Minnesota DNR Response to Public Comments on 2015 Minnesota Deer Population Goal Setting

Public comments on 2015 Minnesota deer population goal setting

This document is a response to the topics most commonly addressed in public comments received by MN DNR during the 2015 deer population goal setting process.

Between January 29 and February 12 (online) or 20 (mail/email), 2015, DNR solicited public input regarding deer population goals in five goal-setting blocks in northeast, north-central, and east-central Minnesota. Comments were collected from the following sources:

- Written questionnaires collected at public meetings between February 2-19, 2015 (see Appendix for meeting dates and locations)
- Informal record of verbal comments made during public meetings
- Online questionnaires submitted between January 29 – February 12, 2015
- Emails received between January 29 – February 20, 2015
- Letters received between January 29 – February 20, 2015

DNR staff and citizen advisory team members in each goal-setting block completed a careful review of all comments received (approx. 1700 total). These comments, along with hunter and landowner survey data, and data on deer harvest trends, populations and habitat, were used by citizen advisory teams to develop recommendations for new population goals for 40 deer permit areas (DPAs) in the five goal-setting blocks. The citizen advisory team recommendations were posted for public comment between April 2 and 15, 2015. Comments on the recommendations (approximately 450 total) were collected from the following sources:

- Online questionnaires submitted between April 2-15, 2015
- Emails received between April 2-15, 2015
- Letters received between April 2-15, 2015

We received over 2150 comments total 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.

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DEER POPULATIONS

Comment summary:

The greatest number of comments addressed deer populations in each of the five goal setting blocks. Most commenters indicated that overall deer populations have declined in recent years, although local populations vary. A majority expressed a preference for moderate to significant increases in deer densities, primarily to improve hunting opportunities for recreation, subsistence, or to carry on a family tradition. A smaller number of commenters expressed a desire for deer populations to be stabilized or reduced, citing concerns about the impacts of deer browsing on native plants and forests, potential threats to moose (e.g. through diseases carried by deer), Lyme disease, and deer vehicle collisions.

DNR response:

Deer populations in many areas have decreased due to recent severe winters but also as a result of purposeful population reduction to meet publicly set deer population goals. The Department is currently managing deer to increase numbers and will continue to boost the population based on the 2014 and 2015 goal setting processes. MNDNR will continue to manage deer within the framework of the agency's mission, which is to work with citizen's to conserve and manage the state's natural resources, to provide outdoor recreation opportunities, and to provide for commercial uses of natural resources in a way that creates a sustainable way of life. Natural resource management decisions, including those related to deer, must consider the various and often competing values and objectives that are central to this mission. With significant population increases slated for many areas of the state, MNDNR will be reassessing public satisfaction and considering other factors (such as browsing, economic and public safety impacts) as populations increase and goals are revisited in 3-5 years. Information specific to population goals for individual permit areas is provided online (www.mndnr.gov/deer). Briefly, population trends and new goals are summarized by goal setting block below.

Block 1: Deer densities have recently declined throughout much of Block 1 due to the back-to-back severe winters of 2012/13 and 2013/14. Prior to these winters deer numbers were purposefully reduced from their record high numbers in the mid 2000s (i.e. between 2000 and 2010) after a public goal setting process resulted in general agreement that numbers should be reduced to lessen deer impacts on their habitats. In this part of the state severe winters will always suppress deer populations. As part of our Moose Management and Research Plan (MMRP), the MNDNR intends to keep deer numbers quite low-likely lower than some hunters desire. Low deer numbers are a strategy used to reduce the risk of brainworm infections that kill moose. None-the-less, new goals in some permit areas in this block will allow for some population recovery, pleasing those who wish to see more deer without jeopardizing forests or the intent of the MMRP.

Block 2: Deer densities have recently declined throughout much of Block 2 due to the back-to-back severe winters of 2012/13 and 2013/14. While not as severe as in the NE part of the state, the winters here did result in deer mortality. Prior to these winters deer numbers were purposefully reduced from

their record high numbers in the mid-2000s after a public goal setting process resulted in general agreement that numbers should be reduced to lessen deer impacts on their habitats. The outcome of the 2015 goal setting process in this block is to significantly increase deer numbers in most permit areas. The MNDNR thinks that continuing conservative antlerless deer harvests will allow this population to increase to goal levels even in light of existing wolf populations. In much of this area severe winters will still result in large population swings, but otherwise management decisions should aim to avoid large swings in the herd size.

Block 3: Deer densities have recently declined throughout much of Block 3 due to the winter conditions of 2013/2014.While not as severe as in the NE part of the state, recent winters here did result in higher deer mortality. Prior to these winters deer numbers were purposefully reduced from their record high numbers in the mid-2000s after a public goal setting process resulted in general agreement that numbers should be reduced to lessen deer impacts on their habitats. Impacts to forest regeneration following timber harvest were a significant issue in this block during the mid-2000s. The outcome of the 2015 goal setting process in this block is to significantly increase deer numbers in most permit areas. The MNDNR thinks that continuing conservative antlerless deer harvests will allow this population to increase to goal levels even in light of wolf predation.

Block 4: The MNDNR has clearly heard from hunters in Block 4 that deer densities are below levels they feel are acceptable and hunters are not satisfied. The Block 4 advisory team recommended increases in most permit areas, and the final outcome of the process was that population goals in 10 of the 11 permit areas in this block will increase. The majority of permit areas will be managed for a population increase of 50 percent. This population increase should improve hunter satisfaction, but will require additional monitoring of deer browse impacts, particularly for oak and pine regeneration.

Block 5: Comments from Block 5 presented a good representation of the different points of view regarding the public's attitudes towards deer, including different assessments of population trends in recent years (ranging from stable to significantly decreasing) and concerns related to management (ranging from deer depredation and vehicle collisions to support for family hunting traditions and hunting opportunities for venison). The diverse range of population management preferences is reflected in more moderate population increases set for these permit areas. This more southern goal setting block is comprised of productive permit areas that are not as significantly impacted by winter severity. As a result of the conservative 2014 harvest and mild winter, deer numbers in many of these areas are well on their way to meeting new population goals.

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WOLVES

Comment summary:

A majority of comments addressed wolves and other predators. Many commenters indicated that current wolf populations are too high, and expressed concern for the threats wolves pose to deer, people, pets, and moose. Some commenters expressed a desire for management of wolves to return to state jurisdiction, and for the wolf hunt to be reinstated. A few commenters expressed a value for wolves as an important component of the biological community that deserves protection. Smaller numbers of commenters indicated concerns about the effects of coyotes, bear and cougar on deer.

DNR response:

Wolves are currently under the protection of the federal Endangered Species Act, and therefore the MNDNR cannot manage the state's wolf population, except for providing funds to remove wolves that are verified to be preying upon livestock or pets. There are efforts in Congress to de-list the wolf and give management authority back to the state. The MNDNR has demonstrated that the state can have a regulated wolf hunting season without diminishing the population, and it is likely a hunting season would be reinstated after delisting. Whether or not the state should use a wolf hunting season to actually reduce the wolf population for the sake of increasing deer or moose numbers is a question that would require additional public input.

GOAL SETTING PROCESS

Comment summary:

A number of comments addressed the goal-setting process itself. Many of these comments expressed a desire for decisions about deer management to be based primarily on scientific research. Several expressed a desire for population goal setting to include consideration of long-term ecosystem health. Some commenters expressed concern that DNR prioritizes the interests of hunters over those of landowners, foresters and others who may prefer lower deer densities. Others indicated that hunters should have a primary voice in decisions about population goals. Several indicated the importance of including input from local citizens and local DNR staff. One expressed doubts about the goal setting process, indicating that DNR had likely already made final decisions before seeking input. Several expressed appreciation that the public is provided information and asked for input about goal setting

Regarding the online and written questionnaires used to collect input, several commenters indicated the online questionnaire was difficult to find, and/or provided other feedback about the online resources provided by DNR. Two stated that the online questionnaire should have provided options for respondents to indicate preferences for increasing deer populations more than 50%.

DNR response:

Through this public process, MNDNR attempted to identify deer population goals that are both ecologically sound and socially acceptable to the greatest number of stakeholders. For that reason, the goal setting process was designed to incorporate biological and social data as well as input from a wide range of stakeholder perspectives, including hunters, landowners, foresters, farmers, business owners, wildlife watchers and others. Recommendations from stakeholder advisory teams (whether or not they reached consensus) helped provide an indication of how acceptable or contentious proposed goals would be among the broader community. Local area wildlife managers contributed their professional opinions as well. In those cases where consensus could not be reached because points-of-view were too divergent, the MNDNR considered all interests and made a reasonable decision. MNDNR values the contributions that deer hunters make to conservation and to the state's economy, and the hunting community's input is very important to us. Other communities – including farmers, foresters, business owners, and more are also impacted by changes in deer populations, so it is important that decisions about deer management consider all citizens' input.

The MNDNR is a science-based organization that values collecting good data, and we use data to inform our decisions. However, science cannot decide for us what constitutes an appropriate deer population given the range of public attitudes and values that must be considered. The Department believes that all citizens of the state should have some say in what is an appropriate deer population. Science can inform us on what the consequences are of having a certain population level, and this information was shared with team members. We also value the knowledge of our local managers, and their input is important and was part of the goal setting process.

Although the final population goals were not pre-determined, MNDNR did anticipate that deer populations would be increased in most permit areas, based on input we had been receiving from the public over the last few years. Indeed, the citizen advisory teams recommended 25-50% increases in most permit areas.

Stakeholders were not asked for their preferences about deer population increases greater than 50% for a number of reasons. The options available were selected because they are levels of change that we think we can manage toward given the range of factors that influence deer populations on an annual basis and that we feel are objectives that are most likely to be achievable over the next 3-5 years (a timeframe for goals that MNDNR shortened in recognition that stakeholders desired more frequent assessments of public satisfaction). Fifty percent increases have also been a standard measure of significant increase during past goal setting processes (i.e. this presents consistent options for comparison over multiple years of surveys). MNDNR has also heard hunter dissatisfaction with large swings in the population and is thus interested in population goals that will minimize fluctuations between unacceptably high and unacceptably low population levels. As such, we feel that the options provided gave the teams the latitude to recommend realistic, moderate-to-significant levels of

population change over the time period under consideration. It is important to note that when goals are revisited in 3-5 years, public satisfaction will again be evaluated and changes to the goals (e.g., additional population increases) will be possible.

We appreciate stakeholders' feedback on our online resources and on the input process in general. We are aware that finding information and resources on our website can sometimes be challenging. In the future, we will continue work to make our online resources more accessible to all.

HUNTING RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

Comment summary:

Numerous comments expressed a desire to pass on hunting traditions to future generations, and concern that youth are losing interest in hunting because of declines in deer populations. Several comments indicated that DNR should prioritize providing hunting opportunities for youth when considering management options. Many comments also indicated that hunters of all ages are unsatisfied with their hunting experiences in Minnesota and that many are choosing to hunt in other states where deer populations are higher. Several comments also stressed the importance of hunter ethics, and/or expressed appreciation for the whole hunting experience whether or not they shot a deer.

DNR response:

Deer populations in Minnesota will likely always fluctuate depending upon the severity of winter weather, so hunter recruitment and retention strategies should include educating the public that low deer numbers are sometimes a part of deer hunting. The MNDNR shares the desire for hunting traditions to be passed on to future generations. Some of our efforts to increase hunter recruitment and retention include: creation of reduced-price youth deer licenses, reduction of minimum legal draw weight for archery deer hunting, expansion of the Youth deer season to include Southeast MN, Special Mentored Youth Hunts on State Parks and Military properties, Becoming an Outdoors Woman "Deer Day" and "Learn to Bowhunt" programs, and "Learn to Hunt" programs for adults who want to learn to deer hunt for food. Policies and programs to support recruitment and retention are important but currently pale in comparison to the effectiveness of hunters sharing their passion and knowledge with family, friends, and – perhaps most importantly – individuals with fewer connections to the hunting community. We simply cannot rely on guaranteed deer abundance alone to keep the next generation interested in hunting.

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HABITAT

Comment summary:

A number of comments in Blocks 4 & 5 addressed concerns about the loss of quality deer habitat, and the importance of managing habitat for the benefit of deer. Several comments expressed a desire for programs that would help private landowners improve deer habitat, potentially through property tax incentives or education and outreach about habitat management. Suggestions for DNR and private landowners included logging aspen, planting conifers, providing food plots, and limiting agricultural practices that may negatively impact deer.

DNR response:

The MNDNR agrees that managing habitat for the benefit of deer is important. Minnesota DNR works to improve habitat on public land around the state through tools such as forest habitat maintenance, prescribed burns, forest opening development, and habitat evaluation. The Fish and Wildlife Division is also active in private and public food plot development where appropriate. The Division coordinates on land management and habitat priorities with other DNR divisions as well as with other agencies and land managers through interagency collaboration. We encourage all interested landowners to contact their area wildlife manager to discuss what they can do to improve habitat on their private lands. We also encourage landowners to contact their area forester who can provide valuable information on how to conduct a successful timber harvest that addresses their specific goals and objectives.

The MNDNR agrees that the amount and quality of deer habitat in Block 5 is limited. Intensively farmed row crops do not provide the necessary cover for deer or other valued wildlife. The MNDNR thinks that restoring some agricultural land to native forest, grassland, and wetland cover would increase the area's ability to support more wildlife, including deer. The Governor's buffer initiative, while not specifically targeted to deer, is an excellent example of how state agencies can work with private land owners to affect positive change on the landscape.

POPULATION MONITORING AND MODELING

Comment summary:

Several comments addressed the methods by which DNR monitors and models deer populations, and expressed a lack of confidence in DNR's population estimates. Two indicated support for an audit of the DNR's deer population model.

DNR response:

The MNDNR uses multiple methods to monitor deer populations, including tracking harvest trends, conducting aerial surveys, and modeling deer populations. The MNDNR's deer model is based on well accepted scientific methods, and is similar to models used by other states. Significant contributions from

our commitment to local research and data collection include information on factors such as predation and winter mortality, fawn production, and annual harvest data. The MNDNR is actively working to provide the Office of the Legislative Auditor (OLA) all information requested about Minnesota's deer management system, including its deer population model. The results of that audit will be shared with the public in 2016. The MNDNR values continuous improvement and we aim to always improve upon our deer management system. The audit will be useful for that purpose. We also hope that the OLA audit will give us information that we can use to help regain the public's trust in our ability to appropriately manage deer, including estimating deer populations.

MOOSE

Comment summary:

In Block 1, DNR received numerous comments that expressed concern about the moose population in this block. Many comments indicated that the moose population has declined, and most of these comments expressed concern about the impact of wolves on moose. Some comments supported lowering deer populations if it would benefit moose. Other comments indicated that deer, and any diseases they may carry, pose little to no threat to moose.

DNR response:

The MNDNR is also very concerned about the declining moose population in NE Minnesota, and is continuing research to better understand causes of mortality. As a result of this concern, the MNDNR plans to keep deer numbers in this block quite low in an effort to lessen the risk of brainworm infection on moose. The Minnesota Moose Management and Research Plan (MMRP) calls for keeping deer numbers below 10 deer per square mile, and the new deer population goals, even in those permit areas with increases, will still maintain deer numbers below this threshold. If results from current research suggest a different deer population threshold or other management responses are needed, strategies in the MMRP can be adjusted and may impact future deer population management decisions.

FORESTS AND NATIVE PLANTS

Comment summary:

A number of comments addressed concerns about forest regeneration and a desire to protect native plant species, particularly in Block 1. A majority of these comments indicated that deer browsing is detrimental to forests, and that deer populations should be controlled to protect and restore healthy forests. Some comments expressed concern about the combined impact of climate change and deer browsing on forests and native plants. Several comments expressed a desire for DNR to offer cost-

sharing programs or other support to foresters and landowners experiencing over-browsing by deer. A few comments expressed a desire for forests to be managed to provide food and shelter for deer.

DNR response:

The impacts that deer have on forests is well documented and understood by the MNDNR, and we recognize that high deer populations can have substantial effects on forest regeneration and forest communities. The Department recommends managing deer populations at a point below where these impacts would be significant. Deer populations are currently quite low in this block, and the MNDNR does not expect that the modest increases in a few of the deer permit areas in the block will result in widespread significant negative impacts to forests. In some localized areas it will likely be necessary to use specific forestry methods, from reduced canopy openings and control of competing vegetation to fenced exclosures and other browsing barriers, to protect regeneration of vulnerable species like northern white cedar.

OTHER TOPICS

Comment summary:

Additional comments addressed deer feeding, public safety (e.g. deer vehicle collisions), food plots, public health (e.g. Lyme disease), issues specific to public or private lands, biodiversity, carrying capacity, depredation, economics, logging and timber, permanent deer stands, permit area boundaries, poaching, subsistence hunting, agribusiness, bears, climate change, chronic wasting disease (CWD), damage to landscaping, elk, donations to food shelves, hunter access to private land, landscape change, outreach and education, perceptions of DNR, quality deer management, special hunts, and issues specific to individual cities.

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 citizen advisory team members in this block. Comments not specific to deer population goals (e.g. permanent deer stands) may inform broader deer management or Departmental discussions.

COMMENTS ON MANAGEMENT AND REGULATIONS

The comment period open from January 29 – February 20, 2015, focused on determining goal populations for deer in five goal-setting blocks in northeast, north-central, and east-central Minnesota. However, some of the comments submitted during this time addressed specific deer management issues in these blocks and around the state. DNR is not currently seeking input on specific management tools, but 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. From 2015 to 2017 the University of Minnesota, under contract with MNDNR, will be conducting hunter surveys to better understand regulatory preferences and support among hunters (including topics such as antler point restrictions, cross-tagging, and season timing.

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

Comment summary:

Almost half of the comments we received related to management addressed the use of antler point restrictions (APR); of these, individual comments varied by block, but overall slightly more than half expressed opposition to implementing APR. Many comments addressed season length and timing. Suggestions included moving hunting season out of the rut, eliminating early antlerless seasons, or changing the timing of archery season or early season youth hunts. Numerous comments expressed the sentiment that past hunting regulations in Blocks 1-5 have been too liberal, resulting in excessive declines in deer populations. Some indicated a desire to use “bucks only” harvest strategies until deer populations increase. Several comments either supported or opposed party hunting/cross tagging. Many comments addressed regulations specific to certain permit areas, parks or cities, including Itasca State Park, Schoolcraft Refuge, Camp Ripley, Cedar Creek Reserve, Baxter/Brainerd and Newport. Many comments addressed specific management strategies (lottery, hunter’s choice, intensive harvest, etc.). Others addressed license fees, special youth hunts, non-resident licenses, special permits for landowners, the definition of “legal buck”, ATVs, scopes on muzzleloaders, youth licenses, hunting pressure and other topics.