

**DECISION
AND
FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT**

**ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT: THE MANAGEMENT OF WHITE-TAILED DEER
DAMAGE IN THE STATE OF GEORGIA**

**United States Department of Agriculture
Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service
Wildlife Services**

February 2008

I. Introduction

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), Wildlife Services (WS) program prepared an Environmental Assessment (EA) to analyze the potential impacts to the quality of the human environment from resolving white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*) damage related to the protection of property, agricultural commodities, natural resources, and human health and safety in Georgia (USDA 2002)¹. The EA documents the need for deer damage management in Georgia and assesses potential impacts on the human environment of four alternatives to address that need. WS' proposed action in the EA implements an integrated damage management program in Georgia to fully address the need to manage deer damage while minimizing impacts to the human environment.

The pre-decisional EA was made available to the public for review and comment through notices published in local media and through direct notification of interested parties. Comments from the public involvement process were reviewed for substantive issues and alternatives which were considered in developing the Decision for the EA. After consideration of the analysis contained in the pre-decisional EA and review of public comments, a Decision and Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) for the EA was issued on June 25, 2002. The Decision and FONSI selected the proposed action to implement an integrated damage management program using multiple methods to adequately address the need for deer damage management in Georgia.

This new Decision and summary report will analyze WS' deer damage management activities in Georgia since the 2002 Decision/FONSI was signed for the EA to: 1) facilitate planning and interagency coordination, 2) streamline program management, 3) ensure WS' activities remain within the scope of analyses contained in the EA, and 4) clearly communicate to the public the analysis of individual and cumulative impacts of the proposed action since 2002. This new Decision/FONSI ensures WS' actions comply with NEPA, with the Council on Environmental Quality (40 CFR 1500), and with APHIS' NEPA implementing regulations (7 CFR 372). All deer damage management activities, including disposal requirements, are conducted consistent with: 1) the Endangered Species Act of 1973, 2) Executive Order (EO) 12898², 3) EO 13045³, and 4) federal, state, and local laws, regulations, and policies.

¹ Copies of the EA and 2002 Decision/FONSI are available for review from the State Director, USDA/APHIS/WS School of Forestry and Natural Resources, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia 30602 or by visiting the APHIS website at http://www.aphis.usda.gov/wildlife_damage/nepa.shtml.

² Executive Order 12898 promotes the fair treatment of people of all races, income levels, and cultures with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.

³ Executive Order 13045 ensures the protection of children from environmental health and safety risks since children may suffer disproportionately from those risks.

WS is authorized by law to reduce damage caused by wildlife through the Act of March 2, 1931 (46 Stat. 1468; 7 U.S.C. 426-426b), as amended and the Act of December 22, 1987 (101 Stat. 1329-331, 7 U.S.C. 426c). Wildlife damage management is the alleviation of damage caused by or related to the presence of wildlife and is regarded as an integral part of wildlife management (The Wildlife Society 1992). WS uses an integrated wildlife damage management approach in which a combination of methods may be used or recommended to reduce damage (WS Directive 2.105). The goal of wildlife damage management conducted by WS is to respond to requests for assistance to manage damage and threats to human safety caused by wildlife. Integrated damage management strategies employed by WS to resolve requests for assistance are based on WS' Decision Model (Slate et al. 1992, USDA 1997, USDA 2002).

II. Monitoring

The WS program in Georgia annually reviews program activities to determine impacts on issues identified in the EA to ensure that program activities are within the scope of analysis contained in the EA. The annual monitoring reports document WS' activities while discussing any new information that becomes available since the completion of the EA and the last monitoring report. If WS' activities, as identified in the annual monitoring reports, are outside the scope of the analyses in the EA or if new issues are identified from available information, further analysis would occur and the EA would be supplemented to the degree as identified by those processes pursuant to NEPA or a notice of intent to prepare an EIS would occur.

WS will continue to provide the number of deer taken during WS' activities to the Georgia Department of Natural Resources (GDNR) to ensure the magnitude of take by WS is within allowable harvest levels in Georgia.

III. Relationship to Other Environmental Documents

WS' Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement: WS has developed a programmatic Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS)⁴ that addresses the need for wildlife damage management in the United States (USDA 1997). The FEIS contains detailed discussions of potential impacts to the human environment from wildlife damage management methods used by WS. The EA developed by WS for deer damage management activities in Georgia is tiered to WS' FEIS. Pertinent information available in the FEIS has been incorporated by reference into the EA and this Decision.

IV. Public Involvement

The pre-decisional EA was prepared and released to the public by a legal notice that was published in the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* on April 23, 2002. The public was allowed to review and provide comment on the pre-decisional EA during a 30-day comment period. The pre-decisional EA was also mailed directly to agencies, organizations, and individuals with probable interest in the proposed program. No comments were received on the pre-decisional EA during the 30-day comment period.

This new Decision along with the EA and the 2002 Decision/FONSI will be made available for public review and comment through a legal notice announcing a 30-day comment period. The legal notice will be published in the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* and posted on the APHIS website located at http://www.aphis.usda.gov/wildlife_damage/nepa.shtml. This new Decision will also be directly mailed to agencies, organizations, and individuals with probable interest in the proposed program. Comments received after publication of the legal notice notifying the public of this new Decision will be fully

⁴Copies of WS' programmatic FEIS are available from USDA/APHIS/WS Operational Support Staff, 4700 River Road, Unit 87, Riverdale, MD 20737-1234.

considered for new substantive issues and alternatives. Unless new substantial issues are brought to WS' attention, this new Decision will take effect upon the close of the comment period.

V. Affected Environment

The proposed action could be conducted on private, federal, state, tribal, and municipal lands in Georgia to protect agricultural commodities, natural resources, property, and public health and safety. The affected environment includes, but is not necessarily limited to, areas in and around agricultural areas, buildings and parks, industrial sites, urban/suburban woodlots, and rural areas wherever deer are found to be causing damage to resources or posing threats to human safety.

VI. Alternatives Analyzed in Detail

The following four alternatives were developed in response to the issues identified in the EA and through public involvement:

- Alternative 1 - Integrated deer damage management program (proposed action/no action)
- Alternative 2 - Non-lethal deer damage management only by WS
- Alternative 3 - Lethal deer damage management only by WS
- Alternative 4 - No deer damage management by WS

The EA contains a detailed description and discussion of the alternatives and the effects of the alternatives on the issues identified. Appendix B of the EA provides a description of the methods that could be used or recommended by WS under each of the alternatives. WS has reviewed the alternatives analyzed and determined the analyses in the EA are still appropriate for those alternatives.

VII. Alternatives considered but not analyzed in detail

The following alternatives were considered but not analyzed in detail:

- Live trap and relocation
- Population stabilization through birth control

A complete evaluation and discussion of the alternatives not considered in detail can be found in the EA along with the rationale. WS has reviewed the alternatives analyzed but not in detail and determined the analyses in the EA are still appropriate for those alternatives considered.

VIII. Summary of WS' Deer Damage Management Activities

WS continued to provide both technical assistance and direct damage management as part of an integrated damage management approach to preventing and resolving damage caused by deer in Georgia from federal Fiscal Year (FY)⁵ 2003 through FY 2007. Technical assistance was provided to cooperators through the dissemination of information regarding damage management techniques to prevent damage, methods demonstrations, and through site visits. Through technical assistance, WS' made recommendations on the appropriate methods available for use that a requestor can employ to resolve damage or reduce threats without WS' direct involvement.

Operational assistance occurs when WS' is directly involved with employing methods to resolve, alleviate, or reduce threats associated with deer. As directed by the selected alternative, WS' applies multiple

⁵The federal fiscal year begins on October 1 and ends on September 30 the following year.

methods as part of an integrated damage management program to resolve requests for assistance. WS' technical assistance and direct operational programs are discussed in detail in the EA (USDA 2002) along with WS' programmatic FEIS (USDA 1997). WS' activities from FY 2003 through FY 2007 are summarized below:

WS' Deer Damage Management Activities in Georgia during FY 2003

Most requests for assistance received by WS in FY 2003 involved deer damage to more than one resource concurrently. For example, deer at an airport can pose a threat to human safety as well as pose a threat to property from damages that could occur to aircraft from striking deer. WS' responded to four requests for assistance that involved agricultural resources in FY 2003. Deer often feed on agricultural crops with significant damage occurring when deer densities are locally high. WS' also responded to requests to reduce threats to property in FY 2003, mainly from the potential damage caused by vehicles striking deer on roads. WS' conducted six projects in FY 2003 to manage damage to property in Georgia. Landscaping damage and damage to botanical gardens were the two most common resource types damaged by deer in FY 2003. Damage to natural resources was also resolved or prevented by WS in FY 2003. WS conducted two projects to alleviate or prevent deer damage to natural resources. When deer densities are high, natural resource areas, such as parks, can become overgrazed.

WS also reduced threats to human safety from deer striking aircraft at airports and military bases in FY 2003. WS conducted two separate projects to remove deer at airports which reduced threats to aircraft from potentially striking deer. In total 297, deer were lethally removed by WS in FY 2003 to resolve or prevent damage to resources in Georgia.

WS' Deer Damage Management Activities in FY 2004

Similar to FY 2003, WS continued to receive requests for assistance that involved deer damage or threats of damage to multiple resources in FY 2004, such as deer posing a strike threat to aircraft which raises concerns for human safety. WS continued to provide technical assistance in FY 2004 through recommendations and disseminating information to those requesting assistance on managing damage or threats of damage caused by deer.

Deer damage management activities in FY 2004 were conducted during five projects to prevent damage or reduce damage to agricultural resources, such as commercial tree seedlings. WS also conducted eight projects to protect property, such as reducing threats of vehicles colliding with deer. The most requests for assistance were received for the reduction in damage to natural resources in FY 2004. A total of seven projects were conducted by WS to reduce or prevent damage to natural resources, primarily to reduce high deer densities in parks and other forest resources where deer can damage trees and other vegetation from excessive browsing. Requests for assistance were also received to reduce threats associated with the potential for aircraft to strike deer that can result in severe damage to the aircraft and threaten passenger safety. WS conducted two projects in FY 2004 that involved the removal of deer to reduce threats to aircraft. A total of 506 deer were taken by WS in FY 2004, and most were taken to reduce damage or prevent damage to more than one resource.

WS' Deer Damage Management Activities in FY 2005

WS' continued to implement a deer damage management program in FY 2005 using multiple methods in an integrated approach that was adaptive to each damage situation. WS conducted four projects in FY 2005 to manage damage to agricultural resources after receiving requests for assistance. WS also continued to recommend damage management methods that could be employed by the cooperator to

prevent future damage. Damage to agricultural resources was reported for agricultural research plots and commercial tree seedlings in FY 2005. Requests for assistance to resolve deer damage to property continued in FY 2005. WS conducted six projects to reduce or prevent damage to property in FY 2005. Similar to FY 2003, deer damage to landscaping plants and botanical gardens was reported in FY 2005. WS' also provided direct operational activities and technical assistance to reduce threats of vehicles striking deer in areas with high deer densities. Similar to FY 2004, WS received the most requests for assistance to prevent or reduce damage to natural resources in FY 2005. A total of ten projects were conducted that involved technical assistance on preventing damage to natural resources in FY 2005. The reduction of threats to aircraft from deer strikes continued in FY 2005 with WS conducting three projects that involved technical assistance to airports on threat identification and threat reduction methods. In total, 480 deer were taken in FY 2005 with 441 taken to reduce damage or threats of damage to multiple resources.

WS' Deer Damage Management Activities in FY 2006

In FY 2006, WS' conducted seven damage management activities to reduce damage or prevent damage to property and natural resources. Deer were taken as part of an integrated approach that involved technical assistance and direct operational assistance in which non-lethal methods were recommended for use and lethal methods were employed by WS. Similar to previous years, requests were received to reduce or prevent deer damage to landscaping plants, botanical gardens and to reduce threats of vehicle collisions with deer in areas where deer densities are high, primarily in urban environments.

WS' continue to provide assistance to airports in Georgia in FY 2006. WS' conducted five projects at separate locations in FY 2006 to reduce threats of damage to aircraft. WS also provided technical assistance to airport personnel on the identification of wildlife attractants and hazards associated with wildlife at airports. A total of 270 deer were taken in FY 2007 as part of an integrated approach to reducing damage that involved recommending non-lethal and lethal methods to reduce damage or threats of damage.

WS' Deer Damage Management Activities in FY 2007

Similar to previous years, WS' damage management activities conducted in FY 2007 often resulted in the protection of multiple resources. WS responded to 11 requests for assistance to manage damage to property in FY 2007. As part of an integrated approach, WS continued to provide technical assistance to requestors by disseminating information on preventing damage and making recommendations on available methods. Assistance with five incidents involving damage or threats of damage to natural resources were received in FY 2007. WS' continued to provide technical assistance to airports in Georgia in FY 2007. Technical assistance projects involved the identification of wildlife hazards, assisting with wildlife identification, and identifying potential wildlife attractors to airport properties. WS' provided direct operational assistance at five separate airports in FY 2007 in which 20 deer were taken to reduce threats of aircraft striking deer. In total, 391 deer were taken in FY 2007 to reduce damage or prevent damage to several types of resources.

IX. Major Issues

The EA describes the alternatives considered and evaluates the identified issues. The following issues were identified as important to the scope of the analysis (40 CFR 1508.25):

Issue 1 - Effects on White-tailed Deer Populations

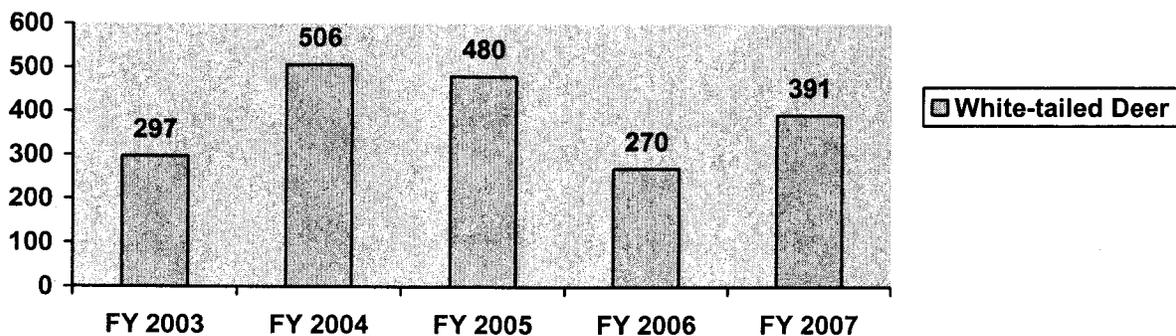
Under WS' current deer damage management program, WS incorporates non-lethal and lethal methods in an integrated approach in which all or a combination of methods may be employed to resolve a request for assistance. WS recommends both non-lethal and lethal methods to interested individuals, as governed by federal, state, and local laws and regulations. Non-lethal methods can disperse or otherwise make an area unattractive to deer causing damage thereby, reducing the presence of deer at the site and potentially the immediate area around the site where non-lethal methods are employed.

Lethal methods would be employed to take an individual deer or a group of deer responsible for causing damage or threatening human safety. The use of lethal methods would therefore result in local reductions of deer in the area where damage or threats were occurring. The number of deer removed from the population using lethal methods under the proposed action would be dependent on the number of requests for assistance received, the number of deer involved with the associated damage or threat, and the efficacy of methods employed. The EA concluded that WS' activities when conducted within the scope analyzed would not adversely impact deer populations in Georgia.

The GDNR, the agency with authority for management of resident wildlife species in Georgia, including deer, estimates the statewide deer population to be in excess of 1 million deer. Deer management units are used to set goals for the state's deer herd in 9 units composed of groups of similar adjacent counties. One of the goals of the GDNR is to reduce the deer herd size in 5 of those 9 management units and stabilize populations in 4 units (Georgia Deer Management Plan 2005).

WS' annual take of deer to reduce or prevent deer damage in Georgia since FY 2003 are shown in Figure 1. Analysis in the EA determined that take of up to 1,000 deer annually by WS would not adversely impact deer populations in Georgia (USDA 2002) which the GDNR concurred with (D. Forster, GDNR, letter to D. Hall, WS, February 11, 2002). WS' annual take of deer to reduce or prevent damage has not exceeded 1,000 deer in any given FY with the highest number taken being 506 deer in FY 2004. Since FY 2003, the WS program in Georgia has removed a total of 1,944 deer to alleviate damage problems or prevent damage from occurring. The number of deer taken by WS annually has been within the estimated level of lethal take analyzed in the EA.

Figure 1 - Deer Take by WS from FY 2003 through FY 2007.



As shown in Table 1 and Figure 1, the highest number of deer taken by WS occurred in FY 2004 and represented 0.04% of the estimated deer population in Georgia for 2004 and 0.10% of the deer harvested during the regulated harvest season that year. The GDNR also issues depredation permits to those producers experiencing damage to agricultural resources caused by deer. Therefore, deer taken under depredation permits in Georgia are monitored and considered as part of deer management goals for the State. It is also estimated that 43,000 deer die annually due to deer-vehicle accidents. Based on WS' limited take of deer annually to reduce or prevent deer damage and WS' continued coordination with the

GDNR to ensure WS' take of deer is considered as part of deer management goals, WS' deer damage management activities are not having an adverse impact on deer populations in Georgia. Likewise, WS' annual take has no adverse impacts on the ability of those interested in harvesting deer during the regulated season in Georgia based on the limited magnitude of take that occurs by WS annually.

Table 1 – Magnitude of take by WS in Georgia to reduce or prevent damage caused by white-tailed deer.

Year ^a	GA Deer Population	Hunter Harvest ^b	Depredation Take ^c	WS' Take ^d	WS % take of total population	WS % take of deer harvest
2003	1,200,000	317,337	7,914	297	0.02%	0.09%
2004	1,200,000	484,000	7,914	506	0.04%	0.10%
2005	1,200,000	348,760	7,914	480	0.04%	0.14%
2006	1,100,000	318,808	7,914	270	0.02%	0.09%
2007	1,000,000	319,377	7,914	391	0.04%	0.12%

^aListed by calendar year

^bFigures from the GA Deer Harvest Summary reports from 2003 through 2007 (GDNR 2007).

^cEstimates of depredation take

^dFigures reported by federal fiscal year

WS' will continue to coordinate deer damage management activities with the GDNR to ensure WS' annual take does not adversely impact deer populations in Georgia. Based on coordination with GDNR and WS' limited annual take, the effects of WS' white-tailed deer damage management activities on the statewide deer population are expected to remain insignificant.

Issue 2 - Effects on Plants and Other Wildlife Species, including T&E Species

The issue of non-target species, including T&E species, arises from the use of non-lethal and lethal methods identified in the alternatives. The use of non-lethal and lethal methods has the potential to inadvertently disperse, capture, or kill non-target wildlife. WS' minimization measures and SOPs are designed to reduce the effects of deer damage management activities on non-target species' populations. To reduce the risks of adverse affects to non-target wildlife, WS selects damage management methods that are as target-selective as possible or applies such methods in ways to reduce the likelihood of capturing non-target species. Before initiating management activities, WS also selects locations which are extensively used by the target species and uses baits or lures which are preferred by those species. Despite WS' best efforts to minimize non-target take during program activities, the potential for non-target take exists when applying both non-lethal and lethal methods to manage damage or reduce threats to safety.

Non-lethal methods have the potential to cause adverse affects on non-targets primarily through exclusionary, harassment, and dispersal techniques. Any exclusionary device erected to prevent access of target species also potentially excludes species that are not the primary reason the exclusion was erected. Therefore, non-target species excluded from areas may potentially be adversely impacted if the area excluded is large enough. The use of auditory and visual dispersal methods used to reduce damage or threats caused by target species are also likely to disperse non-targets in the immediate area the methods are employed. Therefore, non-targets may be dispersed from an area while employing non-lethal dispersal techniques. However, like target species, dispersal of non-target species during application of non-lethal methods to disperse target species is expected to be temporary with target and non-target species returning after the cessation of dispersal methods.

The lethal take of non-targets from using those methods described in the EA is unlikely with take never reaching a magnitude that a negative impact on populations would occur. Any potential non-targets captured using non-lethal methods are handled in such a manner as to ensure the survivability of the animal if released. The potential adverse affects associated with non-lethal methods are negligible and, in

the case of exclusion and harassment methods, often temporary. The use of firearms is virtually 100% selective for target species since animals are identified prior to application; therefore no adverse impacts are anticipated from use of this method.

While every precaution is taken to safeguard against taking non-targets during operational use of methods and techniques for resolving damage and reducing threats caused by wildlife, the use of such methods can result in the incidental take of unintended species. Those occurrences are minimal and should not affect the overall populations of any species. The EA concluded that there would be no probable effects on other wildlife species when conducting deer damage management activities. Since FY 2003, no non-target species have been taken by WS during deer management activities. WS' did not employ methods to manage damage or prevent damage caused by deer that would cause any secondary hazards to wildlife species. Therefore, no non-target species have been adversely affected by WS' actions since the completion of the EA.

WS' has reviewed the current list of threatened and endangered species in Georgia provided by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). Six additional species have been added to the list of threatened and endangered species in Georgia since the completion of the EA. Those include the Eskimo curlew (*Numenius borealis*), roseate tern (*Sterna dougallii*), cylindrical lioplax (*Lioplax cyclostomaformis*), oyster mussel (*Epioblasma capsaeformis*), smalltooth sawfish (*Pristis Pectinata*), and the gray wolf (*Canis lupus*). The Eskimo curlew, cylindrical lioplax, oyster mussel, and the gray wolf have been extirpated from Georgia with no known populations currently existing in the state. For the roseate tern and smalltooth sawfish, methods used by WS' for deer damage management activities are not those that would result in the take of either of those two species. Therefore, after review of the methods discussed in Appendix B of the EA and program activities under the proposed action, WS has determine that activities conducted pursuant to the scope of the EA will have no effect on those species listed since the completion of the EA including any designated critical habitats. No take of threatened or endangered species has occurred during WS' activities to reduce or prevent deer damage in Georgia. Thus, WS' determination of not likely to adversely affect is still valid and appropriate for the proposed action for those species identified in the EA. As discussed in the EA, the USFWS has concurred with WS' determination for those threatened and endangered species addressed in the EA.

Analyses in the EA concluded that the cumulative impacts on non-target species is biologically insignificant to nonexistent and that WS' activities would not adversely affect the viability of any wildlife species populations from WS' deer damage management activities. Program activities and their potential impacts on non-target wildlife populations and T&E species have not changed from those analyzed in the EA. The effects on this issue are expected to remain insignificant.

Issue 3 - Effects on Human and Pet Health and Safety

The EA concluded that the effects of WS' deer damage management activities when conducted within the scope analyzed would have no adverse impact on human safety or pet safety. WS' implementation of the proposed action from FY 2003 through FY 2007 did not result in any adverse impacts to human or pet safety. The methods available for use to manage damage caused by deer in Georgia remain as addressed in the EA. Therefore, the potential impacts of program activities on human health and safety have not changed from those analyzed in the EA. Impacts of the program on this issue are expected to remain insignificant.

Issue 4 - Humaneness of Methods to be Used

As discussed in the EA, humaneness, in part, appears to be a person's perception of harm or pain inflicted

on an animal. People may perceive the humaneness of an action differently. The challenge in coping with this issue is how to achieve the least amount of animal suffering within the constraints imposed by current technology and funding.

Some individuals believe any use of lethal methods to resolve damage associated with wildlife is inhumane because the resulting fate is the death of the animal. Others believe that certain lethal methods can lead to a humane death. Others believe most non-lethal methods of capturing wildlife to be humane because the animal is generally unharmed and alive. Still others believe that any disruption in the behavior of wildlife is inhumane. With the multitude of attitudes on the meaning of humaneness, the analyses must consider the most effective way to address damage and threats caused by wildlife in a humane manner. WS is challenged with conducting activities and employing methods that are perceived to be humane while assisting those persons requesting assistance to manage damage and threats associated with wildlife. The goal of WS is to use methods as humanely as possible to effectively resolve requests for assistance to reduce damage and threats to human safety. WS continues to evaluate methods and activities to minimize the potential pain and suffering of those methods addressed when attempting to resolve requests for assistance.

As mentioned previously, some methods have been stereotyped as "humane" or "inhumane". However, many "humane" methods can be inhumane if not used appropriately. For instance, a cage trap is generally considered by most members of the public as "humane". Yet, without proper care, live-captured wildlife in a cage trap can be treated inhumanely if not attended to appropriately.

Therefore, WS' mission is to effectively address requests for assistance using methods in the most humane way possible that minimizes the stress and pain of the animal. WS' personnel are experienced and professional in their use of management methods. When employing methods to resolve damage to resources or threats to human safety, methods are applied as humanely as possible. Methods used in deer damage management activities in Georgia since the completion of the EA and their potential impacts on humaneness and animal welfare have not changed from those analyzed in the EA. No new methods were identified in this report that would alter the analysis contained in the EA on the issue of method humaneness. Therefore, the analyses of the humaneness of methods used by WS to manage damage and threats caused by deer have not changed from those analyzed in the EA.

Issue 5 - Effects on Aesthetic Values

As described in the EA, WS would employ methods when requested that would result in the dispersal, exclusion, or removal of individuals or small groups of deer to resolve damage and threats. In some instances where deer are excluded, dispersed, or removed, the ability of interested persons to observe and enjoy those deer will likely temporarily decline. However, the deer populations in those areas will likely increase upon cessation of damage management activities.

Even the use of exclusionary devices can lead to dispersal of deer if the resource being damaged was acting as an attractant. Thus, once the attractant has been removed or made unavailable, deer will likely disperse to other areas where resources are more vulnerable.

The use of lethal methods would result in temporary declines in local populations resulting from the removal of target deer to resolve requests for assistance. WS' goal is to respond to requests for assistance and to manage those deer responsible for the resulting damage. Therefore, the ability to view and enjoy deer in Georgia will still remain if a reasonable effort is made to locate deer outside the area in which damage management activities occurred.

The EA concluded the effects on aesthetics would be variable depending on the stakeholders' values towards wildlife. Program activities and potential impacts on human affectionate bonds with individual deer and aesthetics have not changed from those analyzed in the EA.

Issue 6 - Effects on Regulated White-tailed Deer Hunting

The EA concluded that the effects of WS' deer damage management activities on this issue would be insignificant. As noted in Table 1, WS' annual take of deer has not exceeded 0.04% of the estimated deer population in Georgia in any given year nor has WS' take exceeded 0.14% of the deer harvested in Georgia in any year. WS' activities are coordinated with the GDNR to ensure WS' annual take does not exceed a level where a decline in the deer population would occur due to cumulative impacts from harvest, damage management activities, and other sources of mortality. WS' limited take of deer in Georgia is not occurring at a magnitude that would adversely affect the ability of those interested to harvest deer in the State. Program activities and their potential impacts on statewide deer populations have not changed from those analyzed in the EA. The effects on this issue are expected to remain insignificant.

X. Environmental Consequences

WS has reviewed the EA and has determined that the environmental impacts on the quality of the human environment from activities conducted pursuant to the EA will continue to be insignificant, and that no substantive changes in the analysis are necessary at this time. From FY 2003 through FY 2007, the level of WS' annual take of deer in Georgia falls within the scope of analysis provided in the EA. Any changes in the scope, methods, or a change in environmental rules or regulations may trigger additional analyses.

XI. Decision and Rationale

I have carefully reviewed the EA, the comments received during the public involvement process, the 2002 Decision/FONSI and the information provided in this new Decision document. I find the proposed program 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 addresses the identified issues which reasonably confirm that no significant impact, individually or cumulatively, to wildlife populations or the quality of the human environment are likely to occur from the proposed action, nor does the proposed action constitute a major federal action that would warrant the development of an Environment Impact Statement (EIS). Therefore, the analysis in the EA remains valid and does not warrant the completion of an EIS.

Based on the EA, the issues identified are best addressed by selecting Alternative 1 (Proposed Action/No Action) and applying the associated mitigation measures discussed in Chapter 3 of the EA. Alternative 1 successfully addresses (1) deer damage management using a combination of the most effective methods and does not adversely impact the environment, property, and/or non-target species, including threatened and endangered species; (2) it offers the greatest chance at maximizing effectiveness and benefits to resource owners and managers while minimizing cumulative impacts on the quality of the human environment that might result from the program's effect on target and non-target species populations; (3) it presents the greatest chance of maximizing net benefits while minimizing adverse impacts 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 deer damage management activities, that affect the natural or human environment, or from the issuance of new environmental regulations.

The rationale for my 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 will only be conducted by WS at the request of landowners/managers, 2) management actions are consistent with applicable laws, regulations, policies and orders, and 3) no adverse impacts to the environment were identified in the analysis. As a part of this Decision, the WS program in Georgia will continue to provide effective and practical technical assistance and direct management techniques that reduce damage.

The WS program in Georgia will implement the proposed action in compliance with all applicable standard operating procedures described in Chapter 3 of the EA. This new Decision will take effect 30 days after publication of a legal notice making the EA, the 2002 Decision/FONSI, and this Decision available to the public for review and comment if no substantive issues or alternatives are identified during the public comment period. New issues or alternatives raised after publication of public notices will be fully considered to determine whether the EA and this Decision should be revisited and, if appropriate, revised, or if a Notice of Intent to prepare an EIS should be issued.

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

The analyses provided in the EA, the 2002 Decision/FONSI, and this Decision document indicates that there will not be a significant impact, individually or cumulatively, on the quality of the human environment as a result of the proposed action. 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 in Georgia, is not regional or national in scope.
2. The proposed action will not have an impact on unique characteristics of areas such as historical or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecological critical areas.
3. The proposed action will not significantly affect public health and safety.
4. The effects on the quality of the human environment are not highly controversial. Although there is opposition to government-sponsored wildlife damage management, this action in Georgia is not controversial in relation to size, nature, or effects.
5. Standard operating procedures adopted as part of the proposed action lessen risks to the public and prevents adverse effects on the human environment while reducing uncertainty and risks.
6. The proposed action does not establish precedence for future actions with significant effects. This action would not set precedent for additional WS' damage management that may be implemented or planned in the Georgia.
7. The number of animals taken (both target and non-target) annually would be very small in comparison to total populations. Adverse effects on wildlife or wildlife habitats would be minimal.
8. Deer damage management would not affect cultural or historic resources. The proposed action does not affect districts, sites, highways, structures or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, nor would it cause a loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.
9. An evaluation of the proposed action and its effects on state and federally listed T&E species

determined that no significant adverse effects would occur to those species. The proposed action complies fully with the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended.

10. This action would be in compliance with federal, state, and local laws or requirements for damage management and environmental protection.

11. No significant cumulative effects were identified by this assessment or other actions implemented or planned within the area.

For additional information concerning this decision, contact State Director, USDA-APHIS-WS, School of Forestry and Natural Resources, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia 30602.



Charles S. Brown, Eastern Regional Director
USDA/APHIS/WS
Raleigh, NC

2/7/08
Date

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