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COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA
Pennsylvania Game Commission

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*"To manage all wild birds, mammals and their habitats
for current and future generations."*

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Chairman Causer and members of the House Game and Fisheries Committee, it is a pleasure to appear before you this evening and discuss the Deer Management Program of the Pennsylvania Game Commission.

In 2001, the Pennsylvania Game Commission invited a number of stakeholder groups to meet and discuss deer management and come up with a series of goals that should form the basis of our deer program.

From that discussion developed a program based upon five basic goals. The program strives to develop a healthy herd, a healthy habitat and an acceptable level of deer human conflicts. In addition to those initial three goals we have recently added two others which are providing recreational opportunity for our sportsmen and improving the information and education of our deer program.

The basic element of the deer program is to keep the deer herd in balance with the habitat available to it within the Wildlife Management Unit. In other words have a sustainable herd based on the conditions in the WMU. We have established specific measures for the first three goals and are confident on the sound science on which they are based.

The measurement for herd health consists of two factors. The first is disease. Is Chronic Wasting Disease or other diseases present? The second measure is the fawn to doe ratio. We look at the ratio of the harvest to see if there are any changes in the fawn to doe ratio. A change could indicate less fecundity or increased predation. We would then determine that cause. At present all the WMUs except two have good herd health. We have concerns in 2A and 5B where CWD has been detected. The population trends for the deer are increasing in four units, decreasing in one unit and stable in all the others.

The habitat health issue is measured by using the forest inventory sample of the U. S. Forest Service. We determine if there is sufficient regeneration occurring to have the forest replace itself. We measure seedlings and density to see the condition of the forest. It is then rated as poor, fair, or good. We then look at the browse rate from deer. We use a scale of one to five to see what the browse rate is for the WMU. We then look at the browse impact to see the effect of the browse on the regeneration. We have decision points along each of these evaluated areas. There are two WMUs that have good regeneration and the rest have fair regeneration. In all the WMUs the deer impact on regeneration is decreasing or stable. In the deer impact are only two WMUs have deer impact that is two high. The final measure is deer human conflict. We recently completed a survey of all citizens to determine how they feel about deer and the conflict they have with them. The survey was conducted by an outside company and had sample sizes large enough from each Wildlife Management Unit to have a strong confidence interval. At the statistical level the survey revealed that 54 percent said the deer herd was just right. 20 percent it was too high, 18 percent said it was too low and 8 percent said it did not know. By WMU only two of the 22 WMUs had a majority say that they felt the deer herd was too low.

What I have described up to this point is the first portion of the deer management process involving the staff of the Game Commission. What happens after staff has gathered the data is that we provide that information to our Board of Commissioners who are the ones responsible for making the decisions regarding which direction they want the herd to go. We provide them with the best information available so that they may make informed decisions on whether to allow the herd to increase, decrease or stay the same, based on the number of antlerless license they allocate within each WMU. Since 2005 when herd reduction ended, the Board has only voted to decrease the herd in the three metropolitan WMUs, and the rest of the state is seeing a herd that is stabilizing or increasing in some areas. Outside of the metropolitan areas, the number of antlerless licenses the Board issues today is nearly identical to the numbers that were issued in the 1990's.

In addition to stabilizing the number of antlerless licenses that are available, the Board has also responded to requests from those who wish to see a separate buck/ antlerless season, and in approximately half of the state we have moved to a split season for the first five days of the rifled deer season. We continue to monitor that aspect of the program to see if it is something that allows us to strike the balance of providing sound management while creating adequate recreational opportunities for our hunters.

Moving forward, a major concern for the future of the deer program is the discovery of Chronic Wasting Disease in the free ranging herd. We have established two Disease Management Areas. One is in the York and Adams County area as a result of a captive herd with CWD. The other is in Blair and Bedford County area. The later is the most problematic as around 112 cervid livestock operators have business in that area. This could pose a difficult situation with the movement of deer. This year we will increase surveillance by testing more deer to determine the prevalence of CWD. Our overall goal is to slow down the spread of the disease to other parts of the state.

Deer management has been a controversial issue for the last 100 years and I am sure it will continue to be so in the future. I have read quotes from each decade since 1920 saying there are too many deer and there are too few deer. We recognize that we will not be able to meet everyone's expectations when it comes to deer. Rather, our focus is on developing a plan that is scientifically based. I believe we have done so, as evidenced by the fact that lawsuits against the Commission have been unsuccessful and the program itself withstood the scrutiny of an audit directed by the Legislative Budget and Finance Commission. In addition to noting that our program is "at the forefront" when compared to our neighboring states the report concluded that "the scientific foundation of the PGC deer management system is sound."

I will be glad to take any questions at this time.