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2014 Deer Population Management Report

Submitted by:

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INTRODUCTION

The Joint Chairman's Report on the Fiscal 2015 State Operating Budget (SB 170) and the State Capital Budget (SB 171) includes a request for the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to:

...consult with a wide variety of stakeholders, other states, and outside experts to identify and evaluate all possible techniques for controlling and reducing deer populations to acceptable levels in areas of the State determined to have an overabundant deer population. In addition, the budget committees request that DNR report by December 31, 2014, on the results of its evaluations and actions that DNR will take to reduce deer populations to acceptable levels.

This report is intended to fulfill that request and to provide the General Assembly with a detailed update on the significant progress that has been made to balance the deer herd with the diverse interests and concerns of Maryland's citizens.

Deer management in Maryland is the responsibility of the Game Management Program within the Wildlife and Heritage Service (WHS) of DNR. White-tailed deer management in Maryland is guided by the *Maryland Ten-Year White-Tailed Deer Plan* (Department of Natural Resources, 2008). This plan was developed with extensive public input and involved several stakeholder meetings, multiple public meetings, outreach to the farm community and local government participation. A formal public opinion survey was also conducted by Responsive Management, a professional public survey firm. The goal of the Plan is a healthy deer herd that is in balance with the cultural and ecological concerns across Maryland.

Maryland has an estimated 227,000 deer within its borders (*Maryland Annual Deer Report 2013-2014*; Maryland Department of Natural Resources, 2014). The population peaked in 2002 with nearly 295,000 deer and has been on a declining trend for the past decade. In accordance with the Plan, this downward trend is driven by an effort to increase deer harvest via hunting, shooting on crop damage permits and the focused removal of deer via sharpshooting.

At the forefront of these approaches is the annual regulated hunting harvest. Deer hunters in Maryland enjoy very liberal deer seasons and bag limits, and as a result, harvest more antlerless deer per square mile than any other state or province in North America (*QDMA's Whitetail Report 2014*; Quality Deer Management Association, 2014). Antlerless deer harvest is a fundamental management practice in controlling deer populations and Maryland is a national leader in this effort. Hunters reported harvesting 95,863 deer during the 2013-14 season (*Maryland Annual Deer Report 2013-2014*; Maryland Department of Natural Resources, 2014).

WHS also employs a liberal and effective crop damage program for farmers experiencing damage from deer. To accomplish this, the WHS issues Deer Management Permits (DMP) without charge to producers exhibiting damage to commercially grown crops. The farmer or landowner, and any other person included on the DMP, may harvest deer

on a year-round basis. The goal of the DMP program is to allow farmers to focus harvest pressure on areas where deer damage is most severe. DMPs accounted for 8,969 deer across the state in 2013 (*Maryland Annual Deer Report 2013-2014*; Maryland Department of Natural Resources, 2014), down from the peak in 2003 of 13,327.

Additionally, the WHS has a Deer Cooperator Permit program that employs a rigorous testing program to license individuals to professionally remove deer for a fee. The practice typically involves focused sharpshooting operations in suburban areas where hunting is difficult or not feasible at all. Harvest by DCPs is typically very important locally, but is low compared to hunting and crop damage permits.

Combined, these efforts annually remove over 105,000 deer (approximately 12 per square mile) from the Maryland landscape, representing nearly 45% of the fall population. Maryland also promotes effective non-lethal management techniques including fencing and repellants, and has cooperated on numerous research studies examining the effectiveness of deer birth control and sterilization.

The WHS responded to the Joint Chairman's Report request by expanding its public outreach efforts to identify and evaluate all possible techniques for controlling and reducing deer populations to acceptable levels. The results of that effort are outlined below. What emerged from these investigations was the need to increase hunter opportunity within the existing fall hunting season. Increases in hunter effort yield an increase in harvest when offered within the traditional hunting seasons. We also learned that deer problems were often focused in discrete areas. For rural or semi-rural landowners, we found they did not adequately harvest deer due to being poorly informed on the basics of deer management or due to misconceptions on safety and liability issues. We learned that the deer management challenges in the more suburban areas of the state are very complex, but also include reluctance by landowners to allow adequate hunting where legal and feasible. These issues are best addressed by better outreach and education.

Input from the farm community revealed that many farmers with deer problems were not using DMPs to their fullest extent, either due to a lack of understanding or by limitations imposed by DNR on how and when the permits can be used. Consequently, DNR will pursue further liberalization of the DMP regulations to allow more efficient harvest as well as to step up outreach efforts, given adequate funding.

PUBLIC OUTREACH EFFORTS

To meet the Joint Chairman's Report request, the WHS conducted a wide variety of outreach efforts to gain a better understanding of deer issues across the state and to explore additional means to reduce and control the deer herd. A summary of those efforts is below:

Stakeholder Meeting on August 18:

This meeting was focused on working with groups supporting and/or conducting deer control in our suburban areas by using fertility control measures. The primary fertility control options available today are surgical sterilization or chemical contraception of female deer. The attendee list is attached in the Appendix.

Stakeholder Meeting on October 8:

This diverse group included many of the organizations in Maryland that have a vested interest in deer management. Attendees included representatives of hunting groups, the agricultural industry, equestrians, ecologists, wildlife law enforcement and animal rights organizations. The primary focus of the discussion at this day-long meeting was to increase the lethal control of deer with a secondary focus to review non-lethal options. The attendee list is attached in the Appendix.

Local Government Meetings:

The WHS had numerous interactions with local government staff to discuss and seek to resolve deer issues. Most of these discussions focused on deer in suburban or urban areas where conventional lethal control methods such as hunting are very limited or not feasible. Examples of these interactions are working with the Maryland National Capital Parks and Planning Commission staff in Prince George's and Montgomery counties, advising the Anne Arundel County deer management staff, meeting with Montgomery County deer managers, working with county civic associations and interacting with legislators and other elected officials.

Local Community Meetings:

WHS staff had dozens of meetings with community homeowner associations (HOA) to present lethal and non-lethal deer management options. These deer control discussions typically involve areas where conventional hunting opportunities are limited and HOA members are sharply divided on deer control solutions. WHS staff often attend several meetings with a given HOA to provide guidance on deer control options, ensure the discussion is based on accurate assumptions and respond to questions as they arise. The desired outcome is to craft a solution for the specific area that is biologically sound, operationally feasible and culturally acceptable to the majority of the HOA membership.

Other States and Outside Experts:

Staff in the WHS are members of the Northeast Deer Technical Committee and the Southeast Deer Technical Committee. Both of these groups consist of deer managers working for the wildlife agencies in the eastern United States and Canada. Non-government organizations and other interests (e.g. hunting industry reps) with a stake in deer management regularly attend these meetings and provide an opportunity to interact with professionals not employed by state wildlife agencies. The deer technical committees meet at least annually and WHS staff are closely involved, in fact the Deer Project Leader currently chairs the northeast committee. Through meetings with other states and outside experts, it has become evident that Maryland has developed one of the most comprehensive and progressive combinations of lethal and non-lethal deer management strategies in the nation.

OUTCOMES

Listed below are the action items that DNR developed based on the public input process that are considered to be reasonable and feasible. Some of these action items can be achieved in the short term (one year), others will take longer to develop and apply. Others may prove to be unattainable, but nevertheless are worth pursuing.

DNR Action Items:

Modify the Deer Management Permit (DMP) regulations to allow all shooters on a permit to use a firearm year-round. We will review this change with internal and external stakeholders with the goal of making any changes in time for the 2015 permit renewal period in late February.

Restructure the DMP regulations and policies to address deer damage in cases where legitimate damage is occurring to something other than commercial crops.

Develop a list of deer donation program processors (butchers) who will accept deer outside the deer seasons for persons shooting on DMPs or other special permits. Include that list with any DMP issued.

Work with the deer donation program to increase and strategically locate additional processors that accept donated deer outside the normal deer seasons for persons shooting on DMPs or other special permits. This may include the strategic location of coolers funded by the deer donation program or other outside entities.

Investigate options to provide incentives for persons donating deer to the deer donation program.

Improve outreach and education to the farm community on DMP opportunities.

- via Maryland Farm Bureau (MFB) Spotlight Newsletter, and
- via MFB Wildlife Committee, and
- via MFB Annual Convention, and
- via Maryland Horse Council publication The Equiery, and
- via the DNR Website.

Review local government lands to assess the opportunity to increase deer harvest via public or managed hunting.

Review DNR lands to assess the opportunity to increase deer harvest via additional or new public or managed hunting areas.

Improve hunter access to DNR lands during key deer hunting seasons to facilitate higher hunter effort and deer harvest. This effort should focus on improving access to tracts that currently allow hunting, but limit vehicular access via the use

of closed gates, prohibiting the use of off-road vehicles and other methods or policies that result in restricting access to foot travel only.

Restructure the Deer Cooperator Permit (DCP) regulations to allow for an agricultural application that maintains a high degree of safety but is more compatible with producer needs and a rural landscape.

Provide training to producers once the restructured DCP regulations are completed.

Ensure that all interested citizens have a reasonable opportunity to complete the Hunter Safety Course in an efficient manner, to include use of WHS staff trained as Hunter Safety Instructors and to consider this activity as part of the normal work duties for qualified WHS staff. Additional hunters would help achieve a higher deer harvest.

Continue with hunter recruitment and retention efforts, especially opportunities focused on deer hunting. Again, a strong foundation of hunter participation will ensure the short and long-term sustainability of hunter-managed deer harvest.

During the 2016-18 regulations cycle, propose to modify the existing October muzzleloader antlerless deer season to include modern firearms.

Continue to explore a means to allow the appropriately controlled sale of wild venison as a potential mechanism to encourage or otherwise facilitate lethal deer control. It is important to note that the commercial sale of venison is currently a national level discussion with a wide range of jurisdictions and agencies involved. Maryland is fully engaged in this discussion and is committed to carefully reviewing any outcome of this dialogue.

Approve non-lethal projects that involve fertility control. Focus on locations where the projects have merit and will add to our knowledge of how to apply this option on insular deer populations where hunter access is limited or non-existent.

Legislative Action Items:

Work with various stakeholders to find common ground to allow Sunday deer hunting on a uniform basis statewide. Currently, Sunday deer hunting is authorized by law in 20 counties for as few as two Sundays and as many as 21.

WHS regulations implementing enabling legislation for Sunday hunting legislation, allow no more than 11 Sundays in any jurisdiction. Under no circumstance does the number of firearms deer hunting Sundays exceed four days, including junior hunt days.

A preferred option for statewide legislation would be to change all existing laws to provide uniformity across each county and reduce the number of authorized

Sunday hunting days from 21 to 9 with a maximum of four Sundays open to modern firearms. This option would provide certainty across the State both to hunters and other recreational stakeholders. Considering the diverse viewpoints on this topic, this change would focus on selecting those Sundays where hunter participation is highest to maximize deer harvest. Further, this approach places an emphasis on those Sundays less attractive to other outdoor users by shifting them to later in the year.

Funding Issues:

If resources are available, obtain funding to hire a Natural Resources Biologist to develop and deliver an outreach program to begin addressing these tasks:

- contact private landowners to guide them in effective deer management on their property, and
- inform landowners of liability issues related to allowing hunting on their property, and
- develop deer management educational materials in concert with, and for distribution by, the Maryland Cooperative Extension Service, and
- provide information on how to develop deer management cooperatives that include multiple landowners committed to effective deer management in an area, and
- contact producers to keep them effectively using DMPs or DCPs, and
- to work with private landowners to better coexist with non-hunting neighbors, and
- work with Land Acquisition and Planning to provide effective deer management information to landowners executing easement agreements with DNR.

Public Input Not Currently Being Considered:

Comments that were simply not practical or were intended to address problems not supported by the data are not considered in this report. However, other comments not incorporated in the lists above warrant mention:

Allow the use of rifles in all counties for persons shooting under the authority of a DMP.

Concern: Each county government has the authority to make this decision, not DNR. Further, we consider the use of rifles in all areas of the state to be ill-advised from a safety standpoint.

Require hunters to harvest an antlerless deer prior to being able to take an antlered deer.

Concern: While this would help meet our goal of increasing antlerless harvest, it would put an undue burden on new hunters and hunters with limited time. It also would put an unprecedented level of temptation on hunters to fraudulently report an antlerless deer to comply with the

requirement. Lastly, this requirement would potentially reduce hunter interest and therefore effort, resulting in a harvest reduction.

Modify the existing antler point restrictions (APR) to further limit the harvest of antlered deer and shift harvest to antlerless deer.

Concern: This is feasible, but we are in the first year of an APR and do not wish to change it until we have good data to review prior to making this decision. Additionally, this requirement would potentially reduce hunter interest and therefore effort, resulting in a harvest reduction.

Reduce the statewide antlered deer bag limit to shift harvest to antlerless deer.

Concern: This is feasible, but a recent WHS effort to do this was met with significant resistance from hunters during the public input process and was accordingly dropped from consideration.

Create an Apprentice Hunter Program to allow new hunters of any age to hunt with a mentor prior to completing the Hunter Safety Program.

Concern: This has been discussed in the past with stakeholders and lawmakers. Most participants in prior discussions supported continuing the current model where all new hunters must pass a written test and live-fire exercise to complete the hunter education program before hunting in Maryland.

Reduce the hunting license cost for new hunters.

Concern: This is feasible, but several prior efforts to restructure license fees have not passed the General Assembly. Legislation passed during the 2014 General Assembly gives DNR the ability to modify license costs for customers who have not purchased a hunting license over the previous three years. The provisions of the bill did not specifically address first time buyers; however DNR will review the legislation to ascertain if any opportunities to pursue this option exist.

Limit Sunday hunting to certain shooting hours that include just the early morning and/or late afternoon time periods.

Concern: The nature of deer hunting does not readily fit a model of limited shooting hours since successful deer hunters typically require up to several hours to locate, field dress and remove harvested deer from the field. This normal activity would be confusing to the public expecting deer hunters to be absent outside of the limited shooting hours. It would also create an atmosphere where the enforcement of this provision would be difficult since hunters may appear to be hunting when they are merely retrieving harvested deer in a normal and appropriate manner.

The Department wishes to thank the many citizens and organizations that provided the input so critical to the development of this report. This input was often very perceptive and always informative as we collectively explored options to address the deer population across this diverse state. Listening to public input allowed the Department to gain a

better understanding of the issues surrounding our deer population and was as enjoyable as it was insightful.

References:

Maryland Department of Natural Resources. 2008. *Maryland Ten-Year White-Tailed Deer Plan*. http://www.dnr.state.md.us/wildlife/Hunt_Trap/pdfs/2009-2018MarylandWTDeerPlan.pdf).

Maryland Department of Natural Resources. 2014. *Maryland Annual Deer Report 2013-2014*. http://www.dnr.state.md.us/wildlife/Hunt_Trap/pdfs/md_annual_deer_report13-14.pdf

Adams, Kip and Matt Ross. 2014. *QDMA's Whitetail Report 2014*. http://www.qdma.com/uploads/pdf/2014_WR.pdf

Appendix

2014 Deer Management Stakeholder Meeting Attendees and Affiliation August 18, 2014

Last Name	First	Organization	Position
Santelli	Tami	Maryland Chapter, Humane Society of the US	Director
Boyles-Griffin	Stephanie	National Chapter Humane Society of the US	Staff
Naugle	Rick	National Chapter Humane Society of the US	Staff
DiNicola	Tony	White Buffalo, Inc	CEO
Feinburg	Enid	Wildlife Rescue	Member
Lenhard	Lierra	Wildlife Rescue	Member
Peditto	Paul	Wildlife and Heritage Service (WHS), Director	Staff
Jayne	Peter	WHS, Associate Director for Game Management	Staff
Spiker	Harry	WHS, Game Mammal Section Leader	Staff
Eyler	Brian	WHS, Deer Project Leader	Staff
Timko	George	WHS, Assistant Deer Project Leader	Staff

2014 Deer Management Stakeholder Meeting Attendees and Affiliation October 8, 2014

Last Name	First	Organization	Position
Zembower	Jerry	Allegheny/Garrett Sportsmen/Women's Association	President
Schroyer	Joe	Allegheny/Garrett Sportsmen/Women's Association	Member
Guilfoyle	Matt	Carroll County Sportsman's Association	President
Fornaro	Nick	Delmarva Sika Deer Association	President
Kelkye	Ben	Frederick County Sportsman's Council	President
Lushbaugh	Rick	Frederick County Sportsman's Council	Member
Rhodehamel	Chick	Maryland Botanical Heritage Work Group	Member
Compton	Lou	Maryland Bowhunters Association	Pres. & WAC
Stafford	Wayne	Maryland Farm Bureau	Officer
Teffeau	Matt	Maryland Farm Bureau	Staff
Bishoff	Billy	Maryland Farm Bureau – Garrett County	County Pres.
Baker	Dan	Maryland Fur Trappers, Inc	President
Santelli	Tami	Maryland Chapter, Humane Society of the US	Director
Ellis	Allan	Maryland Hunting Coalition	Board Member
Seigler	Jane	Maryland Horse Council	President
Kimball	Crystal	Maryland Horse Council, Equiery Magazine	Editor
Miles	Bill	Maryland Legislative Sportsmen's Foundation	Member
Johnson	Kirsten	Maryland Native Plant Society	President
Winter	Cheri	Maryland Chapter, Quality Deer Mgmt Association	President

Last Name	First	Organization	Position
Grimes	E.W.	Maryland Chapter, Quality Deer Mgmt Association	Member
Sutherland	David	Maryland Sportsman's Foundation	Member
Lamp	Joe	Maryland Votes for Animals	Board Chair
Tracey	Greg	Maryland Waterfowler's Association	President
Winter	Joe	Washington County Federation of Sportsmen's Clubs	President
Feinburg	Enid	Wildlife Rescue	Member
Plummer	Jeff	Maryland Wildlife Advisory Commission	Chairman
Gregor	Tina	Maryland Wildlife Advisory Commission	Member
Michael	Joseph	Maryland Wildlife Advisory Commission	Member
Rodney	Charles	Maryland Wildlife Advisory Commission	Member
Wojton	Beth	Maryland Wildlife Advisory Commission	Member
Gill	Joe	Secretary of Natural Resources	Staff
Norling	Rich	DNR Legislative Director	Staff
Peditto	Paul	Wildlife and Heritage Service (WHS), Director	Staff
Stonesifer	Karina	WHS, Associate Director for Regional Operations	Staff
Spiker	Harry	WHS, Game Mammal Section Leader, WHS	Staff
Eyler	Brian	WHS, Deer Project Leader	Staff
Timko	George	WHS, Assistant Deer Project Leader	Staff
Jayne	Pete	WHS, Associate Director for Game Management	Staff
Bakeoven	Robert	DNR, Natural Resources Police	Staff
Shirley	Angie	DNR, Natural Resources Police	Staff
Fawley	Chuck	DNR, Natural Resources Police	Staff
Johnson	Edward	DNR, Natural Resources Police	Staff