

Deer Management Plan Advisory Committee Minutes

August 16, 2017

Opening

- Katie Clower, policy and planning consultant, opened the meeting and reviewed the agenda.
- Check-in: name, and one thing that affects your level of satisfaction with deer management in Minnesota

Committee review of previous topic areas

Prior to today's meeting, DMPAC members were provided a chart showing: 1) draft Deer Management Plan objectives/strategies as initially presented to DMPAC members at previous meetings, 2) summaries of input from DMPAC members at previous meetings, and 3) revisions to the draft objectives/strategies based on DMPAC and DNR staff input. DMPAC members were asked to review the chart and prioritize strategies for additional discussion during this meeting. Member identified 4 objectives and 22 strategies as priorities for further discussion; these items were discussed in order of priority. Because time did not allow discussion on all identified items, DNR encouraged DMPAC members to submit additional comments to Adam Murkowski via email on any and all draft objective/strategies developed thus far.

Previous months' draft objectives and strategies identified as priorities for further discussion today (in numerical order) include: 1.1, 1.1.1, 1.1.4, 1.3.3, 3.1.1, 3.1.3, 3.2.1, 3.3, 3.3.4, 5.1, 5.1.1, 5.1.2, 5.1.4, 5.2, 5.2.1, 5.2.2, 5.2.3, 5.2.4, 5.2.5, 5.3.1, 5.3.2, 6.1.2, 6.2.1, 6.2.3, 6.2.4 and 6.3.2.

Discussion on draft strategy 3.1.3 (deer population goal setting):

DMPAC agrees that DNR should periodically set deer population goals, and that the process should include public input. No consensus was reached on the preferred timing or process for goal setting (see more discussion below). Members indicated support to explore the benefits of setting population goals by larger blocks of deer permit areas (e.g. blocks with similar habitat, deer populations, hunter distributions, land ownership patterns, etc.) rather than by individual deer permit areas. Additionally, DMPAC recommends that DNR take public input on annual season setting decisions.

Discussion:

- Clarification that population estimates are different than population goals, and that annual season setting decisions are separate from longer-term public goal-setting processes.
- Some members expressed that deer population goal-setting should be conducted on a shorter time frame, such as every 3-5 years. One suggestion that it needs to be on a clear schedule for each DPA. Others felt goals should be revisited only if and when needed (for example, if there was a significant change in habitat in an area).
- Multiple members expressed that the goal-setting process should incorporate input from many perspectives; specifically, it should include farmers and other private landowners as well as hunters.

- One member expressed concern that the draft language “Continue to...” implied there would be no change in how goal-setting was conducted, when in fact the process had room for improvement and specific changes should be identified.
 - Look at how draft strategy 3.1.3 ties into 5.3.2 (“where needed, adjust deer population goals to reduce browsing pressure”).
 - Several members indicated that information about crop damage should be incorporated into goal-setting.
- Members notes that there will be regional differences in deer population goals.
- If the timeline and process for goal-setting is based on funding, DNR may need to request additional funding from the legislature for activities that contribute to goal-setting, such as conducting aerial surveys, etc.
- DNR may need to consider revisiting its deer population model and population estimates as the public either questions or does not relate to the information, making the goals seem irrelevant or off-base.
- DNR should remove constraints around goal-setting (for example, in the previous round of goal-setting, DNR did not provide an option to allow increasing or decreasing goals by more than 50%, when some members of the public felt that goals should be increased by 100% or more).
- Multiple members identified a need for annual public input about DPA designations and hunting regulations; hunters in particular want an opportunity to affect decisions. Minor course corrections are ok, but there is a perception that DNR is slow to respond to public input and real world changes. There needs to be a way to close the information feedback loop when DNR and the public disagree about population goals or annual season setting decisions.
- Members agreed that it’s important to have deer population goals, and important for the public to be involved in setting them.

Discussion on draft strategy 3.1.1 (public engagement)

- One member expressed concern that in the revised version of this strategy, the phrase “Demonstrate how [public input] informed decision making” was deleted, even though that phrase was moved to become part of Objective 3.1.
- One member preferred the strategy in its original form.
- DMPAC recommends making this (i.e. reporting back to the public how their input was used to inform decisions) its own objective.

Discussion on draft strategy 3.2.1 (sharing information about season-setting)

DMPAC supports this strategy in concept but discussed additional, related needs, including the desire for more formal annual public input opportunities on season setting decisions:

- More outreach is needed to make people aware that this information is being published. Outreach is also needed about other sources of information about deer, such as DNR’s GovDelivery email listservs.
- DNR needs to be more descriptive of how the decisions were arrived at, instead of the broad format used in the 2017 interactive deer permit map.
- The information on the interactive deer map should include hyperlinks to drill down into more detail, such as historical trends in a specific deer permit area.

- Note that the word “annually” is used twice in this sentence. Should rephrase to be more clear and concise.
- Again, members note that DNR needs to take annual public input about season setting decisions. Members discussed whether such input would be covered by social science surveys as described in draft strategy 3.1.4; most felt that no, DNR should be explicit about getting input before each season, separately from surveys. However, members note the need to consider logistics and costs.
- Members note that season designations and regulations may not be adjusted every year, but many expressed that the public should still have an opportunity to provide annual input, and it’s important to acknowledge that people were heard even when decisions aren’t modified.
- Members also acknowledge that Area Wildlife staff do listen to what they’re hearing from hunters and others in their areas, and use this information in season setting; however, more formal input opportunities are desired.

Discussion on draft strategy 1.3.3 (monitoring deer habitat and deer population health)

DMPAC supports this strategy in concept. Discussion:

- DNR staff note they’ve heard support from this committee for many things associated with this strategy, but want to emphasize that implementation of this strategy will require committed partnerships, as DNR does not have the capacity to conduct such monitoring without assistance. Some information suggests evidence of density dependent concerns in MN; improving the quality of deer may require lowering the population by harvesting more adult does, so that more habitat is available for each individual deer.
- One member suggested that this strategy, and all similar strategies throughout the plan, needs language to better describe the 2-way reciprocal interrelationship between deer and their habitats, and how both impact each other.
- Jim Leach, FAW Division Director, asked committee members to consider what specific types of monitoring are most important, as all come with a financial cost. Important to make sure that the things we want to monitor can actually impact management decisions.

Discussion on draft objective 5.2 (increase quality of habitat in forest regions)

- Comment that this objective needs to be measurable.
- One member proposed that the committee consider recommending an increase in the amount of timber harvested by DNR in the northern forests, for example perhaps double the percentage of land harvested each year.
 - Not all forest land is harvestable; some may be swamp land or other non-usable forest.
 - Nate Eide provided copies of a handout with timber harvest information gathered from DNR (available upon request to Katie Clower).
 - DNR currently harvests about 2% of commercial (harvestable) timber, or around 800,000-900,000 cords per year. That’s right at what is a sustainable level, to maintain stable age classes and be able to harvest similar amounts every year.
 - The State is currently assessing whether it could harvest 1,000,000 cords annually from state lands.
 - State and county timber harvests have remained stable or increasing in recent years, while timber harvest on private lands has been declining. Research indicates the decline

of harvest from private lands is due to a lack of technical assistance to individual landowners, rather than a decline in market values. This is addressed in draft strategy 5.2.2 regarding promotion of DNR's Private Forest Management efforts.

- Several members expressed that while there is always room to improve habitat quality, the counties and State are already at sustainable harvest levels, and an increase in quantity is likely unrealistic.
 - Most members expressed support for increasing habitat quality in the forested regions through appropriate timber management and other strategies.
 - DNR staff noted that there is a lot of pressure on public lands already, and more support is needed to protect critical deer wintering areas.
 - One member asked to clarify if the proposed recommendation is really about cutting more trees, or more about producing better deer habitat to increase the number of deer? May be multiple strategies to improve deer habitat without cutting more timber.
 - DMPAC decided not to vote on the proposed recommendation to increase timber harvest.
- Several members noted that “over” mature and true old growth forest age classes are underrepresented in Minnesota forest habitat; these age classes add an important component for wildlife. DNR should manage for greater diversity of age classes, including old growth.
 - Regarding draft strategy 5.2.1, one member noted that it may be unrealistic for DNR to develop a single outreach tool for conservation programs and land management options for private landowners. Other groups are already doing this, and DNR may not be the right venue to house it.
 - DMPAC is supportive of draft strategy 5.2.2, promoting private forest management technical assistance. Members discussed ways to make such programs more accessible for landowners with small (<20 acres) properties.

Other priority draft strategies were not discussed due to lack of time; DMPAC members were invited to submit any additional comments to Adam Murkowski via email at their earliest convenience.

Small group discussion on hunter and non-hunter satisfaction

Small groups were asked to discuss and report back on what about “satisfaction” is most important to include in the Deer Management Plan. Responses include:

- Older buck age structure
- Overall numbers (of deer)
- Healthy herd – not worried about disease
- Process transparency
- Affirm hunting as a primary management tool
- Incorporate survey findings into actions
- Annual (mandatory) hunter satisfaction surveys
- Survey farmers about their experiences with deer
- Ways to help farmers, harvest more does
- How do we gain more information from non-hunters? Funding issues?
- Having a say in annual regulations, bag limits, seasons, etc.

- Better communication, justification of DNR decisions
- New hunters focus on quantity; seasoned hunters focus on quality
- Not worry about car collisions
- Driving more positive interactions with DNR staff, including Conservation Officers
- Plan should list different types of satisfaction
- Need some way to measure satisfaction
- Much already covered in other chapters/topic areas
- Economic impacts (hunting or not)
- MN is losing hunters due to a lack of satisfaction
- Annual measure of deer hunter satisfaction
- Commissioner should retain authority for decisions; surveys should be influential but not determinative
- Who should be surveyed about satisfaction?
- Draft strategy 4.2.3 (allowing landowners to shoot up to 5 deer causing property damage without a permit) is too liberal
- Photography options – trail cams, ability to watch specific deer move and grow
- Getting to watch fawns grow up
- Deer as “spirit of the forest” – means the forest is sustaining other wildlife too
- Provides food off the land, empowering for people
- Recruitment, retention and reactivation (R3) – future of hunting and conservation
- Hunters leasing land to hunt restricts others’ access

Large group discussion on hunter and non-hunter satisfaction

- DNR staff noted that there are broad perspectives on what drives satisfaction, and some factors are in direct opposition to others. In thinking about how DNR would measure public satisfaction with deer, it’s important to consider what we would measure and how that information would impact decision making. Feedback on satisfaction with specific hunting regulations is very useful to DNR. DNR has used statistically representative social science survey methods to measure satisfaction (and hunter and landowner attitudes/preferences generally) since 2002, but this is typically done at a regional scale as opposed to statewide. Hunters in Minnesota have generally expressed higher satisfaction when there are higher deer populations.
- One committee member asked whether organizations such as MDHA and QDMA can assist DNR in distributing and collecting hunter satisfaction surveys.
 - DNR staff indicated that it is very useful for DNR to know where these organizations and their members stand on particular issues. However, these organizations are relatively small and not fully representative of the whole hunting community in Minnesota. Surveying a random sample of all license holders can provide more representative information.
 - DNR staff also indicated that organizations can be key partners in implementing certain strategies in the deer plan that will positively impact satisfaction.
- Members asked whether there is any way to include a hunter satisfaction survey in the registration process, or in the process of buying a license.

- Registration process: DNR response is that logistically this could be done, but it would provide a biased sample, because only successful hunters would be taking the survey; successful hunters typically express more satisfaction than unsuccessful hunters.
- When buying a license: DNR response is that this might be possible if everyone were required to buy a license online. But when people buy licenses through external vendors, the vendors may skip the questions if they are in a hurry (for example if there is a long line of people waiting to buy a license) or enter all “yes” or all “no”, providing inaccurate data.
- One member suggested requiring registration even for unsuccessful hunters; if registration is not completed in one year, the individual would not be allowed to purchase a license the next year.
 - DNR response is that the State is not authorized to require this. Something similar was tried in requiring successful bear hunters to submit a bear tooth; however, hunters and the legislature expressed concern over such requirements.
- One member suggests looking into examples of how other states measure satisfaction.
- Also need to discuss whether measuring satisfaction is a priority compared to other desired efforts. DNR staff feel the agency may not be on the cutting edge of measuring public satisfaction, but that it is already using solid methodology that provides useful results. Would additional effort provide meaningful improvements?
 - Several members expressed that if DNR has to make a choice, the agency should focus resources on improving communications and population management and monitoring over increasing opinion surveys. If those things are going “right”, there won’t be a need to measure satisfaction.
 - Several members indicated that surveys help measure how DNR is doing in relation to the recommendations in the Deer Plan and the legislator’s audit, and should be supported.
- Dissatisfaction is sometimes about not understanding how decisions were made and implemented. When DNR collects data, they also need to explain how they are using it or why they are not.
- Members note that satisfaction with deer may be different than satisfaction with DNR. There was widespread satisfaction with how DNR ran the winter public input meetings for the Deer Plan; how can DNR build on those efforts, establish relationships and ensure the public feels they are being listened to and heard?
- One member asks whether objective 4.1 is needed, since it’s difficult to measure perceptions of satisfaction. Most of the factors that affect satisfaction (communication, transparency, population management) are covered in other sections of the plan. Is it redundant to have it repeated here?
 - Several members express they are neutral on whether or not the final deer plan includes a specific chapter/topic area about satisfaction. If the topics are covered elsewhere in the plan, then there is no need to repeat them.
 - Several other members prefer to have a chapter/topic area that is explicitly about satisfaction, as a way to highlight this topic and provide accountability to it.
- The Plan should include better definition of who “non-hunters” are; this is not a homogenous group (although neither are hunters). Different audiences have different values.

- Also helpful to define other terms, such as “deer management”, “harvest management”, etc.
- Members discussed draft strategy 4.1.5, which lays out a potential process by which DNR could assess public support for implementing an early youth deer hunting season.
 - Members expressed various personal preferences about an early youth season, some in support and some opposed.
 - Clarification that this strategy is about the process used to make a decision, rather than the specific decision itself. What are fair processes through which DNR can use public input to inform decisions about specific hunting regulations? DNR hopes the committee will discuss this more at the September DMPAC meeting.
 - Some members supportive of the idea of using public input and/or a statistically representative survey of hunters to determine public sentiment about different hunting regulation options, and then to make final decisions based on some level of public majority (50.1% support? 75% support?). More discussion is needed about specifics.
 - DNR staff added that an early youth season could be a useful opportunity to collect information about individual deer (e.g. weight, antler width, etc.); youth tend to be less selective about the deer they shoot, providing a more representative sample of the whole deer population; additionally, if this effort is conducted outside of the regular hunting season, more volunteers would be available to run check stations and help collect the data. Something for members to consider and perhaps discuss at a future meeting.
- Draft strategy 4.2.5 is very vague; it would be helpful to provide some specific examples of non-consumptive deer-related recreation (such as photography).
- Several members expressed concerns about draft strategy 4.2.3, “Work with the legislature to empower citizens to be able to remove up to 5 deer causing property damage without a permit”.
 - How would “property damage” be defined? Clarify that this is specific to agriculture and is meant to be a tool for producers.
 - Consider moving this strategy to the chapter on “Impacts to other resources”.
 - DNR staff note that there is a huge administrative burden to giving landowners shooting permits; a strategy like this would alleviate that burden. If landowners have wildlife property damage, they need some way to alleviate that; this is an alternative to hiring more depredation staff, which is costly. Similar strategies already apply for other wildlife (e.g. bear) and for deer in other states.
 - Several members feel this strategy is too liberal. Others feel there are some areas where it may not be liberal enough. Some suggest that the number of deer allowed to be harvested (e.g. 5) should be different in different parts of the state, depending on local conditions.

Preview of next month’s topic: Deer Population Management, Monitoring and Research

Members participated in a “Walking Brainstorm” activity, with the prompt to brainstorm topics that the Deer Plan could address for each proposed Population Management, Monitoring and Research 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 deer population management, monitoring and research	# stars
Use independent third parties	3
Common data protocols – deer brown surveys across ownerships	0
Deer impacts in grassland habitats (forests are covered)	2
Exclosure maps and guides to existing exclosures statewide (LCCMR grant?)	0
Quantifiable counts	0
Collection of data around sex and age	1

Potential objectives/strategies related to use of public and stakeholder input in management	# stars
Include land management agencies (county, state, federal, private)	3
“Citizen science” app for hunters	0
Citizen data collected on regeneration and other issues	0
Respond to hunter input suggestions	1
Respond to farmer damage	0
Input yes; decisions = DNR	1
APR or not	0
Majority decision?	1

Potential objectives/strategies related to deer population goal setting	# stars
Balance of hunter and landowner	2
Local input and feedback	4
Specific to area	1
APR or not	0
+ or – 50% isn’t proper range	0
Model? How do we get better data/accuracy	0
Listen	0

Potential objectives/strategies related to deer harvest objective(s)	# stars
More hunter input (and agriculture/farmers)	2
Sustainable	0
Ecological input	1
APR or not	0
Transparency	4

Potential objectives/strategies related to deer harvest objective(s)	# stars
Stakeholder involvement	4
Use to control depredation	2
Shoot more does	1
Balance numbers vs. age structure	3
Goal: manage the numbers	0
Control hot spots of depredation	1

Potential objectives/strategies related to managing deer on small geographic scales	# stars
High vs. low populations	0
Older buck structure – passing on young bucks to areas of trophy management	0
Vegetation response – “sentinel seedlings”	0
Community management (LGUs) – partner with universities (students, faculty) for population counts (e.g. Bemidji State University example)	0
Local input	1
Personal contact (camera data)	0

Potential objectives/strategies related to special hunts, urban landscapes, etc.	# stars
Need to include Metro Region in management plan (urban in general – e.g. Duluth, Grand Rapids, Rochester)	4
Better public awareness – website	1
Parks, city, private land. No general hunt	1
Earn-a-buck to encourage doe harvest where needed	3
Use to control depredation	1
Use bow and arrow	1

Potential objectives/strategies related to biological and social constraints	# stars
Carrying capacity, and social carrying capacity	2
Predators	0
“Don’t shoot bambi”	0
Invest in a good study/survey of hunters and non-hunters to determine factors and capacity	0
Partner with other agencies to develop/disseminate materials (e.g. MDH, MNDOT)	1
Social determinants drive specific types of hunting (commercialization, food, big bucks)	0

Potential objectives/strategies related to quality of DNR decision-making	# stars
Quality vs. quantity?	0
Perception is reality for many	0
Ensure feedback loops are facilitated between DNR and stakeholders	0
Goals vs. actual vs. what is implemented	0
Explain decisions in plain English	2
Justify with public survey/poll/online etc.	2

Potential objectives/strategies related to uncertainty in deer management	# stars
Err on the high side	0
Act annually, with small corrections	0
Deer population numbers – with actual	2
Take control of CWD concerns	0
Use trends to make decisions	1
Good topic for education and transparency	0

Closing and next steps

- Members may submit any additional comments on the revised draft objectives/strategies, and on Topic 4 (Hunter and non-hunter satisfaction), via email to Adam Murkowski.
- DNR will continue to update the chart provided this month to DMPAC which shows summaries of input received from this committee, and subsequent revisions of draft objectives/strategies.
- Staff will communicate to the committee within the next month if additional meeting time is deemed necessary; at that point, the group can decide together how to proceed with scheduling additional time.
- Next meeting is scheduled for Wednesday, September 20, from 10am-3:30pm at the Sauk Rapids Government Center.