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Scientists say deer hunting must increase

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Concerned that a ravenous deer population is destroying Pennsylvania forests, a group of scientists says the state Game Commission is politically incapable of pursuing the best solution for keeping the animals under control: allowing more hunting.

They say that's because the commission is funded mostly by hunting-related taxes and fees, and the agency caves in to pressure from hunters - many of whom, ironically, do not want the state to allow them to kill more deer.

The scientists' findings are contained in a 340-page report, to be released today, that was commissioned by a coalition of conservation groups, including a few that represent hunters. A copy was obtained in advance by *The Inquirer* from supporters of the report.

Some hunting groups familiar with the report were highly critical of it, contending that increased hunting in the last three years has already reduced the deer population to the point where it is difficult to find the animals.

Game commissioners and agency staff said they are doing the best they can to balance the wishes of hunters with the needs of the forest and other wildlife.

"There's always two sides to this story," said Stephen L. Mohr, one of the eight game commissioners.

Because deer eat tender tree shoots and saplings, many parts of the state are devoid of young trees. That threatens the health of the forests, the birds and the mammals that live in them, and the land's ability to absorb rainfall, the report's authors write.

The deer problem has reached crisis levels, they say.

The state's deer population numbered about one million after the hunt in 2003, compared with 600,000 in 1985. Numbers from last fall's harvest are not in yet.

Overpopulation exists in many other states, including New Jersey, where deer have overrun suburbia and farmland in addition to the remaining forests, said Emile DeVito, an ecologist with the nonprofit New Jersey Conservation Foundation.

But Pennsylvania is considered to have one of the nation's most severe problems, said Robert J. Warren, professor of wildlife ecology and management at the University of Georgia, who saw an early draft of the report.

"I think it can safely be said that Pennsylvania has had probably the longest record of a problem of overabundance of deer in natural forest habitat," he said.

The report's 10 authors include nine scientists. Five work for federal or state agencies, three are independent consultants, and one, Ann F. Rhoads, is senior botanist at Morris Arboretum in Philadelphia. The 10th author, Ronald R. Freed, is a former policy analyst for Audubon Pennsylvania and has volunteered with many wildlife groups.

Among many policy recommendations, the report's authors urge elected officials to create nonhunting sources of funds for the Game Commission and to appoint some nonhunters to the board - which has two vacancies and will have a third at year's end. Gov. Rendell, who nominates commissioners for approval by the state Senate, declined through a spokeswoman to comment yesterday.

The authors say that one reason the state has not reduced its deer population is its unusual three-part structure for managing natural resources.

One agency, the Game Commission, issues licenses for hunting deer and other mammals. Another, the Fish and Boat Commission, has responsibility for managing aquatic life. A third, the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR), manages forests but does not have authority over deer.

Two of the report's authors work for but did not speak for the DCNR.

Some Game Commission staff have found the system so frustrating over the years that they have quit, while others have been fired or transferred for being too aggressive in trying to reduce the deer population. Most recently, commission biologist Gary Alt resigned last month, saying he felt the state's political climate would not allow him to bring deer under control.

"The agency is serving the hunters. And they're paid for by the hunters. And they feel their constituents are the hunters and little else," said Alt, who was not involved in the report but said he largely agrees with it.

Alt and the report's authors are quick to say they are not antihunting. Alt and about half the authors of the report are hunters themselves.

"We're promoting hunting as the primary solution for managing deer over most of the state," said biologist Bryon P. Shissler, a report author and a consultant for Audubon Pennsylvania.

Alt was instrumental in several regulatory changes designed to reduce the deer herd. He persuaded game commissioners to allow more licenses for hunting "antlerless" deer - does and also fawns of both sexes. He also helped persuade the commission to allow private landowners to issue licenses for hunting on their property.

While the new report says Alt was not allowed to go far enough, many hunters feel he went too far.

In some circles, the idea of shooting does is seen as unmanly, because the doe season formerly came at the end of hunting season and was seen as consolation for those who could not bag a buck. Some say the authors failed to account for other reasons for the state's damaged forests, such as acid rain.

Charles Bolgiano, legislative director for the Unified Sportsmen of Pennsylvania, said that shooting too many does is simply bad for the herd.

"They're killing off too many does that are the mothers of our future bucks," Bolgiano said of the commission.

Melody Zullinger, executive director of the Pennsylvania Federation of Sportsmen's Clubs, said she agreed that some parts of the state have too many deer, but she said many areas do not.

Alt's changes have had an effect, she said. "Quit trying to make us believe we're not reducing the deer herd," Zullinger said. "We can see it."

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