

Deer Management Plan Advisory Committee Minutes

June 21, 2017

Opening

- Katie Clower, policy and planning consultant, opened the meeting and reviewed the agenda.
- Check-in: name, affiliation, and something you feel grateful for
- Other notes:
 - Reminder to submit mileage reimbursements

Review of last month's topic

- Adam Murkowski, Big Game Program Leader, provided a verbal progress update:
 - Staff have been working on the drafts of previous chapters and should be able to provide DMPAC with updated versions soon.
 - Wildlife staff had no objections to the draft objectives/strategies for "Healthy Deer", but did suggest adding a strategy regarding reimbursement to DNR for costs of capturing escaped farmed cervids.
 - In May, an online poll was sent to non-selected applicants to DMPAC who expressed interest in periodically providing feedback on Deer Plan topics; this poll asked respondents for feedback on some of the strategies DMPAC has discussed related to the chapters on communications and public engagement, and healthy deer. Approximately 60 people responded; respondents were generally supportive of the suggested strategies, with the exception of a potential statewide ban on deer feeding, which slightly over half of respondents ranked as being "a little" or "not at all" important, while less than one third ranked it as "somewhat" or "very" important.
 - DMPAC members also participated in an online poll following last month's meeting, to formally vote on the proposal to ban deer feeding statewide. That proposal passed as a committee recommendation, with 15 members supporting and 4 members opposed. Wildlife staff will be reviewing this recommendation with DNR leadership to determine next steps. Note that implementation of this recommendation would require legislative action.
- Discussion about how DMPAC recommendations should be articulated in the Deer Plan:
 - General agreement among members that recommendations accepted by DNR can be incorporated into the relevant chapter of the Deer Plan, but that there should also be an appendix or other consolidated list of all committee recommendations, including those that are not ultimately incorporated as action items in the Plan.
 - General agreement that "recommendations" should include both formal items where an actual committee vote was taken, and informal items where a vote did not occur but the committee appears to have consensus.
 - General agreement that in the case DNR does not follow a committee recommendation or incorporate it into the Plan, the recommendation should still be recorded, along with an explanation from DNR staff as to why it was not followed.
 - General agreement that any recommendations that require legislative action for implementation should be noted as such.

- Committee members are comfortable having DNR staff draft the list of DMPAC recommendations; this list would be subject to committee review/approval before finalization.

Overview of DNR Wildlife Habitat program

- Steve Merchant, Wildlife Populations and Regulations Manager, presented an overview of how DNR manages habitat, particularly in the Section of Wildlife:
 - A majority of DNR staff are, in one way or another, involved in activities that affect wildlife habitat.
 - DNR manages habitat for multiple interests; for example, both wildlife habitat and a sustainable supply of fiber and special forest products
 - The Fish & Wildlife Division partners with other Divisions (e.g. Forestry, Parks & Trails, Ecological & Water Resources) to manage habitat.
 - The Section of Wildlife's primary habitat responsibilities include managing approximately 1.4 million acres of Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs). The Division of Forestry manages approximately 4 million acres of public forest; Parks & Trails manages our state parks; and Ecological & Water Resources manages Scientific and Natural Areas (SNAs) and provides technical guidance to other Divisions.
 - The Section of Wildlife was reorganized in 2012 to emphasize habitat management; at that time, approximately \$80 million of new money was available through the newly-formed Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Committee (LSOHC), for the purpose of restoring, enhancing and protecting habitat. This reorganization included the creation of a Wildlife Habitat Program Manager position, which supervises habitat teams for prairies, forests, and wetlands. These are organized by habitat type, not by wildlife species.
 - Individual Wildlife Area Managers also manage habitat in their work areas, and the Section of Wildlife also provides input during Section Forest Resources Management Plan (SFRMP) processes led by the Division of Forestry.
- Discussion:
 - Question about what is meant by "natural lands"? DNR response is that natural lands are primarily wild or native plants, as opposed to agricultural systems.
 - Question about how DNR defines "native plants"? DNR response is that "native" typically implies species that were found in an area prior to European settlement.
 - Native plants are typically found existing in "plant communities", or assemblages of species that are often found together, and have evolved together with climate and ecological processes (fire regimes, flooding, etc.). DNR attempts to manage some native plant communities using techniques that emulate natural processes (e.g. prescribed burning, timber harvest, etc.). Non-native invasive species are introduced or exotic species (e.g. buckthorn, emerald ash borer, etc.) that are typically more aggressive and can take over whole sites. DNR maintains a list of invasive species on its [website for reference](#).
 - Committee member noted that plant communities set the parameters for which wildlife species will occur in an area, in what abundance, etc.

- Question about when DNR sells land, is there any requirement to replace a similar amount elsewhere? DNR response is no, there is no such requirement.
- Committee member noted that at the public meetings last winter, he heard consistent comments about the need for more timber harvest to create new growth for deer. Does DNR have any plans to increase its timber harvest? DNR response is that the Governor recently directed the DNR to increase its annual timber harvest from 800,000 cords to 900,000 cords, and an assessment is currently underway to determine whether 1 million cords could be a sustainable harvest. Forest planning and timber sales are also handled separately by counties, private owners and the Federal government. Timber harvest on non-industrial private lands has declined significantly since the mid-2000s, while Federal timber harvest has declined slightly, counties have increased slightly, and the state has remained about the same.
 - Follow-up comment that it seems a miniscule amount of state forest land is actually harvested. Response that timber is harvested to maintain a relatively even flow based on the age-class of each cover type. Additional comment that not all public forest acres are capable of producing marketable timber. DNR staff commented that approximately three quarters (3.4 million acres) of DNR's state forests are commercially viable (this figure may not include Wildlife Management Areas).
- DNR staff commented that tremendous work goes into managing forests for multiple values and uses, and we rely significantly on commercial timber harvest to accomplish management plan objectives. It is much too expensive to harvest wood if it does not have commercial or market value. Wildlife managers typically do not have the additional monies to manipulate large forested areas purely for wildlife benefits.

Small group brainstorm discussions

- DMPAC members split into 3 groups; each group rotated through 3 rounds of discussion on the following topics:
 - Habitat needs/potential strategies in the farmland and prairie region.
 - Habitat needs/potential strategies in the forested region.
 - Other habitat needs/potential strategies (e.g. research and monitoring, public land access, etc.).
- After a break, groups identified 3 highlights from each round of discussion.

Drafting "Healthy Habitat" strategies

- DMPAC members were asked to sort highlights from their small-group discussions under one of the following draft objectives:
 - **Draft objective 1:** More habitat where limiting; increase habitat in the farmland regions of the state.
 - **Draft objective 2:** Quality habitat where habitat is not limiting; enhance and maintain healthy and sustainable forests.
 - **Draft objective 3:** Science-based; use habitat data to inform decisions about deer population management.

- Facilitator worked with DMPAC to create groupings of similar highlights, and start forming draft strategies for “Healthy Habitat”. Groupings and discussion notes follow:

Farmland highlights:

- **Grouping: Conservation easements on marginal lands**
 - **Increase the amount of habitat for all plants and animals (protection, conservation easements)**
 - **Marginal farmland → habitat**
 - **Make conservation reserve program (CRP) more available**
 - Discussion about conservation easements
 - Many committee members identified a need to educate the public and engage legislators to increase CRP; at least one committee member does not support a CRP program without an enrollment cap, but rather would seek to balance programs like CRP with other priorities.
 - There are good ideas in the MN Prairie Plan – acknowledge DNR’s role in achieving these goals.
 - Many conservation programs are federally-based; what type of programs can the state of Minnesota do on its own?
 - Have programs like CREP (but it’s permanent) and WRE/RIM.
 - Outcome will be through 2018 Farm Bill; DNR is directly engaged but does not have complete control; still, DMPAC could endorse this work.
- **Water quality/availability**
 - Discussion about water quality/availability:
 - This may be an outcome of other conservation actions.
- **Grouping: Management practices**
 - **Increasing quality of habitat through management**
 - **Cover crops**
 - **Changing tillage practices**
 - **Increase diversity**
 - Discussion about management practices:
 - Timing of tillage (spring instead of fall) to increase winter food.
 - Promote soil health, diversity, cover crops; also improves water quality.
 - Supply info to landowners about cover crops/tillage; hunters can contribute greatly to these efforts by promoting the benefits (including financial) of conservation farming practices with landowners and farmers where they hunt. This information isn’t being actively disseminated currently and could greatly help wildlife.

Forest highlights:

- **Timber management to maximize food sources**
- **Management techniques outside of timber harvest**
 - Examples might include shearing, prescribed burning, saw cutting, etc.
- **Grouping: Management of different age classes**
 - **Collaborative forest management to achieve a range of forest ages and species**
 - **Manage over-mature forests**

Statewide highlights:

- **Grouping: technical assistance to private landowners**
 - **Private land habitat assistance**
 - **Habitat education**
 - **Private technical assistance**
 - **Increase access and availability of technical assistance for private land owners**
 - **Promote/educate private forest management**
 - Discussion about technical assistance to private landowners:
 - Establish a Deer Management Assistance Program (DMAP). Use other states as example.
 - In Wisconsin, tiered system based on acreage; consult with biologists; opportunities for collaboration. DNR staff shared concern that while such programs do have positive impacts, the inability of these programs to engage the whole deer hunting community may limit overall program effectiveness.
 - In Pennsylvania, DMAP also applies to some public lands.
 - Could partner with other agencies to accomplish this, to reduce the burden on DNR.
 - Could offer financial incentives (such as tax breaks) for implementing action steps or getting a certification.
 - What about calling it “Forest Management Assistance Program” instead of “Deer...”, to broaden the audience and make it a young forest or early successional habitat assistance program? But something like this should apply not only to forests, also in the farmland region.
 - Should provide tools to increase or decrease deer, depending on the landowner’s goals and current situation.
 - Do we need to create a new program, or just expand or increase awareness about existing programs? Confusing to navigate all the different programs.
 - Some concerns from DNR staff that programs like DMAP can actually facilitate further privatization and inequalities (e.g. if also connected to allocation of harvest tags).
 - General agreement among committee members that some kind of deer management assistance program is needed, whether it is created new or built on existing programs. Should be statewide to include multiple habitat types. Should not include allocation of harvest tags. Should be proactive about reaching out to landowners and trying to reach new audiences.
- **Grouping: Winter habitat**
 - **Winter food**
 - **Winter cover**
 - **Protect deer yards and winter habitat**
 - Discussion about winter habitat:
 - Maintain/improve food so it’s not depleted before spring green-up.
 - Maintain thermal cover.
 - Consider effects on deer yards when planning timber sales.

- DNR constrained because 85% of northern MN public lands are School Trust Lands, and there is a requirement to maximize long-term economic returns on these lands (same strategic direction for counties).
- Suggest strategy to “Prioritize protection of winter deer yards on some Trust Lands and all non-Trust Lands”, or “Protect winter deer yards to the extent possible.”
- Some deer wintering areas are high priority for conservation because of the importance of these habitats to other species as well, not only deer.
- Need to identify a problem statement, such as “Need improvement of winter habitat for deer”, before determining the solution.
- Need more information on how much winter habitat there currently is, where it is located, what quality, etc. “Identify and enhance winter habitat for deer.” If they’re identified, they could be prioritized.
- Don’t forget the prairie region – deer wintering areas are needed statewide.

Science-based highlights:

- **Measure and communicate data on deer habitat: winter, openings, age class, regeneration**
- **Improve guidance for DNR Native Plant Silvicultural Interpretations and connect with habitat management.**

Other/Miscellaneous highlights:

- **Climate change (changing habitat implications)**
- **Politics of northern MN forests/ “protecting habitat in a politically charged climate”**
- **Grouping: Private/public collaboration**
 - **Private/public collaboration**
 - **Hunter access**
 - **Private lands with public easements for hunting**

Other notes:

- DNR will draft meeting notes and draft strategies on “Healthy habitat” based on committee discussions and provide these drafts to the committee on Tuesday, 6/27/17. DMPAC members should provide comments, etc. on the draft strategies for Healthy habitat by the end of the day on Wednesday, 7/5/17.
- Need to define “healthy habitat” for each region. DNR should draft a definition. DMPAC members should send suggestions to Adam by the end of June.
- DMPAC data requests for DNR:
 - Link to Minnesota Forest Resources Council (MFRC) regional plans.
 - Information on age distribution of Minnesota forests.

Preview of next month's topic: Deer Impacts to Other Resources

Members participated in a "Walking Brainstorm" activity, with the prompt to brainstorm topics that the Deer Plan could address for each proposed 'Impacts to other resources' sub-topic. Raw notes from the brainstorm are included below. Members were asked to place a star next to any ideas others wrote which they also agreed with.

Potential objectives/strategies related to crop damage	# stars
Most farmers can accept, even expect, a certain level of nature having its share. The problems come when the loss becomes excessive!	0
Develop objective measure to quantify damage	0
Deer population goals that relate to natural food sources	1

Potential objectives/strategies related to depredation resources	# stars
Get better data on depredation rates and sources. (What animals do the most damage?)	2
How good is the data we have on deer and wolf	0
More options for private landowners to manage deer outside regular hunting season	1

Potential objectives/strategies related to local management tools	# stars
Devise suburban hunting tactics (local)	2
The only thing that really works is a very high fence	0
Community based deer management urban deer program	3

Potential objectives/strategies related to human health	# stars
Deer population management	0
New traps/powder application for neighborhoods	0
Decrease deer densities	0
Consider vaccine treatments?	0
Economic impacts to individuals/patients	0

Potential objectives/strategies related to deer-vehicle collisions	# stars
Determine how to quantify DVCs	2
Use data from DVCs to collect deer health data	1
Better drivers – education	0
Work with insurance companies to get data	0
Mow road ditches	0
Decrease deer feeding	0
Signage and education	0
Fewer deer in certain areas	1
Consider/quantify economic impacts for deer-vehicle collisions	1

Potential objectives/strategies related to deer impacts to moose and other wildlife	# stars
Little impact	0
Increase biology insight	2
Brainworm?	0
Trophic cascades	1
Increased deer browsing leads to decreased forest composition and structure leads to decreases in nesting birds, insects, etc.	0
Impacts with elk?	0
Balance deer numbers with what habitat can support	1

Potential objectives/strategies related to damage to forests and other plants	# stars
\$ for protection	0
Manage deer numbers to decrease damage	4
Use objective measure to determine damage (set goal to manage to)	1
Concerns with loss of biodiversity	4
Loss of forest cover and productivity	0
Decrease in carbon storage with increase in deer	0
Provide food sources	1

Closing

- Members may submit any additional comments via email to Adam Murkowski by noon on Wednesday, July 5.
- Next DMPAC meeting will be July 19, 2017 10am-3:30pm, at the Sauk Rapids Government Center. The topic will be “Deer impacts on other resources”.

Related Resources

Following the June 21, 2017 DMPAC meeting, DNR staff identified the following related resources that committee members and others may find useful:

- [Minnesota’s Forest Resources](#)
 - This 72-page report, updated in 2015, is intended to answer questions about Minnesota’s forest resources, including current conditions and trends, and industrial use. The report contains information about statewide harvest levels (see page 23 specifically for a description of how harvest levels are determined).
- [Forests of Minnesota, 2013](#)
 - This four page updated report from the USDA provides a nice summary of forest resources in Minnesota. Figure 3 provides area of forest land by forest type and ownership.
- [DNR Forestry Forest Stewardship Program website](#)

- DNR's Forest Stewardship Program provides technical advice and long-range forest management planning to interested landowners. The program is not specifically focused on deer habitat and management.
- [DNR Wildlife Private Land Habitat website](#)
 - DNR's Section of Wildlife also has staff dedicated to working with private landowners. More information is available on this website.
- [Managing your woodland for White-tailed Deer](#)
 - This short informational report was produced by DNR in 2009 to provide landowners with information about managing for deer.