

DEER ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEETING

02/04/2015 Wausau Howard Johnson Hotel

Introductions - Kevin Wallenfang thanked the committee for their attendance. The main purpose of the meeting is to review the 2014 deer hunting season and discuss the 2015 quota setting process. Member introductions were made: DNR Forestry, DNR Science Services, DNR Northeast District, DNR Northern District, DNR West-Central District, DNR Southern District, DNR Wildlife Damage, Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission, U.S. Forest Service, Wis. Conservation Congress, Wis. Wildlife Federation, and Wis. Bowhunters Association.

2014 Season Review - Robert Rolley shared preliminary deer harvest data that has been collected through January 28, 2014. All of these numbers will be in a state of flux over the next few weeks.

- There was a lot of snow in the north at the opening of the deer season. Up to 20" of snow on the ground was reported which may have hampered success during the 9-day.
- Places in the southern part of the state reported heavy fog and rain during opening weekend.
- How do current numbers compare to what was available? This is the first year that hunters had to purchase tags in the Central and Southern Farmland Zones so it's difficult to track how many tags were issued/purchased vs. how many were used to harvest deer.
- Are we able to tease out what the impact of raising the price of antlerless tags may have on the level of antlerless harvest? Likely no.
- **Harvest data:** Preliminary harvest numbers now total over 300,000 deer.
 - Buck kill is better this year compared to what we observed in 2008 and 2009.
 - Antlerless kill was down but a lot of it was planned.
 - There was a decrease in buck harvest in many of the northern counties. This number is heavily impacted by conditions during the 9-day gun deer season.
 - The percent change in antlered buck harvest per square mile was highly variable across the state.
 - The percent change in antlerless harvest per square mile was highly reflective of where zero quota areas were this year.
 - **GLIFWC:**
 - Can these preliminary data be shared?
 - Why do reservation units have no data? A first look was given at this data and Tribal harvest numbers were very low.
 - Will Tribal harvest data be available in the future? Yes.
- **Aging data:** In the past, aging data on harvested deer was collected at the Deer Management Unit level. The department started recording the county of harvest in 2012. It has been time consuming to approximate county aging samples from DMU samples.
 - Because in some cases this approximation resulted in sparse data at the county level, county groupings were also used to summarize "big-picture" trends.
 - CWD samples have been included in aging estimates in some areas. Particularly across the Southern Farmland Zone, a great deal of aging data is acquired from CWD samples.
 - Does our aging data include information we receive from nuisance tag and agricultural damage harvest? It is reflected within the overall gun harvest.

- Some CWD areas where buck aging was occurring were getting more samples than during the gun deer season. How much does this change our buck age estimates? This discussion is getting more momentum. We need to figure out ways to capture more aging data during the bow harvest.
- In 2014 we aged almost 11,000 bucks which is a fairly decent sample size.
- Around 5,000 adult does were aged which doesn't include harvested fawns.
- **Percent of yearling bucks and does:**
 - The 5-year averages for the percentage of yearling bucks and does did not contain any surprises.
 - The percentage of aged yearling bucks in the north was low which is consistent with two back-to-back severe winters.
 - Most of the Farmland areas also recorded lower yearling buck percentages; except for in the southeastern part of the state where that number is rising.
 - Northern estimates may not be entirely accurate because the sample sizes were very low in those areas.
 - The percentage of yearling does in the harvest in farmland areas seem consistent.
- **Yearling antler development:**
 - Yearling antler development (percent of yearling bucks with forked antlers) was poor in the northern part of the state. This may reflect overall nutritional condition. The Farmland Zones see a pretty stable pattern.
 - The 5-year averages in yearling antler development also show poor development in the northwestern part of the state compared to the northeast.
- **GLIFWC:**
 - Could the observed low yearling antler development in the northwestern part of the state be attributed to the difficult winter? Possibly, but it is likely not be the only contributing factor. Habitat quality also plays a role.
- **Summer Deer Observations (SDO) and Operation Deer Watch (ODW):** For the past few years, the department has been participating in summer deer observations which involve the collection of sightings of adult does with fawns. More recently, a public initiative was launched called Operation Deer Watch which collects volunteer observations also of adult does with fawns.
 - In recent years, observations by department staff and the public have been pooled which vary from a low of 0.5 in the northwest to almost 1 in the southwest.
 - There is a fairly weak correlation between observations collected by the public and observations collected by the department.
 - If there is an error in the data collection, could we identify where it is likely to be occurring? It's difficult to say.
 - SDO data tends to correlate more strongly with yearling doe percentages in the harvest compared to ODW.
 - How much variation is there going to be in using each of these data sets to create deer population estimates? It would make a difference but it's not clear how much.
 - We should pool the data again this year and try to find out more where the noise is coming from in the data.
 - **SDO:**

- Data don't show a huge drop in fawn:doe ratios in the north compared to the year before, but generally low in the northwest, less of a trend in the rest of the north.
- In the Southern Farmland Zone, there were very high observed fawn:doe ratios.
- Statewide five year averages of observed fawn:doe ratios were highly variable.
- **ODW:**
 - The number of reported adult does was similar to what we saw in 2013.
- **GLIFWC:**
 - Why are there no weather effects represented in the last two years of fawn:doe ratio trends? Yearling does are more susceptible to severe winters which would leave the older more experienced does surviving to still produce fawns.
 - Are county groupings going to be used every year? Or can we eventually transition to reporting data at the county scale? We will likely continue to struggle to obtain enough samples at the county level.
 - We should provide more than one estimate based on variable fawn:doe ratios. One for Operation Deer Watch and one for Summer Deer Observations.

The committee recommends that SDO and ODW data be pooled and weighted equally for use in creation of deer population estimates this year.

- **Electronic registration and aging:** Dan Storm explained how an aging pilot was completed this year in order to assess other ways to obtain age data on harvested deer. The department worked with meat processors in eight counties asking them to set aside heads of processed deer to obtain aging information.
 - **Aging pilot:**
 - Throughout the pilot 2,000 deer were aged which came from 61 counties.
 - Sample size targets were provided for each county in the pilot. Based on this year, if we were going to expand this effort statewide we could likely receive decent sample sizes.
 - Results showed the expected yearling buck bias in most counties. However, in one county the yearling buck percentages were identical between aged deer in the pilot and in-person registration stations.
 - One solution for the bias toward yearling bucks would be to have a department staff person at the high volume processor on opening weekend.
 - Overall results saw some fairly large differences between aging data that was collected from meat processors and aging data that was collected with registration stations.
 - In 2015 a solution needs to be found for how CWD samples and ages will be obtained from those deer as well.
 - Lacking an alternative, for next year, the meat processing pilot should be expanded statewide while grouping it together with other more traditional methods such as department staff manning voluntary in-person registration stations.

- If we continue with the meat processing pilot, we'll need to find a solution for obtaining yearling antler characteristics because most yearling bucks that come in to a meat processor already have the antlers removed.
- **Electronic registration pilot:** Kevin provided a brief update on the success of the new electronic registration system for deer which was piloted this year.
 - About 9,000 deer were registered using the electronic registration pilot.
 - With the close of electronic registration stations, there has been concern with how car-killed deer will be registered using electronic registration. A solution for this has been developed.
 - A group of people who manage areas with larger Amish communities who don't have access to telephones or the internet should meet to discuss consistency and how to alleviate this issue.
- **GLIFWC:**
 - Michigan has voluntary stations and they receive thousands of samples.

2015 Quota Setting Process – Kevin provided an overview of the timeline that has been developed for the quota setting process this year. For the most part the process is similar to what it was in years past.

- County Deer Advisory Councils are new to this process and are expecting a starting point when it comes to making quota recommendations.
- CDAC chairs and alternate-chairs attended training with the department recently to start them thinking about logistics involved in this process.
- The decision was made that the department work within the confines of the current CDAC population objective recommendations this year for the next three-years and conduct quota setting from those positions.
- The department will outline concerns relating to intolerable agricultural damage and disease in relation to various population objectives. A metric hasn't been developed yet relating to specific forestry impacts and this would be important when making recommendations in the future.
- We need to be cautious about asking staff to provide their local perspective because if they're not listened to, they could lose their credibility.
- **GLIFWC:**
 - Are CDACs going to be told about nuisance tags that are issued by the department to public land managers for harvesting public land deer?
- **Ojibwe Tribal Threshold Calculations:** Johnathan Gilbert from GLIFWC gave an overview of what Tribal Thresholds are and how they are calculated.
 - The Ojibwe Tribes have the right to harvest up to 15% of the harvestable surplus in the Ceded Territories.
 - Tribal harvest is below thresholds in every county which contains a Ceded Territory.
 - There are no Tribal quotas declared for next year.
 - It's an issue not being able to distinguish between crop damage, military, and disabled hunter harvest.
 - Part of the problem involves legislation that is beyond the ability of the department to coordinate. Solutions to this could involve either better identifying disabled and military harvest or removing the Tribal Threshold.

- **Metro sub-units in 2015:**

- Metro sub-units are not distinguished in our licensing system this year and to do so prior to the 2015 deer season would be very costly. CDACs understand that following this year they may be able to issue antlerless deer tags specific to the metro sub-units.

CWD update - 5,369 deer were tested for CWD this year with 323 positives. There were no new counties this year with a positive CWD test.

Winter Severity Update - Through January in the north, average WSI was recorded at 20.3 whereas at this time last year it was recorded at a 56.

Deer Population Estimates – Robert Rolley outlined initial deer population estimates following the 2014 deer season.

- Calculated an average Buck Recovery Rate for each county. Generally we're coming up with harvest rates in the 30-40% range which are in the ballpark for what was observed in the telemetry studies.
- For some counties in the south, this will be the first time a SAK population estimate was done because prior harvest was not tracked with unlimited tags.
- **GLIFWC:**
 - In the past, there was always a density associated with the population estimates. Why is that not the case this year? Density is very important when deciding if we're in the right place with a county.
 - This should be based on deer range which is how this has always been done.
 - Both the prior estimates are post-hunt estimates.
- Once 2014 numbers are finalized they can be added to 5-year trends and graphed.
- The next step is distributing these estimates to field staff for use in quota setting.

Research Update – Dan Storm provided a brief update on the deer research that is currently being done in the state.

- **Winter Health Assessments:** An attempt was made to update data on pregnancy rates and nutritional condition of deer in Wisconsin. This was done by collecting dead deer from roads that were killed by vehicles and assessing their nutritional condition.
 - Biologists were asked to provide 10 assessments per county.
 - Roughly 500 samples were collected statewide.
 - The initial data collected during this attempt provided evidence that a study like this would be very useful in future years. Therefore a recommendation is being made to the Wildlife Policy Team to do this study again.
- **Final Research Report:**
 - Capture is not occurring right now, although crews are conducting radio-telemetry on the currently collared animals.
 - A large communication plan is being worked on to disseminate program results.
 - A M.S. Student is currently working with previously collected data to describe buck dispersal rates.

- **Status of enclosure study:** This project is under internal review.
- **Snapshot Wisconsin:** It is a goal to evaluate fawn:doe ratios using cameras and this project could be an outlet.

Damage and Nuisance Program Updates – Brad Koele provided an update on the issuance of agricultural damage and nuisance tags to control deer damage to crops and trees. He gave an overview of counties of interest and discussed various considerations in those areas.

- **Damage Program:**
 - The program is still providing a lot of hunting access.
 - The number of shooting permits issued has been increasing.
 - The department is seeing increased evidence of people enrolling in the agricultural damage program to circumvent paying for antlerless deer carcass tags during the regular hunting season.
 - Logistics involved in the transition to electronic deer registration are still being discussed.
- **Nuisance Program:**
 - Nuisance permits were issued in Florence County to a private timber company. 120 shooting permits were issued with 90 deer being harvested with these tags. Public hunters were given a lot of the tags with the rest being issued to contractors and employees of the company.
 - Another nuisance permit was issued in Polk County due to a private company documenting severe damage to Jack Pine. 75 tags were issued there and will be provided for public land hunters to use.
 - This is leading to a renewed interest in shooting permits by other entities so more is expected in the future.

DTR Rules Package Status – Kevin provided an update on where the permanent DTR rule package stands at the moment. A public input form just ended on Sunday which solicited public input on the proposed rule package.

- The permanent rule for the most part looks as it did for the 2014 deer season, but prior to the public input forum, some amendments were included to be put up for public review.
- The Wildlife Policy Team is getting briefed on the results from the public input forum then the memo to the Natural Resources Board will be drafted.

DMAP Update – Melinda Nelson, Assistant Big Game Ecologist provided an update on how the application process for 2015 DMAP enrollment is going. She said the department is steadily receiving a number of applications and the deadline for individuals who wish to be considered for level two or three enrollment this year is March 1st.

Committee items – A member of the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation commented on the tools provided to County Deer Advisory Councils and how they currently don't have the ability to target areas of concern specific to agricultural damage.

Next Meeting: Date and Location TBD