

Deer Management Working Group

Meeting notes – January 29, 2017

MEETING ATTENDEES

Rick Watts, Quality Deer Management Association
Robb Miller, Governor's Council for Hunting and Fishing
Rick Conley, United Bowhunters of Pennsylvania
Wayne Haas, Unified Sportsman of Pennsylvania
Tim Layton, Board of Game Commissioners, chair of the deer working group
Dave Putnam, Board of Game Commissioners
Brian Hoover, President, Board of Game Commissioners
Cheryl Trewella, facilitator
Bret Wallingford, Game Commission deer biologist

MEETING SUMMARY

The Deer Management Working group met on January 29, 2017 to begin their first roundtable discussion on "deer hunting in Pennsylvania." Over the last several months, the committee has engaged in several "onboarding projects" to provide everyone a baseline of information on deer management in the state. These onboarding tasks included workshops on deer management, habitat management, and a field trip to State Game Lands 211 to look at habitat projects which benefit deer.

The initial discussion during the January 27th meeting centered on what a hunter defines as "success". The group discussed, from the deer hunter's perspective, what the hunter's idea of success may look like. The concepts were diverse, from increases in harvest rates, more access to places to hunt, larger deer, increased opportunity to harvest a deer, more hunters afield, and the ability of the hunter to feed the family.

All participants recognize that "success" is a personally-defined value. Every hunter defines their success, or their enjoyment of the hunt, differently.

And all participants recognize deer hunting has changed in Pennsylvania, from a predominantly rifle-gun season culture to a deer hunting climate that provides many months of hunting opportunity, from archery season to the late flintlock season. This lengthy hunting season provides many potential days afield for hunters. The legal use of crossbows allows many additional hunters to take advantage of early deer seasons.

It became evident during the discussion that what one hunter defines as a success another may consider a failure of the program. For example, Dave Putnam mentioned "I am more excited now [about deer season] because I have the chance to get a really nice deer, even towards the end of the season. In the past, after 9:00 am on the first day of hunting, it was pretty much over [for the season]."

The Game Commission's deer management plan balances the deer herd with available habitat. It's because of this effort, combined with antler restrictions, that a record number of massive bucks have been taken from Penn's Woods during the past several years.

But balancing the deer herd with the available habitat has resulted in fewer deer in many areas of the state. "If you don't have ample game, you will have to walk away from hunting," said Wayne Haas. "Some hunters want big bucks. Success to me is getting more hunters out there. We wouldn't have this problem [less deer hunters in the woods during rifle gun season] if we had more deer on public lands.

The number of deer that hunters see while hunting is one measure of success for some hunters. All agree that increasing the number of hunters in Pennsylvania is a great measure of success. However, the reasons behind the decline of hunter numbers during the last three decades are complex, but are not the result of deer management in the state, or fewer deer. Declines in the numbers of hunters is a trend seen nationally, not just in Pennsylvania. In fact, the decline in Pennsylvania's license sales starting in 1983 occurred at the same time the state's deer herd was actually growing.

If how the Game Commission manages deer has not reduced hunting license sales, than what has? "We have so many seasons that the working guy who can only hunt opening day of rifle is at a disadvantage," said Haas. "We walked away from a model that worked."

There is no doubt that the popularity of the archery season has likely impacted hunter participation in deer season. Today, approximately 35 to 40 percent of all bucks harvested are taken during the archery season. While there are certainly plenty of bucks in the woods when rifle gun season opens, many hunters have already tagged their buck.

This change in deer hunting has likely contributed to the decrease in hunters participating in the rifle gun season. Some archers tag out in archery season and can't hunt in the rifle season, and some focus their hunting during October and early November when the weather is more comfortable. These changes to Pennsylvania's deer hunting season framework have had positive effects for some hunters and negative impacts for others. For the rifle hunter, fewer hunters in the woods means fewer deer are being pushed by hunters, and fewer deer seen. For the hunter with limited time to hunt, these longer seasons provide more opportunity, especially in light of the fact that Pennsylvania law does not allow Sunday hunting for deer.

Hunter perception of the quality of deer hunting in Pennsylvania may also likely impact hunter participation. Complaints over "lack of deer" and "overharvest of does" is a time-honored tradition in Pennsylvania, and predates the license sales decline that began in 1983. Has "negative branding" hurt our sport in the state? After all, if all a hunter hears is that there are "no deer," this perception may influence the hunter's decision whether or not to go hunting that year.

“My brother used to be a public land hunter, then went to private land,” said Haas. “We need to maximize public lands for deer hunting. Eighty percent of our hunters hunt 20 percent of the land.”

However, this commonly believed perception that most hunters hunt on public lands turns out to be false. Surveys of deer hunters in 2014 showed that 59 percent of rifle deer hunters hunted private lands, 19 percent hunted public lands, and 22 percent hunted both private and public lands.

However, hunter perception and the state’s “hunting brand” may be changing for the better in the Commonwealth. “The number of complaints we [Game Commission] received four years ago was many,” said Tim Layton. “Now we are not getting many complaints. We have gotten more photos from hunters thanking us for what we are doing.”

Rick Conley echoed Layton’s observations. “People used to be in our face at [sport] shows in the past, but things have changed now. In the last year or two it has been phenomenal the amount of success and good comments,” said Conley.

Although the apparent trend in hunters satisfaction is encouraging, that doesn’t mean some hunters are not dissatisfied. But hunter’s perceptions of deer hunting may not be reflective of deer numbers.

“In a past research project we looked at four Wildlife Management Units that had increasing deer herds,” said Bret Wallingford. “Yet most hunters reported the deer herd was going down.” Wallingford’s findings provide an example that what hunters perceive is going on with the deer herd doesn’t always match what is really going on.

“Adding more deer won’t fix the issue for enhancing hunter success,” said Putnam. The challenge to the Deer Management Working Group is to develop avenues to improve hunter success, understanding that “success” means many things to many people.

The working group developed a list of measures of success:

- Increased access for hunting
- Increased remote access
- Larger deer, not necessarily “trophy” deer. Big, healthy animals
- Larger antlers
- Increased harvest rates
- Increased opportunities for harvest
- Ability to harvest throughout the season
- More realistic expectations
- More hunters in the field
- Increased appreciation while in the field
- Concentrating the seasons
- Ability to feed family

The working group was then tasked with developing suggestions that the agency could implement to increase hunter's success. Working group members stressed the importance of both communicating with and providing education to our hunters. While there are a lot of different communication strategies and educational efforts that could be created, the participants narrowed down their starting point by answering the following question - "If you could only provide one tip to increase a hunter's success, what would it be?" That list included:

- Teach hunters how to hunt "habitat." What is good habitat? Teach hunters to identify what good deer habitat looks like?
- Teach people about our goals in the deer management plan.
- Teach people how to organize a drive.
- Teach people how to quarter out a deer.
- Teach people how to go pre-scouting for deer.
- Teach hunters that they can't always hunt the same location. Deer are mobile, and you should be too.
- Teach people why and how deer hunting has changed.
- Teach hunters how to obtain access to both public and private lands (example is UBP landowner cards)
- Teach hunters about the importance of persistence and having realistic expectations about the amount of time needed to harvest a deer.

NEXT STEPS

The committee was asked to:

1. Review the nine items listed above and provide additional feedback. The group agreed that putting together a hunter survey would provide valuable information to help guide the committee not only to gauge the effectiveness of the Deer Management Working Group, but also to provide some baseline information to measure changes in hunter perception in future surveys.
2. Develop questions that could be used in a survey to help the group measure the success of this communications effort. An initial idea was to ask, "How do you get information from the agency"?