

***Testimony for the PA House of Representatives
Game & Fisheries Committee Public Hearing on Deer
Management***

Coudersport PA
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Good evening. My name is Ned Karger and I am the Land Manager for the Kane Hardwood Division of Collins Pine Co. CPC owns and manages 118,000 acres of forest land in northwestern Pennsylvania. We are one of the largest private landowners in Pennsylvania with all of our properties open to the public at no charge and enrolled in the PGC Forest Game Cooperator program. The Forest Game Cooperator program is a cooperative agreement between landowners and the Game Commission. Landowners agree to keep their land open to the public and the PGC provides services such as signs, game law enforcement and seedlings for habitat improvement.

We work very well with Game Commission staff and Wildlife Conservation Officers in our area and they put in a tremendous amount of time and effort to make the program work. During the last few years there have been a number of vacancies in regional Wildlife Conservation Officer positions that have required the existing WCOs and deputies to expand their coverage areas. I have been told that the Game Commission is committed to refilling these positions from the recently graduated class from the Ross Leffler School of Conservation.

For many decades during the 20th century, Pennsylvania's deer herd was out of balance with their forested habitat. Often deer populations reached 40-80 per square mile and ate almost all available food in the forest understory. Preferred plants were almost eliminated including many desirable tree seedlings, wildflowers and rare plants. Populations of birds and animals which need low brush and cover were reduced. Foresters trying to encourage the germination and development of desirable tree seedlings saw them being browsed or killed before they could grow above the deer's reach. It was truly an unsustainable condition.

Many scientific studies documented these conditions. Multiple studies with deer exclosure fencing showed that over browsing by deer was the primary factor in regeneration failures and the elimination of many wildflowers and rare plants. Studies with controlled deer populations inside fences showed that when populations exceeded 20 deer per square mile in forested areas negative effects were evident. Populations of 10-20 deer per square mile had much less impact and forest regeneration, wildflowers and rare plants recovered and grew well. Subsequent studies in these areas showed increases in bird and mammal species which utilize the low, brushy cover for habitat.

In 2000 a group of public and private landowners, businesses and forest scientists formed the Kinzua Quality Deer Cooperative on 74,000 acres in northern McKean Co. This area included a section of the Allegheny National Forest, the Bradford Watershed and some large tracts of private forest land,

including two large tracts of Collins Pine Co. land. Intensive monitoring of vegetation, hunter educational efforts, deer population monitoring and deer check stations were all started and have continued for the last 13 years. The KQDC embraced the use of the Deer Management Assistance Program (DMAP) to bring the buck-doe ratio and deer habitat into a better balance. They also encourage antler restrictions and the retention of young bucks. Within the first few years the results were undeniable. Many more trophy bucks were being taken and harvested deer were larger and healthier. More does were producing twin offspring, an indication of improved doe health. Tree seedlings were being browsed less and wildflowers and other sensitive plants were beginning to increase. Hunters surveyed realized they would see fewer deer and chances to harvest a deer would be reduced but many said they would still return to the area for the chance to harvest bigger deer and larger racked bucks. This effort continues and many new scientific studies have been started on this landscape.

While it is impossible to replicate that level of scientific study and intensive monitoring everywhere in Pennsylvania, the lessons learned can be replicated. A better balance of deer populations with the available habitat can result in a healthier deer population and healthier habitat. This is certainly true in large forested conditions of Pennsylvania's northern tier. Other parts of the state have very different conditions. Some areas of the state have various mixtures of forest, agricultural land, suburban and urban conditions in the landscape. Many areas have unique mixtures of public and private lands and different mixes of land open to the public and posted. Each mix of habitat type presents slightly different deer management challenges and opportunities. The changes to traditional deer management strategies which have been established by the PA Game Commission over the last 10-12 years have improved their ability to match strategies with this variety of conditions across the state. I would like to comment on a few of the successful new strategies.

Wildlife Management Units or WMUs: The use of WMUs has replaced the old county based system for allocation of antlerless deer licenses. WMUs group areas of like habitat conditions instead of by political boundaries. For instance, McKean Co. includes parts of WMU 2F which includes the Allegheny National Forest and is dominated by public lands intermixed with private forest lands. Limited road systems can make hunter access difficult in many areas. Local residential populations are low and many hunters are non-local Pennsylvanians and out of state hunters.

McKean Co. includes part of WMU 3A which is primarily private lands with forest and some agricultural lands. These lands are generally more intensively managed and can support more deer per square mile than WMU 2F. There are more local residents generally spread out across the rural area but still many non-resident hunters. The public road network and smaller size of forested areas allows better hunter access.

McKean Co. also includes part of WMU 2G which is a heavily forested mixture of private and state owned forest lands with less agricultural land than

WMU 3A. The terrain is steeper and contains a different mix of forest tree species and less public roads. There are some concentrations of the local population but again many non-resident hunters. Forested habitats of WMU 2G cannot support as high of a deer population as other parts of the state.

The point is that the WMU system of antlerless license allocation is an improvement over the old county based system which could not take habitat, hunter access and other factors into account. The WMUs are larger and the deer population has been reduced to be more sustainable with the overall WMU conditions. Deer populations are not evenly distributed and local habitat conditions can vary across the WMUs. This brings me to the Deer Management Assistance Program (DMAP).

The DMAP system is one of the major innovations established by the Game Commission. DMAP allows landowners and managers to deal with deer populations and habitat conditions on their own lands in accordance with their individual management plans. Landowners and managers, both public and private, provide the habitat that support our wildlife populations and are the most knowledgeable about their lands. Many monitor the effects of deer browsing in accordance with their management objectives. They are in the best position to decide whether to utilize DMAP as a management tool to deal with the variety of conditions within WMUs.

I understand that some of you may have supported legislation to restrict the use of DMAP on some ownerships such as public land. We do not support that effort. The public agency staffs, including the DCNR have very good professionals who have developed excellent procedures and protocols for monitoring deer populations and impacts. They use DMAP judiciously and review their data annually to monitor progress toward their management plan goals. DMAP for use as a management tool should not be removed from their tool box by legislation. While my company keeps all of its land open to the public, some private land managers use hunting and recreational leases to manage public use. Currently those landowners are not eligible to utilize DMAP. We support the extension of DMAP to those landowners who are also providing habitat for wildlife so that they can better manage the impacts of deer populations.

Antler restrictions: One of the innovations in deer management implemented by the Game Commission was antler restrictions. While some hunters, including myself, were skeptical in the beginning, this has been a big success with high levels of support from hunters. Recent modifications to the rule which dealt with brow tines have been welcomed and only increased hunter support. As evidenced by the experiences on the KQDC, other Quality Deer Management properties and throughout the state, this change in hunting regulation has lead to more mature, larger bucks and better buck-doe ratios.

Expanded seasons and hunter opportunities: We support the Game Commission's efforts to expand hunting opportunities such as early traditional

and inline muzzleloader seasons, early senior and junior antlerless seasons and cross bow seasons. These non-traditional hunting opportunities are becoming increasingly popular. We also support the youth mentored hunting regulations. These efforts have expanded hunter opportunities and recruited new hunters, both residents and non-residents, to the sport.

Concurrent seasons: We support the change to concurrent seasons from the old system of separate antler and antlerless seasons. In today's world and the current economy, it is often difficult for hunters to find the time or bear the expense of hunting in split seasons. In areas like the northern tier where non-local and out of state hunters contribute to the local economies and are important components in reaching deer density goals, the flexibility of the concurrent season is important. In the northern tier many school districts are closed for the first day or two of rifle season. The full concurrent season gives a better opportunity for the youth hunters to harvest an antlerless deer. The full concurrent season also is less susceptible to short term weather events like rain days or heavy snows which could limit the opportunities to harvest antlerless deer and meet the Game Commission deer harvest goals. We realize that while the full concurrent season may require a slightly lower antlerless license allocation in some WMUs, the benefits stated above outweigh that concern.

Our data indicate that deer populations and deer browse impacts in our area dropped dramatically between 2002 and 2008 and have since been increasing. This is in line with Game Commission data although some of their monitoring metrics use five year rolling averages which are not as sensitive to shorter term changes. We believe the populations should be held at current levels and not permitted to return to the unsustainable, habitat damaging levels of 15-20 years ago. We encourage the Game Commission to continue with their innovative approach to deer management which has resulted in the improvements of the last 10-12 years.

Pennsylvania has a rich hunting tradition and an abundance of excellent habitat that supports many wildlife species including the white tail deer. The mature forests of the state are being harvested and successfully regenerating the forest will insure that the hunting and recreational opportunities will be available to future generations. Successful regeneration of forest stands provides early successional habitat (young forests) which has been declining across the state. This habitat is important for a number of species which have been declining over the last few decades such as the Golden Winged Warbler and the American Woodcock. This habitat is also important for our deer populations as a source of food and cover which is more abundant than in the mature forests.

We maintain a website to provide information on our company's DMAP and open land policies. We field many inquiries each year during the fall and winter. We have seen a trend over the last few years of more inquiries on locations of early successional habitat from woodcock and grouse hunters during both the fall and winter seasons. Many are traveling from outside the area and

the state to hunt. These hunters are buying PA hunting licenses and contributing to the local economy.

We understand that lower deer populations and mixtures of early successional stands with more mature forest stands create new and different challenges to deer hunters. Successful hunters have had to adapt to the changing conditions and have found that pre-season scouting and new hunting techniques can improve their chances of harvesting a deer. The old favorite hunting spot may not be able to support the high deer populations of the past and other areas may have more deer. The habitat just cannot support high deer populations everywhere and populations vary across the landscape. But the overall deer population is healthier and so is the habitat. Bucks are reaching maturity and carrying larger racks. Does are healthier and producing more fawns. Forest regeneration is improving. Wildflowers and rare plants are more common. Early successional habitats and its associated species are increasing. Ground and shrub nesting species have better habitat. Hunting opportunities are increasing during the concurrent rifle seasons and the non-traditional seasons.

While some hunters still remember fondly the days of seeing 50-100 deer in a day, many recognize the improvements in deer health, antler size, forest health, hunting opportunities and habitat for deer and a whole range of other important species. Some may also say that deer populations are unhuntable or that they are almost extinct. What they mean is conditions are different and deer hunting has definitely changed and deer populations are not consistently high across the landscape. I will leave you with some pictures which were taken here in Potter Co. last winter and published on a local website. They show 10-15 deer in a group occupying a small area. That is an unsustainable population which will have negative impacts on that particular area. We still have a lot of deer in Pennsylvania. But in most places they are in better balance with their habitat. We are seeing the benefits of healthier deer, healthier forests and healthier habitats for other species.

I would like to thank the committee for holding this hearing in the northern tier and listening to the various opinions on deer management which have serious impacts on the economy of the region, the future of our forests and the health of our deer and other wildlife populations.

Thank you.

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