

Testimony on Deer Damage

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Good morning. My name is Betsy Huber and I am the President of the Pennsylvania State Grange. The Grange is a family fraternal organization dedicated to the betterment of the American quality of life through community service, education, legislation and fellowship. It represents approximately 20,000 Pennsylvanians across the Commonwealth and is the oldest agricultural and rural organization of its kind in the United States.

Thank you for inviting me to testify today on behalf of the Grange on the issue of deer damage, an issue that concerns our members as well as many other associated and farm-related organizations. As a participating organization in the Ecosystem Management Project, the Grange sponsored an education seminar on deer management last fall which covered the history of deer management in Pennsylvania, the impact of an overabundant deer population on our quality of life, and the challenges and potential avenues for managing deer in our communities.

For many years, the Grange has been concerned about crop damage from deer and elk. The deer problem seems to move from one area of the Commonwealth to another as the deer destroy the browse in one area and then move on to another area. Over the years, almost every portion of the state has suffered the devastation of significant crop damage. Farmers in every portion of the state have experienced their crops being eaten by deer as they move from the forests onto the farmland. One of our Grange members described how he was not able to pick one ear of corn from his 40-acre farmland for two years in a row because the deer decimated his crop. He has since quit trying to grow corn and has switched to other crops which apparently are less enticing to the deer's appetite.

Compensation for deer damage is often hard to obtain because of the difficulty involved in accounting for crop damage. Payments are usually insignificant and do not cover the actual financial loss of the crop. Consequently, we are recommending that the compensation program be reviewed by the Game Commission and adjusted to cover and reflect the true financial loss incurred by this damage.

In more recent years, our members have become even more concerned with the threat of Lyme disease spread by the deer tick. Those members of our organization who have crops that can be damaged are interested in reimbursement for damage but all Grangers, regardless of where they live or whether they even farm, are increasingly concerned about the growing threat of Lyme disease posed by the increased deer population. Many of our members have been disastrously affected by this disease. It's the Grange's opinion that the health concerns affiliated with the deer management issue should take center stage. Clearly, the overabundant deer population needs to be managed more successfully to mitigate the health concerns and financial losses. We are therefore making a few recommendations:

1. Landowners, community associations, and conservancies should be allowed to apply directly to the Pennsylvania Game Commission for deer control permits instead of applying through their individual municipalities.
2. Communities should be allowed to decide what deer management tools are most suitable to their needs based on their property goals, land use and values.

3. The process of deer removal under deer control permits should be allowed to commence on November 1 and should not be restricted by recreational hunting seasons.
4. Deer control permits should allow for trapping and euthanizing as methods of deer removal.
5. In order to effectively engage hunters in this effort, arbitrary restrictions that inhibit their effectiveness, such as the requirement of tagging a harvested deer before taking additional deer, should be discarded.
6. A regulated baiting process should be allowed for hunters to safely lure deer into areas where they can safely be removed.
7. Allowances should be made for the harvesting of deer outside of normal seasons on property enrolled in the Deer Management Assistant Program (DMAP).
8. The DMAP permits should be provided directly to the landowner and communities at no cost so that they can distribute them to the hunters, avoiding the time consuming and burdensome process of acquiring coupons and applying for permits.
9. The Game Commission should conduct programs around the state to educate the public-at-large on the health problems attenuated to Lyme disease, explaining the key role deer play in this disease and the need for deer population management in an effort to help manage the dispersal of ticks and the spread of Lyme Disease.
10. Municipalities should be allowed to sell venison harvested under a deer control permit to help defray the cost of the community's deer control program.

We thank you for your concern in controlling the deer population and would like to pledge whatever support the Pennsylvania State Grange can provide in helping to secure solutions for this problem.

And while this hearing is on deer damage and management problems, I'd just like to call to your attention that many of our livestock farmers who pasture either cattle or sheep are experiencing more and more losses from coyotes. One farmer lost 125 lambs last year and has now engaged his own coyote protection by buying two Great Pyrenees dogs who live and sleep with the sheep and protect them from the coyotes. However, coyotes are getting to be more and more a generator of economic loss and are creating another control issue that this committee might want to address in the future.

Thank you for your time.