

Secretary addresses legislators on deer season & population rule

Presented before Assembly Fish & Wildlife Committee and Senate Transportation, Tourism, Forestry & Natural Resources Committee, December 17, 2009

Good morning Chairs Hraychuck and Holperin and members of the Committees. I'm pleased to be here today to share with you a brief snapshot of Wisconsin's 158th deer hunt before we address the proposed deer management unit population goals for the next three years. The annual deer report is normally first delivered to the Natural Resources Board at its December meeting which this year was canceled due to a pretty good Wisconsin snowstorm. A copy of the report has been provided to the Board and has been provided to you as well.

I was out at deer registration stations on opening weekend and also got away a couple of days to hunt myself. Since the season closed we have heard from a lot of hunters who were frustrated with the hunt. We intend to be responsive to those concerns, but I would first like to make some general observations.



Interest in deer hunting in Wisconsin is as high today as it has been for decades.
WDNR Photo

The Wisconsin hunting heritage is a powerful force in our state; for families, for hunters, our economy and our quality of life.

Consider these facts from the current season:

- The hunting tradition is strong and vibrant in Wisconsin. We have some of the best deer hunting opportunities in the nation. For the 2009 deer hunt season to date, we sold 638,040 gun licenses and 204,833 bow licenses. These figures are just slightly below the numbers for last season. While 94 percent of hunters were Wisconsin residents, hunters from all 50 states once again came to hunt in Wisconsin this year.
- Overall, the 2009 nine-day gun hunt was the fourth safest on record with no fatalities. There were seven nonfatal incidents.
- More than 10,000 10- and 11-year olds tried out deer hunting on the state's new mentored hunting licenses. I thank the Chairs, the members of these committees, and the legislature for passing the mentored hunting bill in this past year. Of the new youth, 20% were girls. There was not a single hunting incident involving these hunters.
- The October Youth hunt harvest increased by 50% to more than 6,000 deer on the youth hunt weekend.
- Wisconsin annually ranks nationally in the top 5 states in the number of deer hunting licenses sold. And we are in the top 3 in total expenditures for hunting. Deer hunting is a \$1 billion driver of our state economy. We are one of the top 3 states in the nation for Boone and Crockett trophy whitetails, including a new state record buck taken by bow and arrow this fall.

While our hunting tradition is something we are both proud of and thankful for, of all the work done by the DNR, there is probably no subject that generates more controversy or criticism than deer herd management. That was true 50 years ago when the old Conservation Department was in charge, and it will probably be true 50 years from today. People are passionate about their opinions. Our challenge is to have a good system in place for public input, and to make the best science based decisions we can on how we manage the herd.

As we do so, a good dose of humility is always in order. White-tail deer have lived on Wisconsin's vast and varied landscape for thousands of years, long before any immigrants arrived. Understanding deer and how they interact with their ecosystem is a significant challenge. The ecosystem is constantly changing, and our understanding of the system is always evolving. For example, one of the areas we are focused on is the impact of natural predators in the ecosystem- wolves, bears and coyotes. We are taking steps to improve the S-A-K population estimate model. And, we are laying the groundwork to do significant research on the impact of deer browse on forest regeneration.

Our 2009 pre-season forecast anticipated a lower harvest primarily due to an expected reduction in antlerless harvest. This reduction was a response to population declines in the last two years which were a result of herd reduction efforts as well as below average fawn production. Statewide **preliminary** registration figures indicate the harvest during the 9-day gun season was down 29% from 2008 to 196,098. This includes 86,708

antlered bucks -- a 12% decrease -- and 109,390 antlerless deer -- a 39% decrease from 2008.

We know that the herd is smaller in some regions of the state which is why we took action to reduce the harvest in those areas. During this season, 13 deer management units had no bonus antlerless permits. 38 units were moved out herd control to regular season, and 29 units were moved out of earn-a-buck, all contributing to a decline in antlerless harvest. In all, the number of regular units increased from 21 in 2008 to 59 in 2009.

Following the 2008 season, hunters told us they wanted fewer antlerless deer harvested. As a result, we greatly reduced the number of antlerless permits available and antlerless harvest went down accordingly. In 2009 there were 78 units (of 132 statewide) where we reduced antlerless deer hunting opportunity. This reduction in permits contributed to the decline in gun deer harvest.

In some areas of the state the deer population is below goal, and our efforts are focused on increasing the population. In other parts of the state, we are still above goal. For example, in the CWD zone in the southern part of the state, over-population has been a contributing factor to the increased prevalence of CWD in the deer herd, increasing the risk of spread of this disease.

Overall, fewer deer on the landscape equals fewer deer seen and fewer harvested. We must continue to manage toward a sustainable, healthy deer population.

Wisconsin's experience in 2009 is not unique. Our neighboring Great Lakes states and provinces also experienced harvest declines. Deer harvest is down 12% in Minnesota, 10-20% in Michigan, 20-30% in the UP, and 24% in Quebec.

Over the next few months, our staff will look carefully at the data hunters provided us on their registration stubs -- data that is the foundation of our science-based management -- to determine where we now stand with respect to the size of the deer population. We know the state's herd varies by region and careful analysis is needed before we move ahead with future season recommendations.

We also will continue to seek input from the public on deer management objectives and policy. In addition to advisory groups, public meetings and hearings, hunters can now give us feedback through a modified deer registration stub and an online database where hunters can record field observations of weather conditions, hours hunted and number of deer seen.

Deer management units and population goals



Deer population goals will guide management of the deer herd for the next three years.
WDNR Photo

This brings us to deer population goals and Deer Management Unit boundaries. The department remains committed to supporting Wisconsin's hunting traditions and managing for a healthy, sustainable and ecologically balanced deer population. In the early part of this decade, the deer population reached unsustainable levels in much of the state. It's the department's job to bring populations down to the population goals approved through an extensive public process with ultimate review by the legislature. It is also our job to use deer management tools to raise the deer population in regions where it is below goal.

The criteria we must follow to determine deer population goals come from laws passed by the legislature. These laws require the Department to manage the deer population for conservation of ecosystems and for future generations' use and enjoyment. They require the Department to keep agricultural and forestry damage to tolerable levels. Our administrative code further emphasizes the balance that deer goals must strike: NR 1.15 directs that the "department shall seek to maintain a deer herd in balance with its range and at deer population goals reasonably compatible with social, economic and ecosystem objectives for each deer management unit."

Unit boundaries and population goals are reviewed at approximately three year intervals. In 2005, this committee reviewed and approved the goals that are now in place. Today you are reviewing Natural Resources Board changes approved in October that will guide our herd management decisions for the next three years. As we have done before, we once again welcome input from your committees before these goals are finalized.

The changes before you were developed with extensive public involvement. Beginning in January 2009, a large stakeholder group made up of representatives of hunting groups, landowners, foresters, farmers and ecologists convened to lead this goal review. I would like to extend our gratitude to these hard working volunteers who take deer management very seriously.

The process for this goal review included the stakeholder panel, 40 public meetings to gather input, several web based surveys, eight public hearings across the state to review this rule, as well as Natural Resource Board review and approval.

There are many factors to consider when establishing deer goals -- preserving Wisconsin's great deer hunting tradition for future generations, forest impacts, agricultural impacts, public safety as measured by car-deer collisions, preventing animal disease transmission, and others.

Wisconsin's 16 million acres of forest land support great deer habitat as well other important economic and environmental values. When the deer population is too high the regeneration of our forests is put at risk, threatening deer habitat and future deer hunting opportunities as well as our forestry based economy. Wisconsin's paper and wood products industry is #1 in the country. Our forests are a tremendous natural resource that provide the foundation for 68,000 family-supporting jobs. Forestry related companies are the #1 employer in 23 Wisconsin counties.

Deer also impact another vitally important sector of Wisconsin's economy, agriculture. The year 2000 was a peak year in Wisconsin's deer hunt- over 615,000 deer were harvested. As we have moved closer to deer population goals over the last few years, agriculture impacts have been reduced. In 2000, over 15,000 acres were damaged by deer and 333,000 bushels of corn lost, as well as 70,000 bushels of soybeans lost. By comparison, in 2008, a little over 8,000 acres were damaged by deer, 172,000 bushels of corn lost, and 30,000 bushels of soybeans lost.

Public safety is another factor that the Department must consider in setting deer population goals. While most Wisconsin citizens expect that car-deer collisions are a part of living in Wisconsin, they expect the DNR to keep these collisions in an acceptable range. As we have moved closer to deer population goals over the past decade, the number of deer caused collisions have declined. DNR numbers for deer carcass removals from our highways declined from 48,000 in 2003 to 28,000 in 2008. The number of car-deer collisions reported by police to DOT declined from over 20,000 in 2000, to just over 15,800 in 2008.

These numbers are not just statistics. 10 people died on our highways last year from car/deer collisions. In the 1990's, the trend was better, with fatalities from car-deer crashed averaging just over 5 per year, compared with 10 per year since 2000.

Disease management also remains a key concern. Chronic Wasting Disease poses a serious threat to a healthy, sustainable deer herd and our hunting heritage. Population goals inside and outside the CWD zone need to reflect our strongest efforts to slow disease spread.

Balancing all of these goals is a challenging task. Our responsibility is to establish goals that will sustain our great hunting heritage, result in a healthy deer population that is sustainable on our landscape, and consider the impacts deer have on all facets of life in

Wisconsin. The rule before you today follows the recommendations of the stakeholder group, with extensive public input. These rules represent our best efforts to strike an acceptable balance that will ensure ecosystem conservation and sustain our hunting heritage for generations to come.

Thank you for the opportunity to be here today. We look forward to answering any questions you may have.

Editor's Note: *Text of Sec. Frank's testimony also will be posted in the "Secretary's Corner."*