

September 21, 2010

Honorable Chris Christie
Governor, State of New Jersey
PO Box 001
Trenton, NJ 08625

Dear Governor Christie:

We are writing as a coalition of stewards of New Jersey's natural heritage. We are non-profit groups, farmers, foresters, naturalists, gardeners, nurserymen, and sportsmen conservationists. Our work improves habitat for New Jersey's wide range of plant and animal species, enables residents to experience both the common and uncommon as they explore the State's natural places, and restores the function of the ecosystems which sustain us.

We are writing to offer our assistance with an urgent but remediable problem that is degrading our forests and farms and reducing their ecological quality and productivity: the severe overpopulation of white-tailed deer.

The effects of deer overabundance are destroying the capacity of our forests to produce the next generation of trees, and jeopardizing the many benefits we receive from healthy, functioning ecosystems. Exotic plant invasions, agricultural losses, incidences of Lyme disease, and automobile accidents are all negative effects caused by deer overabundance.

White-tailed deer were historically balanced in our state's ecosystems by natural forces. However, our modern landscape consists of fragmented forests and lacks abundant natural predators such as wolves and cougars. This has allowed deer, which prefer forest edges, to become vastly more numerous than before (pre-1492). Collectively, humans have created this problem and inherited the difficult responsibility of managing the deer herd to restore ecological balance.

Deer seriously degrade forests and other wild habitats by browsing more plant matter than can effectively regenerate. Fully 40% of New Jersey's native flora is ranked as imperiled in some way. The invasion of non-native plants, most of which are not eaten by deer or other wildlife, is a direct consequence of the suppression of native plant regeneration by an overabundant deer herd. The resulting impoverishment of our plant communities is leading to decreased populations of birds and other wildlife. Degraded forests are also impaired in their ability to sequester carbon, absorb rainfall, and offset global climate change.

There are economic costs to our working forests and farms in addition to the ecological damage suffered due to the overabundant deer problem. Many foresters are unable to regenerate oaks and other valuable timber species. Areas that should regenerate trees after timber harvests or stand improvement are becoming tortured tangles of invasive vines and brambles. New Jersey farmers face millions of dollars of crop losses annually due to deer herbivory.

New Jersey sportsmen want an opportunity to hunt superior deer that thrive in better balance with the carrying capacity of the available habitat. The present demographics of the deer population are such that the herd is overwhelmingly juvenile, and the sex ratio is skewed strongly towards females. A reduced population with fewer does would be composed of healthier, larger animals, including a greater percentage of mature adult bucks.

Deer overabundance also fuels two human health crises. Ever-increasing numbers of automobile accidents are caused by white-tailed deer. In 2008, 15,000 accidents with deer were reported in New Jersey, causing an estimated \$37.5 million dollars in damage. New scientific studies link the incidence of Lyme disease with the distribution of white-tailed deer, one of the primary hosts of the disease-carrying deer tick.

We urge immediate and concerted action to manage the New Jersey deer herd to bring it into balance with our natural habitats and human landscapes. Current deer management practices have not been effective in safeguarding human health and the health of our natural communities.

We recommend that several practical measures be taken immediately. Furthermore, we offer our collective skills in helping to bring these recommendations to fruition.

Improving access for hunters:

- We feel that incomplete hunting access has hampered existing efforts to control the deer population and improved access is required.
- Large preserved properties owned and managed by non-profit organizations should be made accessible to appropriate deer management programs. All public and non-profit land management organizations should be strongly encouraged to prepare and implement deer management plans. The signatories to this letter, including the non-profit land conservation organizations, recognize this responsibility and stand ready to become active partners in this effort.
- Active devotion to deer management should be one of the criteria under which private landowners with Forest Stewardship plans qualify for differential tax assessment.

Legislative and programmatic reforms:

- Existing programs such as the Community-Based Deer Management Program, Deer Management Assistance Program, and depredation permits should be expanded and facilitated. A depredation permit for ecological values, forest regeneration, and endangered species conservation should be made available to managers of wild lands.
- Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative funds should be utilized to enhance NJ Division of Fish and Wildlife efforts to manage deer population numbers for greater forest health.
- The Fish and Game Council should determine necessary Game Code changes to facilitate deer herd reduction. These could include:
 - Moving the six-day firearm season earlier to coincide with the peak of the rut.
 - Restructuring permit fees to encourage antlerless harvest
 - Implementing Quality Deer Management principles to insure a smaller herd comprised of larger, healthier individuals
 - Allowing unlimited antlerless harvest in all zones

- The non-profit organization Hunters Helping The Hungry should be fully funded and enabled in order to supply venison to the needy on a statewide basis. This existing program allows hunters to harvest more deer while benefitting the neediest.

The overabundance of white-tailed deer in New Jersey is causing radically negative effects to our natural heritage, agricultural economy, and human health and safety. This crisis calls for new thinking and collective action. Present management practices have not brought the deer herd into balance with ecological, economic and social standards. We are committed to helping to develop the solutions that will ensure a healthy ecosystem and protect our critical natural resources.

We look forward to scheduling a meeting with you or your representative(s) to discuss how we can move forward in partnership to address this problem plaguing our landscape. Kelly Mooij, Director of Government Relations, NJ Audubon, will call to arrange a meeting after October 11th, 2010, or she can be contacted at 609 577 1434.

Sincerely,

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cc: Honorable Richard Bagger, Chief of Staff
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Honorable Douglas H. Fisher, Secretary, NJ Department of Agriculture
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Dave Chanda, Director, Division of Fish and Wildlife
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Tricia Caliguire, Policy Advisor to the Governor
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