

# On Wisconsin Outdoors

With the Dick Ellis Experts

[www.onwisconsinoutdoors.com](http://www.onwisconsinoutdoors.com)

December 21, 2009

## OPEN HEARING ON DEER MANAGEMENT

Madison, Wisconsin - December 17, 2009

*Unedited presentation by*

### **Greg "Kaz" Kazmierski, WI Hunters Rights Coalition (HRC)**

#### **HRC Calls for a Return to the 9-day Gun Season**

Today the WI Hunters Rights Coalition (HRC) released the recommendations they will take to the Joint Legislative hearing on Thurs. and offer to the Natural Resources Board (NRB) in January.

The centerpiece of the HRC recommendations call for a return to the Traditional 9-day deer gun season statewide including CWD zones and the elimination of Earn-a-Buck and additional herd control seasons for a period of 5 years. This will allow the SAK deer population model to work as it was designed.

Preliminary numbers from this year's 9-day gun season show a 30% decline in overall harvest from last year, but even more troubling is the decline in buck harvest to the lowest level since 1980. The buck harvest is the best indicator of population trends. In 1980 the population estimate after the hunt was 565,255 deer, more than 23% below the current statewide goal of 733,000. In 1980 the antlerless harvest was only 70,000 deer, gun and bow combined, this year's antlerless harvest may well double that of 1980 making matters even worse for next year.

The SAK audit, hunter observations and car kill data predicted

this collapse in the deer population. It was irresponsible of the Department and the NRB, not to err on the side of caution for the '09 season as hunters asked last April when hundreds gathered at the State Capitol. It is almost criminal though that they ignored the Legislature's request to suspend December hunts this year after the preliminary numbers were in. Preliminary harvest data last year compelled the HRC to call for a suspension of the December hunts in '08.

It may well take decades for deer populations to return especially in portions of the North where the state does not have the ability to manage wolf populations. This economic impact to a billion dollar industry will be felt for years to come.

Wisconsin's deer management program is like a three legged stool. To work it requires accurate population estimates, proper population goals and a season structure that works and is acceptable to hunters as well as other users and stakeholder groups. It is clear now all three legs are in need of repair.

Although it was not the choice of hunters to work on season structure first, the NRB chose to ignore the Legislatures request to address population goals and population

estimates. The HRC and other groups though worked extremely hard on the Earn-a-Buck Alternative Committee to develop a season package that would be acceptable to all stakeholders. The Department thwarted those efforts by overreaching with a season proposal nothing like the packages put forth by the committee, knowing full well their proposal did not meet the NRB mandate of acceptable to hunters.

The game has changed; people are looking for accountability with calls to replace the deer management team. There is not a single region of the state that did not show an alarming decline in buck harvest including the CWD units. Preliminary buck harvest data indicates most of the state may be well below goal. For over a decade the Department insisted on unpopular herd control methods and seasons creating deep division among user groups, and now it's clear, the deer population problem could have been solved by simply issuing adequate antlerless tags as prescribed in NR10 of Administrative Code.

#### **Coalition Recommendations**

**1. Bring in outside experts to recalculate current population estimates along with hunter and**

#### **hunting group involvement.**

To gain credibility with hunters, this must be done in a similar fashion to the recently completed bear study. It must be conducted by experts from outside the state and include involvement from the hunting community. It must be ongoing for a period of several years. With the recent windfall in P/R funds available to the state, we would hope this project would take precedence over other proposed studies.

#### **2. Require that calculated non-harvest related mortalities (predation, car kills, etc.) are subtracted from post-hunt calculations to determine final overwinter population.**

It was determined by the SAK audit that consistent over or underestimation of the percentage of non-harvest mortality could have long term consequences on the deer abundance estimates. Confidence in SAK outputs would greatly improve if non-harvest mortalities were transparent and also removed from overwinter population estimates.

**3. Eliminate all additional Herd Control seasons and EAB and return to a 9- day gun season for a period of 5 years statewide, including CWD management**

**zones, to allow the SAK formula the needed time to stabilize.**

Two consecutive years of dramatically falling buck harvest indicate population estimates are far below DNR estimates. The last year the gun season recorded a buck harvest of less than 90,000 deer was in 1980. The statewide post-hunt population in 1980 was 565,255 deer. This is 25% below current statewide population goals. SAK calculations require 5 year averages of consistent buck harvest. With inconsistent seasons and Earn-a-Buck, accurate population estimates are impossible. The dramatic decline in antlerless harvest in '09 indicates the deer aren't there and hunters are electing to forgo venison in the freezer and not shoot the few they see. This also led to the dismal Oct. harvest of 11,000 deer total including the CWD zones where hunters still had to qualify for a buck tag. This year's Oct. gun harvest was little more than archers harvested during the same 4-day period in '06 and '07. CWD units are also managed to goals and the dramatic decline in those units indicates the aerial survey model is also flawed and populations may already be at or below current goals. It is also demonstrated in historical harvest data that hunters can and will shoot adequate numbers of antlerless deer in a 9-day season if the deer are there and adequate tags are issued.

**4. For the initial 5 years, if a tool is needed to reduce populations in units still determined to be more than 20% over goal, the Department should issue free and/or \$2 Herd Control tags, including the Public/Private land tag proposal from EAB Alternative rule to minimize the risk of overharvest on public land.**

This provides hunters the tools to harvest antlerless deer where local populations may be abundant without forcing hunters to harvest antlerless deer in areas where local populations may be depleted. It will also limit tags on public land where hunters are less vested and less likely to make the assessment that populations are low. It is continually stated by the DNR that deer are not dispersed equally over the landscape so a one size fits all approach to address a few hot spot areas within a management unit also risks over harvest in many local areas where deer are less abundant. The key component of the record harvests of the last decade was the availability of free antlerless tags. The most successful harvest season was in 2000 when hunters were provided 2 free tags with the purchase of a license. With the 2

free tags, of the 528,494 deer harvested in the gun seasons, just fewer than 90% of them were harvested during the regular 9-day gun season.

**5. If further Herd Control methods are needed at the end of the 5 year term, before Earn-a-Buck and Herd Control Hunts are implemented, we recommend the Department look to the 2009 EAB Alternative Committee's recommendations that could be supported by all stakeholders.**

There were many good recommendations that were developed by the Earn-a-Buck Alternative Committee. Underestimation of the dismal results of this year's deer harvest by the DNR and overreaching with a rule package that most on the committee knew would not have hunter support may result in the committees work being shelved for some time since herd control appears not to be the issue. If the DNR is diligent about correcting population estimates, establishing goals at a level to provide good hunting as required by law and issues antlerless tags appropriately, additional herd control measures should not be necessary.

## **Goals**

**1. Determine deer goals for total square miles of area and not square miles of habitat.**

Most of the Deer Management units that are habitually over goal are units that have significant areas that are not currently defined as deer habitat. A timely example of non-habitat is corn fields. Yet, standing corn was one of the reasons stated for the harvest being down this year, the deer were in the corn. Many farmland areas have goals of 20 to 25 deer per sq. mile of defined habitat. If a unit is at 50% habitat it means that these units at goal should only have 10 to 12.5 deer per sq. mile of land area. Some units are only at 20% habitat or 4 to 5 deer per sq mile of land area. The biological carrying capacity of farmland areas is 80 to 100 deer per sq. mile. These goals are set at social carrying capacity, yet most farmers and landowners will never shoot their deer down to these low goals. A unit with a goal of 20 deer per sq. mi. of currently defined habitat and 50% deer habitat will produce at goal about 5 deer per year per square mile of total land area for harvest, or one deer for every 128 acres. If a land owner is paying recreational rate property taxes they expect to be able to harvest more than 1 deer per 128 acres. A sim-

ple solution to this would be to establish goals per sq. mi. of total land area, like virtually every other state, and the habitual over goal problem will be remedied.

**2. Establish deer population goals at a level capable of sustaining an annual total hunter harvest (all seasons, gun, bow, tribal, crop damage, etc.) of 400,000 deer plus the 15% wounding loss and the non-harvest mortality.**

It has been stated by the DNR that at current goal, hunters are expected to harvest about 270,000 to 290,000 deer. Since 1990 hunters have harvested over 400,000 deer annually with the exception of 4 years including this year which may end up just shy of 300,000. It is clear that this year's level falls short of what hunters consider good deer hunting. Hunters have demonstrated they are capable of harvesting in excess of 600,000 when deer are plentiful. To sustain a harvest of 400,000 deer and account for non-harvest mortalities the over winter goal needs to be at least between 1,000,000 to 1,200,000 deer over winter or just under 25 deer per sq. mi. of total land area, well within the biological carrying capacity of most of the state. For the last 10 years, DNR's population estimates have been within that range while car deer collisions and crop damage complaints declined since their peak in the 90's.

---

*Greg "Kaz" Kazmierski, Wisconsin Hunters Rights Coalition, Phone 262-547-0535,*