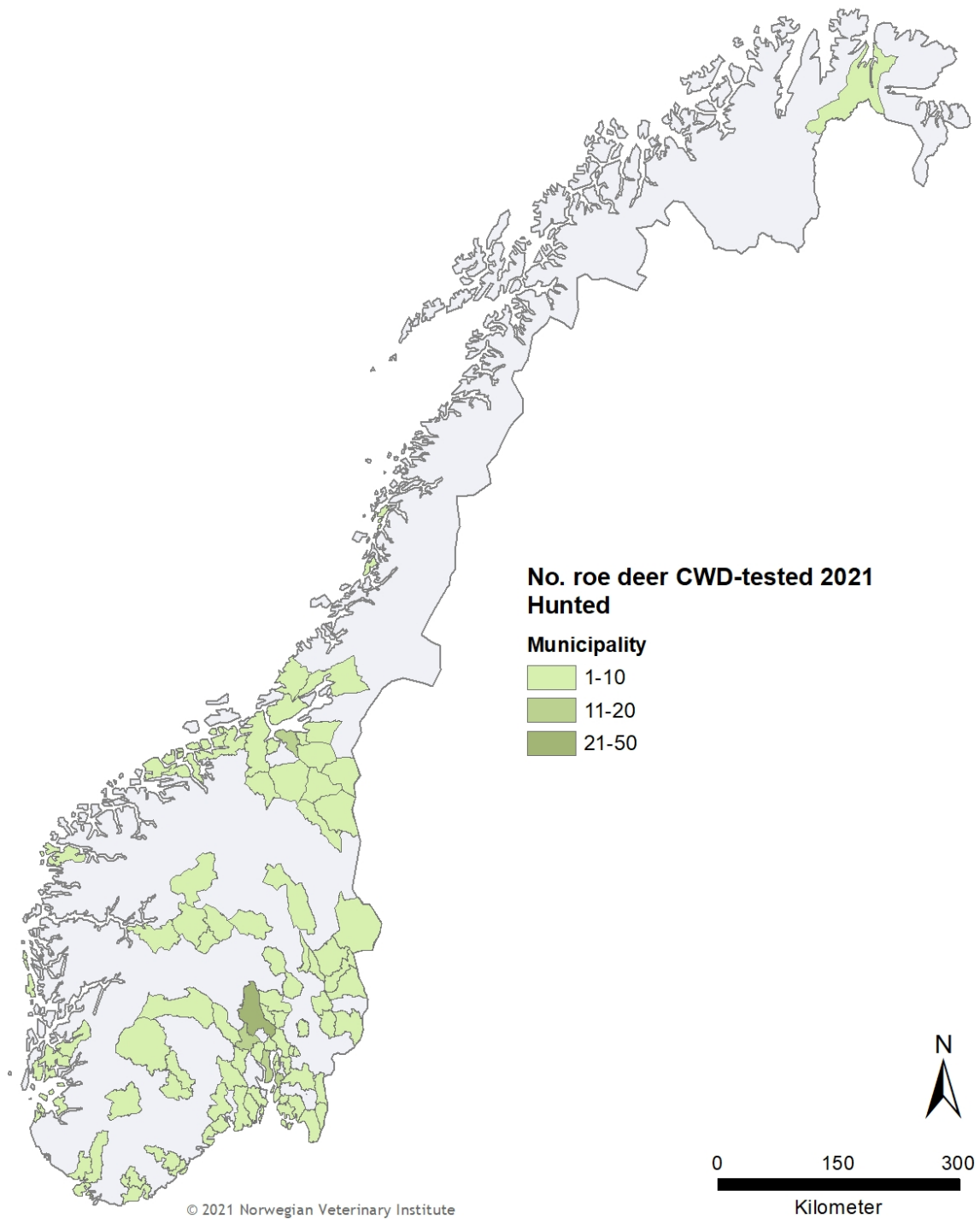


Figure 8: Number and geographical distribution of hunted free-ranging roe deer (*Capreolus capreolus*) tested in the Norwegian surveillance programme for CWD in 2021.

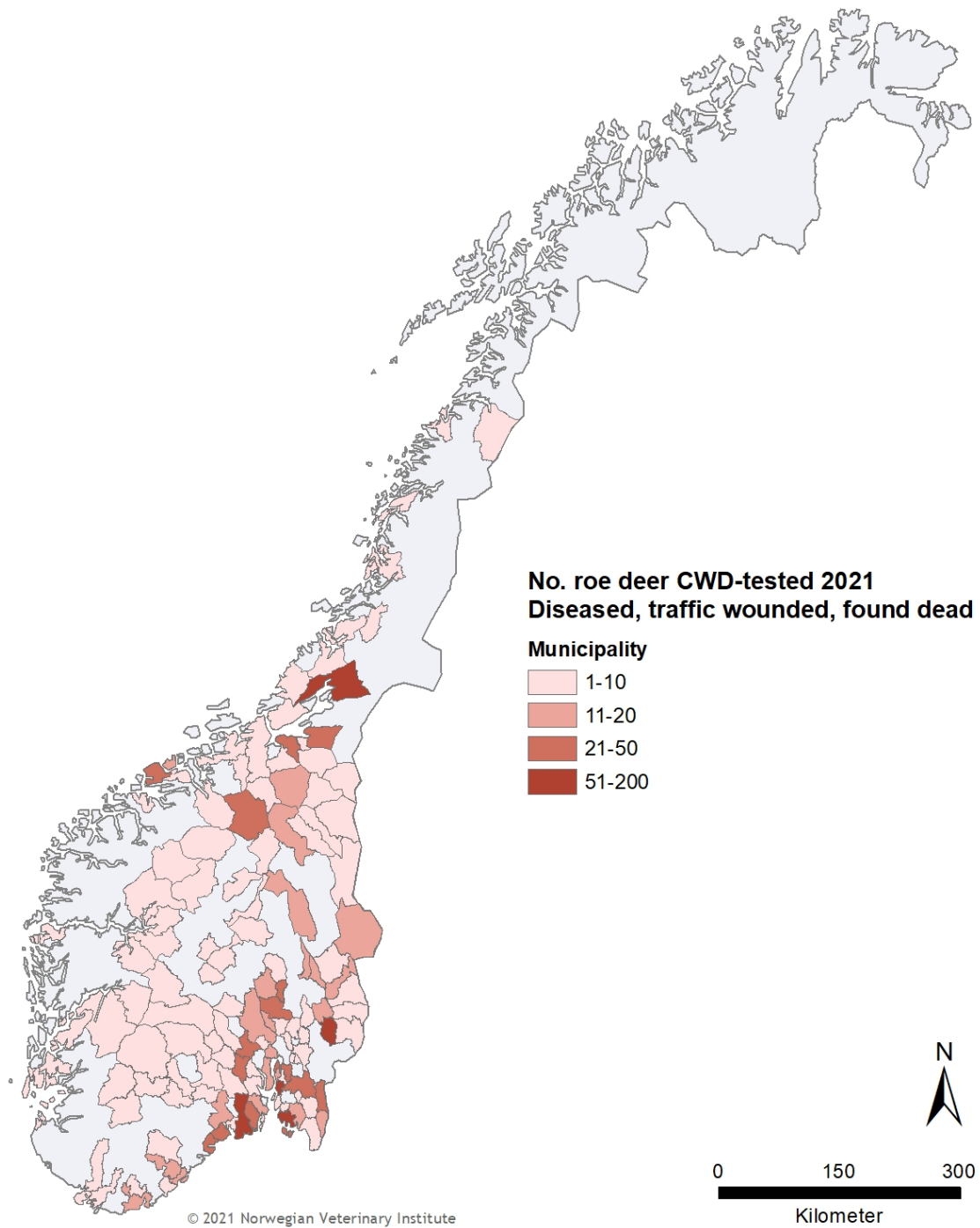


Figure 9: Number and geographical distribution of free-ranging roe deer (*Capreolus capreolus*) found diseased and euthanised, traffic wounded or dead and tested in the Norwegian surveillance programme for CWD in 2021.

Discussion

In 2016, CWD was for the first time detected in Europe, in six free-ranging cervids in Norway. In total, the CWD testing has revealed 20 reindeer, nine moose and two red deer positive for the disease in the period 2016-2021. The first 19 reindeer cases were detected within the outbreak zone 1 of Nordfjella wild reindeer management area. The affected Nordfjella population was culled in 2018. One additional case was diagnosed in a reindeer hunted at Hardangervidda in September 2020. This discovery of CWD in a new reindeer area is challenging the effort to eradicate the disease within the reindeer populations.

Hardangervidda holds by far the largest sub-population, about 7000, of wild reindeer in Europe and the area is much less confinable than Nordfjella in the aspect of disease spreading. Nevertheless, so far no additional reindeer-cases has been detected outside Nordfjella and Hardangervidda management areas, despite intensive testing, and this give some indications of the infection in this species being limited.

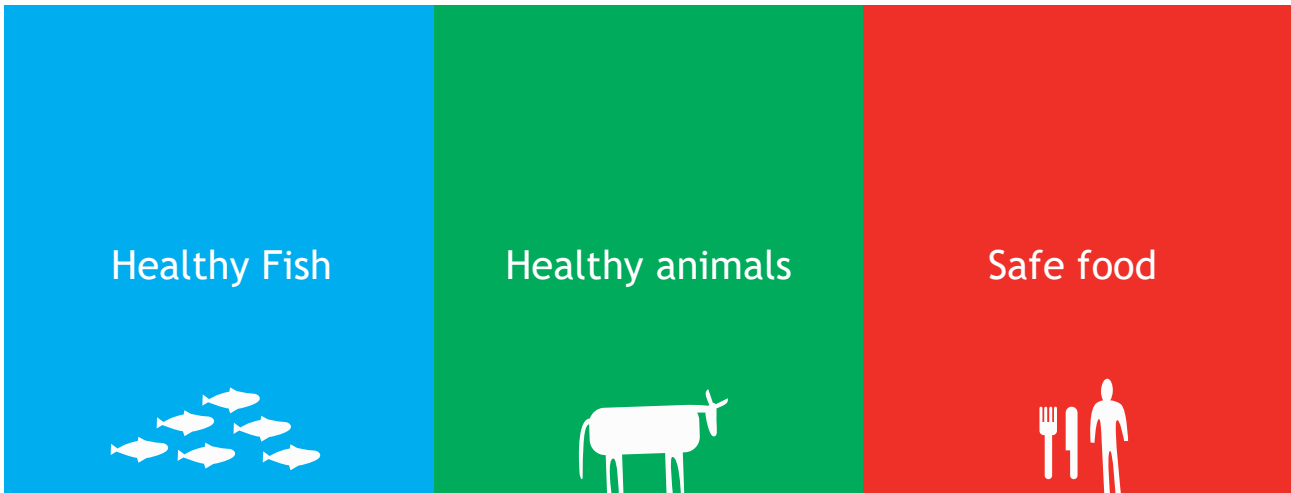
Further research studies aiming at characterizing prion strain differences have shown that the strain found in reindeer is different from those of the two other cervid species. The reindeer cases were indistinguishable, in results of diagnostic test methods, from cases of CWD from North America. The positive European moose and red deer have shown atypical characteristics [6,10], contrasting with the reindeer and cervids from North America, with no detectable prions in the lymphoid tissues using diagnostic tests. Strains analysed in the Norwegian cases, across three species, were demonstrated by inoculation studies as multiple and all different from North American cases. Nevertheless, the reindeer strain has many similarities with strains isolated from cases from North America [12].

The positive CWD animals other than reindeer are 9 cases in 33,236 tested moose and 2 cases in 30,062 tested red deer, indicate low levels of horizontal spreading, if any, between live animals in these species. TSE in domestic animals, with Nor98 / atypical scrapie in sheep and atypical BSE in cattle, have prion strains showing similar sporadic nature. Nor98 / atypical scrapie and atypical BSE have a prevalence of about eight per 10,000 found dead adult sheep and about two per 1,000,000 tested cattle, respectively.

The number of tested cervids in Norway is not enough to assure knowledge of accurate prevalence nor to give complete understanding of CWD epidemiology. For other European countries there is even much more uncertainty as the surveillance levels are still very moderate [6].

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