

# On Wisconsin Outdoors

With the Dick Ellis Experts

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December 21, 2009

## ON WISCONSIN OUTDOORS

### *The DNR deer count-off 300,000?*

By Dick Ellis

Because the following report on the five hour Open Hearing held in Madison Thursday, December 17, 2009 on Deer Management is restricted by newspaper space, the following unedited presentations by the following are available on our website at [www.onwisconsinoutdoors.com](http://www.onwisconsinoutdoors.com) or by clicking the links below:

- DNR presentation by Secretary Matt Frank
- Wisconsin Wildlife Federation by George Meyer
- Wisconsin Hunter's Rights Coalition by Greg Kazmierski
- Wisconsin Bow Hunters Association by Ron Kulas

Stating that the evidence points to current Wisconsin deer population estimates being off by up to 300,000 animals, Former DNR Secretary George Meyer and scores of other speakers at an overflowing Joint Senate and Assembly legislative committee open hearing expressed a loss of confidence in the state's deer management team Thursday in Madison. Although the general consensus among speakers representing numerous Wisconsin fish & wildlife organizations was that the DNR's sex-age-kill (SAK) formula of estimating deer numbers is sound when utilized as intended, most also said that state managers have not implemented the system correctly, over-harvesting does and exponentially multiplying a severe problem with each recent passing season.

Statewide the 2009 deer season saw the deer harvest decline 29 percent from 2008 and 51 percent from 2007. 195,000 deer were harvested this year, compared to 401,000 deer in 2007. All 72 Wisconsin counties experienced harvest declines this season with some northern counties suffering decreases of 50 to 59 percent.

"Having worked on deer management issues for the better part of three

decades, historically I have had a great deal of confidence in the deer herd population numbers estimated by the DNR," said Meyer, current board member of the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation. "In the last couple of years I have lost confidence in the accuracy of the deer herd predictions. While I am not a biologist and surely do not portray myself an expert, the evidence is leading me to believe that the deer population estimate is off by at least 200,000 to 300,000 deer."

Meyer said that the 2009 total harvest and buck harvest "takes us back" to 1980-81 levels when the DNR was estimating the over-winter deer population at around 600,000 deer. He sated also that frequent hunter comments regarding the lack of fawns in the field had factored in his belief that the population is drastically over-estimated.

"I would not be surprised if next year's harvest does not reach this year's 195,000 deer," Meyer said. "We may well have reached the statewide over winter goal of 737,000 deer. Earn a Buck is an extremely effective herd reduction tool. It is my belief that it has been overused and along with increased predation and



Some Wisconsin hunters had great seasons. Dan Hannan took this buck in Jackson County on Sunday afternoon of opening weekend after giving all his family members first choices of stands on private property. The buck had a 25-1/2 inch inside spread and green scored 153. "I feel privileged to have been in the same woods with a buck like that let alone get it," he said. "I feel very fortunate."

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—Former DNR Secretary George Meyer



A packed house of concerned hunters attended the Joint Committee Open Hearing on Deer Management in Madison on December 17. The five hour Hearing included presentations by DNR Secretary Matt Frank, his management team and representatives of numerous Wisconsin Fish & Wildlife organizations. (Dick Ellis)

weather related mortality has led to the major decline in the deer population."

The DNR was represented in the hearing by Secretary Matt Frank, Big Game Ecologist Keith Warnke and Wildlife Biologist Tom Hauge. Frank gave a four page presentation on Wisconsin's deer herd which included a focus on deer management units and populations goals. (Frank's unedited copy will be posted at [www.onwisconsinoutdoors.com](http://www.onwisconsinoutdoors.com)).

After offering many positives of Wisconsin deer hunting heritage including facts from the 2009 season, Frank said that there is no subject that generates more controversy or criticism than deer herd management. "That was true 50 years ago when the old Conservation Department was in charge and it will probably be true 50 years from today," Frank said. "People are passionate about their opinions. Our challenge is to have a good system in place for public input, and to make the best science-based decisions we can on how we manage the herd."

Frank said that understanding deer and how they interact with their ecosystem is a significant challenge. Areas of DNR focus, he said, include the impact of natural predators; wolves, bears and coyotes, in the ecosystem, and taking steps to improve the SAK population estimate model.

Specific to deer population goals, Frank said that the DNR remains committed to supporting Wisconsin's hunting traditions and managing for a healthy, sustainable and eco-

logically balanced deer populations. "In the early part of this decade the deer population reached unsustainable levels in much of the state," he said. "It's the department's job to bring populations down to the population goals approved through an extensive public process with ultimate review by the legislatures. There are many factors to consider when establishing deer goals-preserving Wisconsin great

deer hunting traditions for future generations, forest impacts, agricultural impacts, public safety as measured by car-deer collisions, preventing animal disease transmission, and others."

Senator Neal Kedzie told Frank that his office had coordinated an informal and non-scientific survey of Wisconsin hunters and had been overwhelmed with more than 8,400 responses over one week. The responses comprised 385 pages (single spaced 10-font) in a file Kedzie brought to the hearing. 70 percent of respondents blamed DNR management for a reduction in deer numbers to unsatisfactory levels and a decline in the overall satisfaction of the hunting experience.

Kedzie said that 40 percent of hunters responding were unsure if they would participate in the hunt next year and labeled that number very troubling. "What can the DNR do to turn this around and regain the hunter's confidence in less than one year?" said Kedzie, also referencing the tremendous economic impact the deer season brings to the state. "If we lose the Wisconsin deer hunter...we lose the war." Without hunters, there is no management."

Frank said that the DNR did listen to hunters concerns, and "without hunters, there is no management" but stated that the Department is directed by the legislature to factor in other concerns when setting deer management goals that include agriculture and forestry damage, and deer-car collision as well as hunt-

ing. He said he would not recommend removing those other factors from consideration in managing the herd. Some speakers took exception to the comment that the DNR does listen to hunters when both Frank and Warnke left the five hour meeting after their own presentation and prior to public feedback. Hauge remained throughout the entire hearing.

Former Secretary George Meyer said that for the SAK formula for estimating deer numbers requires five years of stability to be effective. "There isn't that stability right now," Meyer said. "The southern part of the state can rebound in two or three years (with does often dropping fawns or triplets) but I wouldn't want to say no herd reduction should be used five years out in case you do need it. That wouldn't be sound management. It will take four or five years to recover in the north.

Baiting and feeding were also briefly discussed with Secretary Frank expressing his wish to rekindle that discussion in the near future, in part because of the spread of deer diseases through saliva. The department would need an April 1 "drop-dead" date to implement any changes to the 2010 deer hunting seasons. *W*



Wisconsin hunter Kurt Kromm took this deer in southeast Wisconsin during the statewide four-day antlerless only special season December 13. Angry hunters are calling on the DNR to eliminate antlerless only hunts in the wake of a statewide 29 percent decline in deer harvest numbers from 2008 and 51 percent decline from 2007. (Dick Ellis)