

# Minnesota DNR Response to Public Comments on Southeast Minnesota Deer Population Goal Setting

## Public comments on southeast Minnesota deer population goal setting

DNR solicited public input between February 10 – March 3, 2014, regarding deer population goals in Southeast (SE) Minnesota. The following is a response to the topics most commonly addressed in the comments we received.

Comments were collected from the following sources:

- Written questionnaires collected at the Lake City public meeting, February 19, 2014
- Informal record of comments made during Lake City public meeting, February 19, 2014
- Written questionnaires collected at St. Charles public meeting, February 25, 2014
- Informal record of comments made during St. Charles public meeting, February 25, 2014
- Online questionnaires submitted between February 10 – March 3
- Emails received between February 10 – March 3
- Letters received between February 10 – March 3

DNR staff and the Southeast Minnesota Deer Goal-Setting advisory team completed a careful review of all comments received. These comments, along with hunter and landowner survey data, and data on harvest trends, populations, and habitat, were used to develop recommendations for new population goals for 9 deer permit areas (DPAs) in southeast Minnesota.

We received over 600 comments and unfortunately are unable to provide an individual response to each, but below we provide a brief summary of, and response to, the topics most commonly addressed in the comments received. Common themes are summarized under headings, with a brief response from DNR following each summary. Themes are listed in order from those which received the most comment, to those which received the least.

## Deer Densities

### *Comment summary:*

The most numerous comments DNR received were about deer densities in SE MN. Many of these comments expressed a desire for deer densities to be higher, and/or an observation that current deer populations are low and/or declining. Somewhat fewer comments stated that current densities are at or above desired levels.

Of these comments, many referred to specific DPAs. The majority of these described a desire for higher deer densities (especially in 347, 348, and 602), while a lesser number described a desire for lower densities (particularly in urban areas such as Rochester and Redwing). Several stated that they are content with current densities.

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## *DNR response:*

These comments differed somewhat from the information collected through hunter and landowner surveys. In general, comments received online and at meetings tended to reflect a stronger interest in adjusting population densities. As a result of the goal setting process, the Section of Wildlife increased population goals in the majority of permit areas considered. The anticipated impact of the goals will increase the population in five permit areas, decrease the population in three permit areas, and maintain the population in one permit area. Population decreases are recommended for permit areas 343, 346, and 349. Recommendations for permit areas 346 and 349 were strongly influenced by recent aerial survey data indicating pre-fawn densities were near 30 deer per square mile. The recommendation for permit area 343 (increased goal but slight decrease in current population) reflects concerns about deer populations in the Rochester area.

## Goal-setting Process

### *Comment summary:*

DNR received many comments related to the goal-setting process itself; specifically, commenters expressed desire for transparency, equity, legitimacy, and clear communication.

Some of these comments expressed concern about certain groups (e.g. legislators, insurance companies, agriculture) influencing the process. Some comments expressed a desire for hunters' input to be given the most weight in decisions about deer populations. A few comments expressed concern that hunters were over-represented in the goal-setting process.

Some of these comments also expressed concern about how the process was conducted and how decisions were made. In particular, several commenters expressed desire to be given sufficient notice to apply to participate in the advisory team, and for selected team members to adequately represent all SE MN stakeholders.

Several comments expressed a concern that recommendations developed for SE MN will be applied to the remainder of the state.

### *DNR response:*

The goal setting process in SE MN was designed as a pilot effort to test tools for improved public engagement and satisfaction in DNR decision-making processes. While communication before and during the current effort was increased relative to efforts made during the last goal setting process to improve public awareness and transparency, DNR will use the current pilot and public comments regarding the process to inform future practices. Changes made in 2014 to increase transparency included an open nomination process for team members, public announcement of team members, and posting goal setting information on the DNR website during the process.

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The process was also designed with a goal to increase the number of voices heard prior to development of recommendations, including the use of statistically valid surveys representative of the hunting and landowner community in SE Minnesota as well as the collection of public comment *prior* to convening the advisory team. In addition, advisory team members were required to attend at least one public meeting to listen to comments before meeting as a group to develop recommendations.

In advance of team meetings, MN DNR collected information via more than 4000 responses to mail surveys on southeast hunter (n = 2126 responses) and landowner (n = 2312 responses) perceptions about current deer populations and desires regarding future management, 165 questionnaires completed at public meetings, and 434 questionnaires completed online, as well as a small number of comments received by mail or email.

Twenty-one advisory team members were selected from over 90 applicants in an open call for nominations. Team members were selected to represent both the diversity of interests in deer management as well as for their collective familiarity with individual deer permit areas in southeast Minnesota. Team members represented archery, firearm and muzzleloader hunters as well as non-hunters; area residents and landowners; farmers; orchard owners and operators; land managers; local government staff and appointed officials; local business owners; and members of hunting, conservation and agricultural organizations.

After thoroughly reviewing all applicable data and public comment, the advisory team made recommendations for deer population goals for each of 9 DPAs in southeast Minnesota. These recommendations were posted for public comment from April 8-20, 2014. While online comment periods for the pre-team and post-team periods were similar (21 vs. 13 days), very few comments were collected during the post-team period (range 3-14 comments per permit area).

### Hunter access to private land

#### *Comment summary:*

Several comments addressed the issue of hunter access to private land. A majority of these expressed a desire for hunters to have increased access to private land, and many offered suggestions for how hunters and landowners might better coordinate efforts to control deer while providing quality hunting experiences.

#### *DNR response:*

Hunter access is an important, and challenging, issue in SE MN. Unique to SE MN is a southeast landowner assistance specialist, a DNR position established to work with landowners to address deer population and depredation concerns. A critical component of this position is to work within communities and among neighbors to increase access and opportunity for deer population management. Comments received during this process will be considered by staff as we continue to

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work on this issue.

## Depredation

### *Comment summary:*

Several comments addressed damage to farms, forests and ecosystems caused by deer browsing. Some of these were reports by landowners of observed damage by deer, and/or requests by farmers to be able to take deer on their property with fewer restrictions. Others were comments by hunters requesting that landowners allow hunting access on their land before seeking depredation permits.

### *DNR response:*

Impacts from deer browsing and depredation were considered during the goal setting process. In particular, goals for permit areas 346 and 349 reflect concerns about the damage to farms and natural communities that result from high deer densities. As noted above, hunter access is a concern and will continue as an issue to be addressed by the DNR and the community.

## Predator populations

### *Comment summary:*

Several comments addressed predation of deer by coyotes and/or wolves. The majority of these expressed concerns about rising predator populations (especially coyotes) possibly causing declines in deer populations. Some comments expressed the opinion that coyotes and wolves are important to ecosystems and that deer should not be managed at the expense of these predators.

### *DNR response:*

Data on predation and fawn mortality are incorporated into the model used by MN DNR to estimate deer populations. Research conducted by DNR staff in Minnesota has identified predation as the primary source of neonate (young fawn) mortality. Work in southwestern Minnesota indicated that coyotes and domestic dogs were responsible for 100% of the mortality among radiocollared neonates; however the risk of mortality is likely also influenced by habitat variables such as hiding cover. In areas with good habitat and well-established predator populations, fawn survival and recruitment can still be fairly high. Predation and predator populations will continue to be factors the DNR considers in deer management. Coyotes are considered *unprotected animals* in Minnesota; a hunting license is not required to hunt unprotected species.

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## DNR deer population estimates

### *Comment summary:*

Several comments addressed questions about how DNR estimates deer populations in SE MN.

### *DNR response:*

The DNR uses a peer-reviewed process to estimate deer densities, and uses simulation models in conjunction with a variety of other data to monitor deer population management. For example, harvest efficiency rates (i.e. the percent of hunters registering one, or more, deer) are monitored; increasing efficiency rates suggest pre-hunt deer densities are increasing as well. Harvest sex ratios and buck harvest trends are also monitored.

Minnesota DNR primarily uses simulation modeling to estimate and track changes in deer abundance and, subsequently, to develop harvest recommendations to keep deer populations within goal levels for each permit area. In short, the population model estimates the minimum number of deer that must be in the population in order to support the level of known harvest over time. Model inputs include estimates of initial population size, and estimates of survival, reproduction, and hunting and non-hunting mortality for various age and sex classes. While population models are a reliable way to estimate populations, they should be recalibrated periodically because they tend to 'drift' over time as errors within the model accumulate. Different techniques, such as distance sampling and aerial surveys, are used to recalibrate models in different portions of the state, reflecting differences in deer visibility (principally tree cover) across the state. As a science-based agency, DNR researchers are constantly examining new ways to calibrate the deer model using the best available data and techniques.

## Other comments

### *Comment summary:*

Additional comments addressed car collisions with deer, a need for more Conservation Officers during the hunting season, poaching, underreporting of deer harvested, the deer goal-setting online information packet, the 2012-13 SE MN hunter and landowner surveys, the public meetings, and the timeline of the goal-setting process.

### *DNR response:*

Due to the number and diversity of comments received, DNR will not be providing responses to each individual comment. All comments were reviewed and considered by both staff and advisory team members. Comments not specific to SE MN deer population goals (e.g., the number of Conservation Officers) may inform broader deer management or Departmental discussion.

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## Comments on management and regulations

The comment period open from February 10 – March 3, 2014, focused on determining goal populations for deer in Southeast Minnesota. However, more than 300 of the comments submitted during this time addressed specific deer management issues in the Southeast and around the state. DNR is not currently seeking input on management tools; however, these comments have been thoroughly reviewed by staff and will be used to inform the development of future hunter and landowner surveys and other public input processes.

Here, we provide a brief summary of the management issues most commonly addressed in the comments we received.

### *Comment summary:*

A number of comments regarding regulatory tools were provided. Most commonly addressed management tools included the use of antler point restrictions (APR), with strong sentiments expressed in support of and against the regulation; the firearm season timeframe; the use of a split (3A/3B) firearm season and availability of antlerless permits during those seasons; and dissatisfaction with the “intensive” management strategy. Concerns regarding an increase in trophy hunting were raised; however, a number of comments also suggested a desire for additional trophy hunting opportunities. Concern about declines in deer habitat were also mentioned, with several commenters expressing support for agricultural conservation practices that provide forage and/or refuge habitat for deer.

Other comments were received regarding Whitewater State Park, special hunts (e.g., youth hunts and special regulations for seniors), licensing and license prices, specific hunting equipment regulations, hunter and landowner education programs, lottery systems, DPA boundary designations, feeding bans, chronic wasting disease (CWD), use of ATVs, online self-registration, and non-resident tags.