DECISION
AND
FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT: WHITE-TAILED DEER DAMAGE MANAGEMENT IN PENNSYLVANIA

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), Wildlife Services (WS) program completed an Environmental Assessment (EA) on alternatives for the protection of natural resources, agriculture, human safety, and property from damage and risks associated with deer in Pennsylvania (USDA 2015). The EA documents the need for action and assesses potential impacts on the human environment of three alternatives to address that need.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

The EA was made available for review and comment from May 3 to June 10, 2015. The documents were made available through a Notice of Availability (NOA) published in *The Patriot News* and sent to interested parties through the APHIS Stakeholder Registry. WS also published these documents on the program website. No comments were received. All correspondence on the EA is maintained at the WS State Office, P.O. Box 60827, Harrisburg, PA 17106-0827.

ISSUES ASSOCIATED WITH DEER DAMAGE MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

The EA and analyzed a range of management alternatives in context of issues relevant to the scope of the analysis including:

- Effects on white-tailed deer populations
- Effects on Non-target and other Wildlife Species, including Native Flora and Threatened and Endangered Species
- Effects on human health and safety

AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

Deer damage or threats of damage can occur statewide wherever deer are found. However, deer damage management would only be conducted by WS when requested by a landowner or manager and only on properties where a cooperative service agreement or other comparable document was signed between WS and a cooperating entity. Upon receiving a request for assistance, activities could be conducted on federal, state, tribal, municipal, and private properties. Areas where damage or threats of damage could occur include, but would not be limited to agricultural fields, vineyards, orchards, farms, industrial sites, natural resource areas, park lands, and historic sites; property in or adjacent to subdivisions, businesses, and industrial parks; timberlands, croplands, and pastures; public and private properties in rural/urban/suburban areas where deer cause damage to landscaping and natural resources, property, and are a threat to human safety through the spread of disease and vehicle collisions. The areas could also include

airports and military airbases where deer are a threat to human safety and to property; and areas where deer negatively affect wildlife, including T&E species.

DESCRIPTION OF THE ALTERNATIVES

The following three alternatives were developed to respond to the issues identified in Chapter 2 of the EA (USDA 2015). A detailed discussion of the effects of the alternatives on the issues is described in the EA under Chapter 4; below is a summary of the alternatives.

Alternative 1: Integrated Deer Damage Management Program (Proposed Action/No Action)

Under this alternative, WS would continue the current program that administers an Integrated Wildlife Damage Management (IWDM) approach to alleviate deer damage to agriculture, property, natural resources, human health, and human safety. An IWDM approach would be implemented on all private and public lands of Pennsylvania where a need exists, a request for assistance is received, and funding is available. An IWDM strategy would be recommended and used, encompassing the use of practical and effective methods of preventing or reducing damage while minimizing harmful effects of damage management measures on humans, other species, and the environment. Under this action, WS would provide technical assistance and operational damage management, including non-lethal and lethal management methods, by applying the WS Decision Model (Slate et al. 1992). When appropriate, habitat modifications, harassment, repellants, and physical exclusion could be recommended and utilized to reduce deer damage. In other situations, deer would be removed as humanely as possible, by sharpshooting or live-capture followed by euthanasia, under permits issued by the Pennsylvania Game Commission (PGC). In determining the damage management strategy, preference would be given to practical and effective non-lethal methods. However, non-lethal methods may not always be applied as a first response to each damage problem. The most appropriate response could often be a combination of non-lethal and lethal methods, or there could be instances where application of lethal methods alone would be the most appropriate strategy. All white-tailed deer damage management (WDDM) would be consistent with other uses of the area and would comply with appropriate federal, state, and local laws and necessary permits.

Alternative 2: Non-lethal Deer Damage Management Only by WS

This alternative would require WS to use and recommend non-lethal methods only to resolve all deer damage problems. Requests for information regarding lethal management approaches would be referred to the PGC, local animal control agencies, or private businesses or organizations. Persons experiencing deer damage could still resort to lethal methods or other methods not recommended by WS, use contractual services of private businesses that were available to them, or take no action. Property owners or managers may choose to implement WS' non-lethal recommendations on their own or with the assistance of WS, implement lethal methods on their own, or request assistance (non-lethal or lethal) from a private or public entity other than WS.

Alternative 3: No Deer Damage Management by WS

This alternative would eliminate WS involvement in all WDDM activities. WS would not provide operational WDDM or technical assistance, and requestors of WS services would have to conduct their own WDDM without WS input. Information on WDDM methods would still be available to producers and property owners through other sources such as the PGC, extension service offices, or pest control organizations. Persons experiencing deer damage could continue to resolve damage by employing those methods legally available. Lethal methods require permitting from the PGC.

CONSISTENCY

Wildlife damage management activities conducted in Pennsylvania are consistent with work plans, MOU's, and policies of WS, the PGC, and the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). Based on the provisions and protective measures established in the EA, WS concluded the proposed action would have no effect on any federally-listed species. WS also consulted with the PGC regarding potential risks to state-listed species proposed in the EA. The PGC concurred with WS' determination that the proposed action would not adversely impact populations of state-listed species.

MONITORING

The WS program will annually review its effects on deer populations and other species addressed in the EA to ensure those activities do not impact the viability of wildlife species. In addition, the EA will be reviewed each year to ensure that the analyses are sufficient.

CUMULATIVE IMPACTS OF THE PROPOSED ACTION

No significant cumulative environmental impacts were identified from any of the three alternatives, including the proposed action. Under the proposed action, the lethal removal of deer by WS would not have significant impacts on statewide deer populations when known sources of mortality were considered. No risk to public safety was identified when activities were provided and expected by requesting individuals under Alternatives 1 since only trained and experienced personnel would conduct and/or recommend damage management activities. There would be a slight increased risk to public safety when persons conduct their own activities under Alternative 3. However, under all of the alternatives, those risks would not be to the point that the effects would be significant. The analysis in the EA indicates that an integrated approach to managing damage and threats caused by deer would not result in significant cumulative effects on the quality of the human environment.

DECISION AND FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

I have carefully reviewed the EA prepared for this proposal and the input from the public involvement process. I find the proposed action alternative (Alternative 1) to be environmentally acceptable, addressing the issues and needs while balancing the environmental concerns of management agencies, landowners, advocacy groups, and the public. The analyses in the EA

adequately address the identified issues, which reasonably confirm that no significant impact, individually or cumulatively, to the quality of the human environment are likely to occur from the proposed action, nor does the proposed action constitute a major federal action. Therefore, the analysis in the EA does not warrant the completion of an EIS.

Based on the analyses in the EA, the need for action and the issues identified are best addressed by selecting Alternative 1 and applying the associated standard operating procedures. Alternative 1 successfully addresses (1) deer damage management using a combination of the most effective methods and does not adversely impact the environment, property, human health and safety, target species, and/or non-target species, including T&E species; (2) it offers the greatest chance of maximizing effectiveness and benefits to resource owners and managers; (3) it presents the greatest chance of maximizing net benefits while minimizing adverse effects to public health and safety; and (4) it offers a balanced approach to the issues of humaneness and aesthetics when all facets of those issues are considered. Further analysis would be triggered if changes occur that broaden the scope of damage management activities that affect the natural or human environment or from the issuance of new environmental regulations. Therefore, it is my decision to implement the proposed action/no action alternative (Alternative 1) as described in the EA.

Based on the analyses provided in the EA, there are no indications that the proposed action (Alternative 1) would have a significant impact, individually or cumulatively, on the quality of the human environment. I agree with this conclusion and therefore, find that an EIS should not be prepared. This determination is based on the following factors:

1. Deer damage management, as conducted by WS in the state, is not regional or national in scope.

2. The proposed action would pose minimal risk to public health and safety. Based on the analyses in the EA, the methods available would not adversely affect human safety based on their use patterns and standard operating procedures.

3. There are no unique characteristics such as prime farm lands, wetlands, wild and scenic areas, or ecologically critical areas that would be significantly affected. WS' standard operating procedures and adherence to applicable laws and regulations would further ensure that WS' activities do not harm the environment.

4. The effects on the quality of the human environment are not highly controversial. Although there is some opposition to deer damage management, this action is not highly controversial in terms of size, nature, or effect.

5. Based on the analysis documented in the EA and the accompanying administrative file, the effects of the proposed damage management program on the human environment would not be significant. The effects of the proposed activities are not highly uncertain and do not involve unique or unknown risks.

6. The proposed action would not establish a precedent for any future action with significant effects.

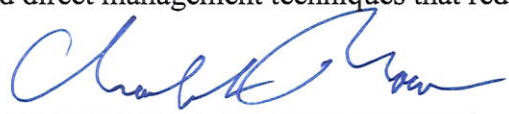
7. No significant cumulative effects were identified through the assessment. The EA analyzed cumulative effects on target and non-target species populations and concluded that such impacts were not significant for this or other anticipated actions to be implemented or planned.

8. The proposed activities would not affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, nor would they likely cause any loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.

9. WS has determined that the proposed program would not adversely affect any federally-listed T&E species currently listed in the state. In addition, WS has determined that the proposed activities would not adversely affect state-listed species.

10. The proposed action would comply with all applicable federal, state, and local laws.

The rationale for this decision is based on several considerations. This decision takes into account public comments, social/political and economic concerns, public health and safety, and the best available science. The foremost considerations are that: 1) deer damage management would only be conducted by WS at the request of landowners/managers, 2) management actions would be consistent with applicable laws, regulations, policies and orders, and 3) no significant effects to the environment were identified in the analysis. As a part of this Decision, the WS program in Pennsylvania would continue to provide effective and practical technical assistance and direct management techniques that reduce damage and threats of damage.



8/12/15

Charles S. Brown, Director-Eastern Region
USDA/APHIS/WS
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Date

LITERATURE CITED

Slate, D.A., R. Owens, G. Connolly, and G. Simmons. 1992. Decision making for wildlife damage management. Trans. N. A. Wildl. Nat. Res. Conf 57:51-62.

USDA (U.S. Department of Agriculture). 2015. Environmental Assessment: White-tailed Deer Damage Management in Pennsylvania. USDA APHIS WS, Harrisburg, PA.