

## FINAL REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

BY,

WISCONSIN WHITE-TAILED DEER TRUSTEE AND REVIEW COMMITTEE

JUNE, 2012

Drs. James C. Kroll (Trustee), David C. Guynn, Jr. (Committee Member), and Gary L Alt (Committee Member)

Presented to,

Wisconsin Department of Administration

Madison, Wisconsin

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For some time, there has been growing public dissatisfaction with various issues related to white-tailed deer management and hunting in Wisconsin. During his campaign, Governor Scott Walker made a promise to appoint a “Deer Trustee” to review programs, activities and efforts by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR) related to deer management, to help resolve these issues. In October, the Department of Administration (DOA) selected Dr. James C. Kroll to be the *Deer Trustee*. A contract for services (October, 2011) was developed between Dr. Kroll (Dr. Deer, Inc.) and the State of Wisconsin, through the DOA. This contract specified the following responsibilities:

*“Contractor, in consultation with two other recognized deer management experts (“Contractor’s Associates”) shall undertake an assessment of Wisconsin’s deer management plans and policies, hereinafter, “Services”, including, but not limited to: (i) The methodology and accuracy of population estimates for Wisconsin’s white-tailed deer herd; (ii) The necessity and effectiveness of Wisconsin’s policies in response to an infectious disease known as Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD); (iii) The significance of the impact of Wisconsin’s timber wolf population upon the white-tailed deer herd, and its impact upon white-tailed deer management policies and plans, if any; and (iv) The structure of Wisconsin’s deer hunting periods, including, but not limited to, the necessity and efficacy of hunting polices such as “Earn-A-Buck” and other policies and plans designed to control the size of Wisconsin’s white-tailed deer herd.”* [EAB was removed from consideration by legislation prior to initiation of this project.

The Deer Trustee Committee conducted an exhaustive study of deer management by the Department of Natural Resources, beginning in October, 2011 through 30 June, 2012. Hundreds of documents, data and other materials provided by the WDNR were reviewed by the committee, as well as conducting meetings with the WDNR, stakeholder groups, other state agencies associated with natural resources and the general public through six Town Hall meetings. We also obtained over a thousand comments via the Internet and numerous letters from professionals and private citizens. We met with biologists and

members of the Great Lakes Indian Fish & Wildlife Commission (GLIFWC), representing 11 Ojibwe tribes in Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan. Our Final Report (Appended) represents our findings and recommendations for re-establishing public trust between the citizens of Wisconsin, the Ojibwe Tribes and the Department of Natural Resources. However, before presenting our findings and recommendations, we wish to present our basic philosophy of deer management. Although there are many issues involved in evaluating the WDNR white-tailed deer management program, there were three basic areas to consider. Deer management has been likened to a three-legged stool (Kroll 1991); one leg representing population management, another habitat, and the third human dimensions (people "management"). The reason for choosing this analogy is each of the three legs is equally important; and, without one the stool is rendered useless. Giles (1978) defined wildlife management as "the science and art of making decisions and taking actions to manipulate the structure, dynamics, and relations of populations, habitats, and people to achieve specific human objectives by means of the wildlife resource." This long and cumbersome definition has many implications, but provides a meaningful context in which to frame a review of the deer management practices of the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources.

Wildlife management is evolving from an art to a science. Despite the many scientific and technological advances that have occurred during the four decades since Giles wrote this definition, it is unlikely wildlife management ever will become a pure science. This is because the factors that affect habitats and deer population responses on the landscape scale are complex, difficult to define, even harder to measure and constantly changing. Public views and expectations for management of white-tailed deer populations vary from those who want more deer (recreational hunting) to those who want less or no deer (motorists, forest managers, farmers). McKean (2011) identified a number of factors that may contribute to declining deer harvests in a number of states including Wisconsin: 1) maturing forests, 2) increasing predator populations, 3) baiting issues, 4) habitat loss, 5) increasing public intolerance of high deer densities, 6) inadequate monitoring, and 7) unrealistic hunter expectations. Most state wildlife agencies have little if any control over these factors or lack the resources to monitor much less manage these factors.

Thus, our review of Wisconsin's deer management practices focused on the density and structure of white-tailed deer populations and how they are managed by recreational hunting and other means, white-tailed deer habitats and how they are described and quantified, and the human dimensions of deer management as it relates to cultural, economic, political and management concerns of the public. We also considered how various aspects of these three components (populations, habitat and people) are monitored and how this information is used in formulation of deer management policies and regulations similar to the 4-cornerstone approach of The Quality Deer Management Association (QDMA 2012).

In our Interim Report (March 2012), we concluded public confidence in the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources in regard to deer management issues has seriously eroded over the last few decades. The reasons are complex and not easily solved, but

revolve primarily around two key issues— the current use of the SAK Population Model and the ineffectiveness of the CWD eradication program. However, lack of public involvement, particularly by landowners and Tribes, in goal setting and decision-making regarding deer management lie at the heart of the problem. As we noted above, these problems did not arise overnight and hence the solutions will also take time. Our Interim Report included a number of findings and conclusions. Since March, we are convinced these findings generally were correct, but came to additional conclusions based on information acquired since that time. This Executive Summary represents our final findings and recommendations. However, we would like to interject here we are in no way questioning the dedication, effort or commitment to deer management by the WDNR staff. We found these folks to be helpful and generous, in spite of undergoing such an intensive evaluation; we are grateful for their help. [The Interim Report was read 1,700 times on the drdeer.com web site.] If these recommendations are implemented, we are convinced they represent a “reset button” for WDNR-public relationships. If not, the situation will continue to deteriorate to one in which deer management falls victim to an increasingly political process.

## **FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Population Management**

- 1. Limit the use of SAK/accounting style models to monitoring deer population size and trends at the state and regional levels.**
- 2. Do away with population goals and population estimates at the DMU level.**
- 3. Replace the current DMU population goal definition of comparing the deer population estimate with the desired population goal for the DMU with a simplified goal statement of increase, stabilize or decrease population density.**
- 4. Develop a set of metrics to monitor progress towards the DMU goal of increasing, stabilizing, or decreasing population density.**
- 5. Reduce the number of DMUs and combine the Farmland regions.**
- 6. Revise the Wisconsin Deer Management Plan.**

### **Hunting Regulations, Seasons and Bag Limits**

- 1. Simplify the regulatory process by setting antlerless harvest goals, harvest regulations and antlerless permit quotas on a 3-5 year cycle.**
- 2. Base Antlerless Permit Quotas on DMU historical demand.**
- 3. Increase the cost of all antlerless tags for Regular and Herd Control Units to \$12.**
- 4. Consider charging a fee for antlerless tags in the CWD Zone.**
- 5. Establish a public lands antlerless permit system.**
- 6. Limit antlerless deer harvest in Regular and Herd Control Zones.**
- 7. Establish a Deer Management Assistance Program (DMAP) antlerless permit system.**

8. Re-evaluate the effectiveness of the October antlerless seasons in the CWD Zone.
9. Maintain the current buck limit of one buck per Deer Gun License (may be used in muzzleloader season) and one buck per Archery Deer License.
10. Maintain the Bonus Buck Regulation in CWD Zone.
11. Resolve the cross-bow season issue through the public involvement process.
12. Resolve the baiting and feeding issue outside CWD affected areas.
13. Put the fun back into hunting by simplifying seasons, bag limits and youth qualifications!

#### **Predator Studies and Management**

1. Continue to conduct research on the impacts of predators on the deer herd.
2. Involve the public as much as practical with field-based research projects.
3. Revise the Wisconsin Wolf Management Plan to include updated information and provide current public attitudes to guide management decisions through the early years of this post-delisting era.
4. Establish a wolf population management program to limit/decrease wolf-societal conflicts.
5. Geospatial studies of predator distribution and densities, especially for wolves, should be encouraged and developed to assess long-term trends and issues.

#### **Chronic Wasting Disease**

1. We believe it is time to consider a more passive approach to CWD in the DMZ.
2. There is a clear need for a new sampling protocol for CWD in Wisconsin, one that gives a true picture of the progress of the disease; but more importantly, one designed to detect spread.
3. Dealing with wildlife diseases is not unlike responding to wild fires, and response plan should be developed on this model, focusing on early detection of “break outs” and citizen involvement (active approach).
4. We recommend implementation of a statewide DMAP program; and, nowhere is such a program needed more than in the DMZ.
5. There is a need to provide more information about concerns for humans contracting a CWD variant.
6. The time required to receive CWD test results from hunter-killed animals must be decreased to a few days.
7. An annual meeting of DMAP cooperators would be an excellent venue for reporting on various aspects of CWD, in addition to the topics discussed earlier. This would greatly enhance public awareness and WDNR credibility.

8. WDNR should work closely (through the local biologist) with the Conservation Congress in developing goals and strategies at the county level. we feel use of human dimensions research to anticipate, rather than reacting to issues as they arise would be very effective.
9. We feel use of human dimensions research to anticipate, rather than reacting to issues as they arise would be very effective.
10. Charlotte the Deer should become the “Smokey Bear” of CWD in Wisconsin, serving as the centerpiece for a public education program developed with stakeholder organizations such as QDMA, Whitetails of Wisconsin and Whitetails Unlimited.

#### Harvest Data, Herd Health and Productivity

1. Involving the public in data collection produces many benefits, including buy-in on management and harvest strategies and cost-efficiencies of data collection.
2. Each field biologist should be required to organize and conduct at least one field necropsy study each year, conducted along with cooperators and volunteers during late winter.
3. Training should be provided to biologists and technicians to standardize methodologies and educate them on deer anatomy and basic physiology.
4. An annual report should be prepared for each DMU and Region summarizing these studies and a Powerpoint/video presentation developed for annual DMAP workshops and public presentations.

#### Habitat

1. As both part of DMAP activities and public lands management, local biologists/technicians should be required to conduct annual range evaluations to assess habitat health and condition. Foresters also should be involved in these activities, public and private.
2. Training programs should be developed for state and private resource managers to standardize habitat/range assessment methodologies.
3. There is a need for modernizing the GIS and GPS capabilities of Wisconsin’s agencies.
4. A statewide geospatial information system, similar to that used in Texas, should be developed which provides seamless support to all state resource managers across agencies, which also supports economic development, emergency planning and response, and a host of citizen services.
5. Form a Young Forest Initiative Task Force.

6. Funding for these activities should arise from fees assessed by stakeholders and landowners using these data and services, as well as grants and contracts for various state agency activities.
7. The WDNR adopt an advocacy role in dealing with the National Forests of Wisconsin to encourage sustainable forest management, especially for early and mid-successional species (game and non-game).

### People

1. Implement a Deer Management Assistance Program (DMAP).
2. Each DMAP cooperator should receive an annual report summarizing current data and trend data over years to monitor progress toward goals.
3. Develop a public lands antlerless permit system.
4. In addition to providing hunting opportunities, the impacts of deer depredation on agricultural crops, forest regeneration and biodiversity, deer/vehicle collisions, the special significance of deer to the Ojibwe people and other factors also must be considered in management of Wisconsin's white-tailed deer resources. This will include strict adherence to all agreements with the Voight Intertribal Task Force (GLIFWC), the tribes serving as "co-managers" where appropriate.
5. Expand public education/outreach efforts to serve landowners whose goals include management for white-tailed deer and other wildlife species.

### DNR Research and Technical Publications

1. We strongly suggest establishment of a research steering committee, with representation from user groups, stakeholders and regional WDNR biologists, and Tribal representatives.
2. A significant effort should be developed in Human Dimensions research. Wisconsin is blessed with two excellent researchers (Holsman at UW-SP and Petchenik in house), and a plan for long-term monitoring of trends and issues should be developed between them.
3. We are concerned about long-term contracts for research services. There need to be milestones and project evaluations.
4. Projects should involve the public whenever practical.
5. There is a need for a long-term research plan (developed through 1), based on needs assessments, and prioritized for funding.
6. Synergies with other agencies and greater cooperative efforts, particularly with those in forestry and geospatial disciplines, would help leverage funding and strengthen projects.
7. Research projects should be of an applied nature, rather than basic research with clearly defined application to the needs for managing Wisconsin's deer and habitat resources.

8. Project results should be extended to the public through media, workshops and field days, as part of the DMAP program and regional stakeholder conferences.
9. In the long-term, we recommend developing a wildlife disease unit to: 1) respond quickly to CWD outbreaks; 2) monitor health and disease of other wildlife species; and, 2) train and support local biologists/technicians in conducting annual herd health surveys.

### Conservation Congress

1. We feel the Conservation Congress must have a more active role in deer management decision-making at the local level.

### Personnel

1. We strongly suggest addition of a Deer Management Assistance Coordinator, a highly qualified individual with the following characteristics: 1) considerable experience with DMAP or related programs; 2) well-respected in both the scientific and public communities; 3) highly skilled communicator; and, 4) highly motivated to work with the public.
2. We also recommend development of a “boots-on-the-ground” culture in the WDNR; and, job descriptions of field biologists be adjusted accordingly.