

Testimony

Presented to:

House Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee

Presented by:

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Chairman Hershey and Chairman Daley, Members of the Pennsylvania House of Representatives Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee, on behalf of the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, thank you for convening this hearing on deer populations and their impact on agriculture. As you are aware, agriculture is the state's leading economic enterprise, and our Commonwealth's farmers produce nearly \$4.5 billion in crops and commodities each year.

Today I would like to offer comments as someone who has direct experience in the daily interactions of a farm operation with its natural environment. Wildlife and our natural resources are precious commodities and I believe some of our best spokespersons and advocates for wildlife and the environment are our farmers. It is for this reason that I feel privileged to offer my thoughts as to where we are with wildlife management and where we need to go with wildlife management to sustain a balanced environment between profitable farms and properly managed deer populations.

To begin I would like to publicly commend the Pennsylvania Game Commission for what they have done in the past five years to take deer management to a new plateau. For quite some time in the history of deer management in Pennsylvania, many farmers wondered whether the Pennsylvania Game Commission would ever be able to get a grasp on the burgeoning deer population. Farmers were, and still are, suffering millions of dollars of damage from deer every year. But during the mid to late 90's the damage was as intense as I ever remember it, and I would feel safe saying that almost all farmers would agree. As the growing herd ate itself out of house and home in the woodlands and forests, they quickly moved to the agricultural areas for an endless food supply.

For years our state's farm organizations have had wildlife management reform at the top of their priority lists. As a matter of fact, wildlife damage remains one of the top issues for most of our agricultural and commodity organizations. As you will hear today from representatives of the Pennsylvania Farm Bureau, the Pennsylvania State Grange, the Pennsylvania Forest Products Association, and the Pennsylvania Landscape and Nursery Association, deer continue to eat into farm profits and cause many farmers to substantially alter their farm operations in order to grow crops and commodities.

Overpopulations of deer have caused considerable economic problems for our grain farmers who often find many acres of their crops damaged and consumed by deer. Pennsylvania Christmas tree farmers often have serious problems growing trees to maturity because of browsing and rubbing caused by hungry and curious deer. Our state's vegetable and fruit industry has experienced considerable hardships when trying to get a transplant crop growing due to deer browsing at night on those crops. A new group of stakeholders has emerged—homeowners—who have joined our nursery and landscaping industry in calling for better deer management due to increasing instances of ornamental plant damage and destruction.

The PA forestry industry, with annual sales of \$5.5 billion, has been damaged over the last several years due to intense deer populations in wooded areas. A blue-ribbon panel convened by Pennsylvania Audubon and the Habitat Alliance published a report in Jan 2005 stating that “there is near unanimous consensus among scientists that the impact of recent high deer populations and forest structure in Pennsylvania is deleterious” and further that “over-browsing by deer has eliminated the tree seedling, sapling and shrub layer in large areas of forest in Pennsylvania.” Regeneration and species diversity are threatened.

Deer overabundance threatens forestry, farming, and tourism in many parts of the commonwealth. Specifically, deer overabundance costs Pennsylvanians in several ways:

❖ **Direct losses due to deer**

- A 1997 study by the Pennsylvania State University pegged deer damage to agricultural crops at approximately \$75 million.
- A Pennsylvania Farm Bureau study in the late 90's indicated an average crop loss per farm at \$9,000.
- Forest productivity losses were estimated at \$73 million annually on that portion of the forest that is actively managed
- The Pennsylvania Forest Products Association estimates as much as \$18 million lost to taxpayers in deferred and lost timber stumpage sales on state lands
- Costs to landowners and business people associated with damage at nurseries and to suburban landscaping has become one of the most important issues for the Pennsylvania Landscape and Nursery Association.
- \$78 million annual costs associated with 39,000 deer/car collisions in Pennsylvania.
- Public health costs associated with Lyme disease and other deer related concerns is a growing problem.

As I indicated in the beginning of my comments, the Game Commission has made great strides in addressing deer damage problems on the farm, and they have moved forward with aggressive new management options for Pennsylvania's ONLY deer management tool—hunters. Programs such as the red tag program, the deer depredation program, the LINK program, and most recently the Deer Management Assistance Program, have helped many farmers micro-manage deer on their farms. Matched with the Commission's fencing program and public access programs, participating farmers have witnessed a decline financial losses caused by deer over the last several years. However,

as indicated by the farm organizations priority issue lists, we are far from declaring victory in our management efforts.

Pennsylvania is a leader in farmland preservation, having preserved thousands of acres of prime agricultural land. But every day in Pennsylvania we continue to lose agricultural land to development. With that development and suburbanization of agricultural areas comes an ultimate problem that no one has been able to solve. Safety zones and shotgun only hunting areas in Pennsylvania have increased dramatically in recent years, especially in southeast and southcentral Pennsylvania. Often this development takes hunters out of the picture as a management tool for control of deer. With the loss of hunting as a control option, many farmers have experienced dramatic increase in deer damage, and many have hung up farming because the growing of crops in suburbanized agricultural areas is not feasible.

In recent weeks I have spoken to many farmers from southeastern PA who are working with the Game Commission to consider and develop new alternatives for deer management in our more suburbanized areas of the state. I believe this Committee could play a helpful role in recognizing this problem and assisting our farm community in realizing new control options.

Please keep in mind that although many hunters have expressed witnessing a "lack of deer in their traditional hunting areas in Pennsylvania, our farmers and foresters and landscapers will tell you that deer continue to be a significant roadblock to the successful operation of a profitable agricultural business.

Thank you for holding this hearing and for calling together such an expert panel of agricultural witnesses who can relate first hand what mismanaged deer populations can do to agricultural economies.