

## **WISCONSIN SAF POSITION STATEMENT ON WHITE-TAILED DEER IN WISCONSIN (March 2007)**

The Wisconsin SAF Executive Committee, with the support of the membership, has approved the following Position Statement about white-tailed deer in Wisconsin. The statement can also be found on the Wisconsin SAF website at <http://www.wisaf.org>. Thanks to all of those who worked, debated, and contributed to this document.



### **A Position Statement of the Wisconsin Society of American Foresters**

**ISSUE:** White-tailed deer populations in much of Wisconsin are above number of animals per square mile goals identified in administrative code. These goals are determined by Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources wildlife management professionals and balance the interests of deer hunting, sustainable forest management, agriculture, and natural resources conservation. Deer herbivory is causing ecological and economic losses in forests by affecting tree growth, species composition and diversity, and age class diversity, and is threatening the sustainability of forest management.

#### **POSITION:**

- Deer herbivory is a serious problem that, if not addressed, will affect the sustainability of forestry in Wisconsin. Deer populations should be reduced to management goals to allow for the efficient and desired regeneration of forests, and to sustain a diverse array of plant and animal communities.
- SAF supports management efforts of the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources to manage the deer herd at the goals established through the administrative code process. The established goals must be evaluated to better reflect the impact of deer density on forest sustainability.
- SAF supports increased hunter and public education on deer impacts on forest sustainability.
- SAF supports additional funding focused for research on deer population management and impacts on forest sustainability.
- SAF supports additional herd reduction efforts that will lower deer numbers to the identified management goals.

**BACKGROUND:** Wisconsin's white-tailed deer population shares the same historical legacy as much of the eastern United States. Deer and deer habitat were greatly reduced during the forest cutovers in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Deer increased dramatically as the forests regenerated and favorable habitat filled the landscape.

Wisconsin has 16 million acres of forest land, covering nearly half the state. The largest management tool for controlling deer numbers has been sport hunting. Deer hunting in Wisconsin has great social and political significance and strong cultural values surround the issues of deer populations, hunter success and deer feeding/viewing. Efforts to reduce the herds to appropriate management levels through hunting have not always been successful because of limited hunting capacity, hunter opposition to changes in deer hunting seasons and regulations, and a substantial public preference for high deer numbers.

There has been no research in Wisconsin specifically to quantify the economic impacts of deer herbivory or estimate reductions in forest productivity caused by deer. However, anecdotal information from private-sector foresters and informal reports from county, state and federal foresters indicates that deer herbivory is significant and that it is causing economic losses as well as reductions in forest productivity and biodiversity. Deer herbivory has also been identified by foresters as negatively impacting the levels of natural regeneration of hemlock, white cedar, white pine, aspen and red maple. In addition, the measures used to protect seedlings from deer such as fencing, plastic tubing and repellent sprays are expensive to implement and maintain.

Forestry surveys completed by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources on forest regeneration successes of both artificial and natural stands gathered these results:

- A 2005 reforestation survey identified deer browse as the most significant barrier to forest regeneration, with 81% of the respondents citing deer browse as a problem.
- A 2006 plantation assessment found that in many plantations deer browse has significantly impacted the growth and survival of hardwood seedlings.
- A 2006 natural oak regeneration survey asked respondents to rate eight different factors regarding oak regeneration. Of the eight factors, more respondents identified deer as a strong to very strong contributor to oak regeneration failure than any other factor.

**SUMMARY:** Deer herbivory in Wisconsin forests is causing economic and ecological losses by reducing tree survival and growth, and altering species and age class composition. The continued overabundance of deer can directly threaten the future of sustainable forestry. Research in Pennsylvania has shown that future economic impacts are avoidable, and that detrimental ecological impacts to forest plant and animal communities are preventable but only if action is taken to reduce deer numbers. The opportunity to reduce the economic and ecological effects is within reach if deer numbers are reduced in a timely and strategic manner.

Approved: /s/ Gary Vander Wyst      Date: March 16, 2007  
Gary J. Vander Wyst, Chair  
Wisconsin Society of American Foresters