



Pennsylvania Federation of Sportsmen's Clubs

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Providing leadership and advocacy for the enhancement of our fish and wildlife resources for the benefit of all hunters, trappers, anglers and conservationists. Protecting our 2nd Amendment Rights.

HOUSE – GAME & FISHERIES COMMITTEE DEER MANAGEMENT HEARING March 19, 2014

Good morning Chairman Causer, Chairman Haluska and Members of the Committee. My name is Melody Schell, and I'm here today on behalf of the Pennsylvania Federation of Sportsmen's Clubs (PFSC). PFSC's membership is comprised of 200+ clubs, 5 statewide organizations, and individuals, representing more than 70,000 sportsmen and women.

Thank you for the invitation to provide testimony regarding deer management in Pennsylvania and several pieces of related legislation.

Deer management has always been a contentious issue in Pennsylvania. Balancing the herd to levels that would please the hunters, allow for healthy deer, quality habitat that can support healthy deer and a varied ecosystem, and avoid an over-abundance of deer-human conflict, is probably an impossible expectation.

In the late 90's and early 2000's, deer numbers in some parts of the state were so high, they were literally eating themselves out of house and home. Deer in many areas of the state were showing signs of poor health; habitat quality was poor and regeneration of trees and understory was non-existent; deer-human conflict was at unacceptable levels; and citizens were asking their legislators to "do something." Deer populations in some parts of Pennsylvania were clearly reaching the upper limits of the carrying capacities and in some instances had exceeded that value.

Due to pressure from farmers, land owners and timber companies, many in the legislature were demanding the Game Commission do something to address the over-abundant deer herd. For years, the commissioners refused to follow the advice of their biologists and reduce the deer herd. However, in 2005, the agency and commissioners took a bold step and introduced a herd reduction plan. Over the next several years, hunters did their part, and reduced the deer herd.

The majority of sportsmen understood the deer management plan was implemented to help reduce the rapidly growing herd. One that was destroying a sustainable habitat necessary to ensure its own future survival as well as that of other wildlife. One that we hunters were partly responsible for creating because we wanted and expected to see lots of deer, and because deer are such a resilient creature.

We have followed the issue closely over the years. Listening to the complaints of those not happy with the program, and listening to those who like seeing healthier deer and improving habitats and forestry. PFSC supported the program because we understood the need for a healthy deer herd the size that is in balance with the surrounding habitat; one that can be supported by that habitat without greatly infringing on it or wiping it out. We understood that the habitat recovery would not happen overnight, and a long-term commitment of reduced deer populations in some areas would be needed.

PFSC supports the concurrent seasons because they provide more opportunity to all hunters, especially our youth hunters and those with limited time off to hunt, and we support the antler restrictions to help protect more buck to bring the buck to doe ratio in line.

We can all pretty much agree that the deer numbers are down from where they were 10 years ago. And yes, some believe they are down too far in some areas, so they are asking for changes. A few think we should go back to the old way of doing things. Yet others believe that we need to stay on course with continued tweaking here and there. Some are concerned that the entire "program" will be thrown out because of the desire of some hunters to "see more deer".

PFSC has always supported science based wildlife management, not emotional or politically controlled wildlife management. We will usually give our wildlife managers (the biologists) the benefit of the doubt when it comes to their recommendations, if they can back it up with valid data. We do not believe they are our enemies, or that they are trying to sell the sportsmen down the river. This does not make us a "PGC Yes" group. We support a system where a group of our peers - commissioners who were appointed by the governor and confirmed by the senate - are the better choice for weighing the science with the social and economic impacts, making the decisions relating to wildlife management regulations. We do not support a system that allows legislators to make those decisions via legislation that is based on emotional or personal political agendas. Allowing any of these bills that are the subject of today's hearing move forward, would allow politics and emotion set precedence in how all wildlife management decisions are set, opening a Pandora's Box for future attacks on our proud outdoor heritage and wildlife resources.

Additionally, access to private land continues to be, and should be, of paramount importance to all sportsmen. The farming community as well as large timberland owners have been strongly supportive of herd reduction and associated programs such as DMAP. They have continued to provide public access to many sportsmen because they know that the "hunting tool" is the most economical solution to any deer management problems they are having. Even the DCNR – as a large public landowner – has increased efforts to make its lands more accessible to sportsmen. We believe the stewardship practices and desires of private landowners must be given significant consideration, sometimes more so than those who occasionally visit such lands for recreational purposes, so as to maintain that public access to thousands, if not millions, of acres of privately owned land.

While we do not support any of the following bills, specifically because we do not support wildlife management via legislation, I would like to share the results of a poll conducted recently with our members when asked their opinions on the "topics" of the legislation.

- 1) Excluding public lands from DMAP: 75% opposed - Most felt this was an important and necessary tool that needed to be available, especially in those areas with habitat regeneration problems.
- 2) Remove antler restrictions for seniors: 87% opposed – While I didn't ask their age, many of the respondents did inform me that they were seniors, and were appalled that it was believed they needed special privilege. One comment said, "As a senior hunter, age 72, I find this suggestion almost insulting. I have had well over 50 years of deer hunting, and have harvested more than my fair share of deer. If I can't count the points, then I will let it walk for a younger hunter, and I will wait for a doe."
- 3) 3-Day doe season following buck season: 99% opposed – Most comments reflected support for continued concurrent seasons where harvest was determined by the number of doe tags issued. It provides more opportunities, and weather conditions are not as much a limiting factor.

- 4) WMU's back to county units: 99% opposed – Most comments reflected support for current WMU's for ease of identifiable boundaries, larger areas available to hunt with one tag, and counties are not large enough areas for gathering quantifiable data.
- 5) Use Maximum Sustainable Yield method of management: 98% opposed – 2 of the comments from those who said they supported this, admitted that they really didn't understand what it meant. Comments from those opposed reflected the need for balancing the herd to allow for co-existence with other wildlife and limit deer-human conflicts.
- 6) Start rifle deer season on Saturday after Thanksgiving: 99% opposed – Some did not want to lose a day of small game hunting, but the majority just did not support the change in the current tradition...unless they had Sunday hunting. Then several said they would maybe consider it.
- 7) Do you support any efforts to implement wildlife management regulations via legislation: 100% opposition – All comments were “diametrically opposed,” to quote one responder.

Although these may appear to be turbulent times for both agencies and their respective Boards of Commissioners, the stellar accomplishments they have achieved over the past century should not be overlooked. They have done a yeoman's job of enhancing and protecting our natural resources and with severely limited financial resources.

We believe much of the current controversies (for lack of a better term) stem more from personality conflicts, power struggles and lack of sufficient knowledge of the issues at hand. Decisions are being based more on emotions than facts. That doesn't serve anyone well, neither the resources nor the residents of the Commonwealth. It is unnecessary and narrow minded to institute what we believe are legislative changes that will compromise our resources, our outdoor heritage and our rights, including our second amendment rights, in the future should these changes be implemented. Therefore we adamantly oppose any and all legislation that sets legislative mandates for wildlife management decisions, threatens the limited independence of our resource agencies, or merges the agencies, particularly a merger that would place them under DCNR.

In closing, as sportsmen, we recognize that one of the greatest benefits of our sport is the camaraderie that we share when afield. Whether it's been pheasant hunting with Ralph Owens, or fishing for walleye on a Lake Erie charter, we've certainly enjoyed ourselves afield in the company of Chairman Haluska. Although we didn't always agree on all the issues, your openness and accessibility to our members was always appreciated and it will be missed. We wish you well in your endeavors and hope you'll keep in touch.

Again, thank you, for the opportunity to present testimony at this hearing.