

Statement to Pennsylvania Game Commissioners

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Secretary/Treasurer, Pennsylvania Council of Professional Foresters, Inc.

Relative to Management of the Pennsylvania Deer Herd

January 23, 2005

My name is Donald P. Oaks. I am a hunter. I began hunting at 12 years of age and have hunted for 55 years. I am also a forester and this year I will complete 50 years in the study and practice of forestry in Pennsylvania. I currently practice as a forestry consultant.

I have therefore had the opportunity to closely experience and observe the habitat that is so critical to the maintenance of the white tailed deer in Pennsylvania. I have had, and have taken, the opportunity to make my observations throughout Pennsylvania. Those of us who are familiar with the relationship between wild creatures, and the habitat that they need to survive, know that habitat is the key to a species survival and success.

In Pennsylvania the Pennsylvania Game Commission is responsible for the management of wild birds and mammals. If habitat is the key to management of species, and we know that it is, then we must recognize that the Pennsylvania Game Commission has limitations in managing the habitat and therefore you are forced to manage game populations to insure the maintenance *of* the habitat, the great majority of which is not under your control.

How well have you managed the white tailed deer in Pennsylvania? Not well, the evidence of the destruction of the habitat for white tailed deer and many others species is everywhere. This destruction is evident to those with professional training in animal biology, botany and forestry - and - it should also be evident to hunters that are aware of what they observe. A simple test that reveals destroyed deer habitat in hardwood forests is can you see deer at distance greater than fifty yards. If you can, then the habitat provided by that forest has been destroyed. Most every hunter knows that the typical hardwood forest in Pennsylvania will permit the observation of deer at two hundred yards, terrain permitting. How did this happen?

An all too common and incorrect assumption made by some hunters is that the health of the deer herd is best determined by the number of deer that they see. It isn't! However, the past majority view point of Game Commissioners is that hunters are the constituency of the Pennsylvania Game Commission and therefore the Commissioners have defaulted the management of the habitat to an under-controlled and over-populated deer herd political pressure from a highly vocal hunters minority. Unmanaged, the deer have destroyed their own habitat.

I spend the first three days of deer season hunting on Addison Ridge in Bedford County. It is a 250 acre property that is in prime deer territory located between agricultural fields and State Game Lands in Deer Management Unit 4A. The presence of a high deer population is evident.

The property is comprised of mature and maturing oak stands with some mixed pine stands. An area that was regenerated some twenty years ago, is now oak pole timber. Cover is lacking on the property. A sometimes abundant supply of acorns is provided by the mature and maturing oak stands consisting of five different species of oak. However, there hasn't been a crop of acorns for the last two years. Without acorn mast there is little to nourish deer on the property. An adjacent

property to the east provided food and cover for the bulk of the deer herd in a clear cut area. I say "provided," this area has grown past the age when it will provide sufficient food and cover for many deer. Since cover is lacking, most deer taken on the property are escaping hunters on adjoining properties. Habitat is insufficient for this property to support resident deer.

Some eight years ago I salvaged cut a Virginia pine stand on the property that had been seriously damaged by ice. I left groups of seed trees to provide a seed source in order to regenerate the stand. A prime objective for the cut was to establish low evergreen cover for wildlife while maintaining high evergreen cover for roosting turkey. I have observed this area each year since, knowing that the high deer population might destroy the germinating pine. I was also observing for the possible necessity of baring mineral soil to get adequate regeneration. However, one of the reasons that the previous stand was prone to damage by ice was that it had regenerated on bare mineral soil on an abandoned farm field resulting in too much regeneration with small root systems on the trees that were lodged by the ice storm. Leaving the lodged trees for cover was not an option in that insects would quickly infect the weakened trees and in turn destroy the remaining healthy trees.

Until two years ago, it appeared that everything was going just right. The Virginia pine did not appear to be a preferred food for the deer and the spacing was right for a rapidly growing healthy stand. That was before two successive years of deep hard snow and failed acorn crops (winters of 2002 & 2003.) The lack of adequate food supply was evidenced by the browse line on the four to five foot high pine stems in the 2003 season. Hunting success rates in the 2003 season were equal to previous years.

The affect of the winter snows of 2003 were painfully noticeable in the pine regenerations with most stems that were above snow line, either destroyed by the total browsing of the terminal bud on the intermediate sized stems, or seriously damaged on the larger regeneration whose lateral and terminal stems now sported softball size balls of needles. The depth of snow was also evident by the raised browse line on the surviving stems and the height of now destroyed intermediate height stems that did not survive the browsing.

So, what of the deer herd in the 2004 season? I saw seven groups of two to five deer for a total of fifteen deer in two days of hunting. Deer stands that in the past yielded antlered deer every year did not produce a sighting of deer within range. The seven hunters on the property harvested one antlered deer and three antlerless deer. In past years it was not uncommon for seven to ten deer to be harvested in the same time frame on this property.

On the positive side, the antlered deer harvested was an excellent eight-point deer with high, heavy beams, long tines and a wide spread. It was a true trophy and unmatched by the antlers (many) hung on the wall of the meat market that ground venison of the antlerless deer that I had harvested.

Five of the seven groups of deer that I saw had an antlered deer with them. Two groups definitely met the antler requirements for legal deer. This was obvious to the naked eye. One of these was in a group of deer that I viewed, without scope or binoculars, at about 200 yards. This was an uncommon (unknown) experience to me in the past.

What happened that my hunting companions and I didn't see as many deer as we did in past years? The answer is obvious. There were, and probably still are, too many deer for the habitat to sustain. Apparently, many deer died from the lack of food and the harsh winter conditions. The antlerless deer that I harvested had very little fat to sustain it in adverse winter conditions.

There are still too many deer for the landowners to take the desired action to create new areas of cover and browse to improve the habitat for deer. This is a major management objective for the landowners as hunting is the primary use of the property. However, there still remain more deer per square mile than the Game Commission set, in the past, as appropriate deer densities. Deer would destroy the new forest that is required to sustain their future existence. Measures to exclude the deer from newly harvested areas are too expensive to consider as truly viable management options.

Hunters harvesting antlerless deer will not destroy the deer herd. More still need to be harvested. A larger question is can enough hunters be granted enough time to hunt, in the modern employment environment, to make a difference?

Disease resulting from an over population of deer in a devastated habitat can (will) destroy the deer herd as high deer densities are now destroying the forest resource.

The Pennsylvania Game Commissioners must not desert the progress made in the last several years in managing the deer herd scientifically. I've witnessed the progress toward gaining a more desirable balance in the deer sex ratio and the effect on improve dominance in male deer. My hunting experience did not suffer from a reduced deer population. I've counted in the past, at fifteen yards, thirty five deer file past me in the woods without the presence of an antlered deer. Seeing five antlered deer among fifteen deer, two being legal antlered deer, is much more satisfying and entirely more appropriate.

IN SUMMARY:

Pennsylvania Game Commissioners should not heed a vocal minority of hunters that want to return to the days when they counted hundreds of deer in their outing. Those were the days that destroyed the deer habitat and future Pennsylvania forests.

Pennsylvania Game Commissioners should continue the recent deer management program that has made progress toward attaining the Game Commission's own desired deer densities.

Pennsylvania Governors should only appoint and retain Game Commissioners that manage wildlife populations in the interest of the entire resource and the majority of all Pennsylvanians, with particular attention and respect to Pennsylvania forest and farm landowners.

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