

FACT SHEET

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Timber & Timber Harvesting in West Virginia

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Forest Management and the White-Tailed Deer

The white-tailed deer is the nation's most dangerous animal and an unsuspected financial burden to all citizens. The white-tailed deer and the West Virginia citizenry can be likened to an abused wife who continues to live with her spouse. Both the wife and the citizenry know the next episode may kill them, but they both, for some reason, continue to accept the punishment.

White-tailed deer annually cause thousands of injuries, millions in damages, an annual average of at least 120 known deaths from car crashes and Ehrlichiosis, Lyme Disease & Babesiosis (diseases carried by deer ticks). It's also probable that other late night car accidents and driver deaths, cause unknown, are caused by drivers swerving to miss deer.

The average deer-car collision, according to an Associated Press article in 2001 cost about \$4,500. This included car repair, medical bills and missed work. The WV DNR reported nearly 15,000 car-deer accidents on state highways in 1997, 13,000 in 1998, 16,000 in 1999, 14,000 in 2,000 and 19,000 in 2001. These figures are probably only for major highways where DOT employees picked them up. There were a few thousand others left along rural roads and still others did damage to cars, but died later (uncounted) in the woods. The 5-year average, 15,400, at \$4,500 is \$69,300,000 or a \$277.20 subsidy per hunter per year or \$319.35 subsidy per legal deer kill (217,000 in 2001). Who paid the subsidy? We did, you and me, through higher insurance, through DOT wages for clearing carcasses from highways (partially reimbursed by DNR), through the loss of tree and understory plant reproduction in our forests, through the loss of ornamental plants from our yards, through the disappearance of rare and endangered species and through the death of loved ones.

In 2002, an insurance institute said 1.8 million deer were killed nationwide on the highways. As driving constantly increases, this carnage will also rise. A 1995 study at Utah State University found 29,000 people were injured and 211 were killed. This would be a conservative \$1.8 billion in repairs and a death rate that exceeds the nation's average for bus, plane and train travel taken together.

The Erie Insurance group keeps records. In West Virginia, 45% of its comprehensive claims on car insurance are deer-caused, averaging \$1,770 for vehicle repairs alone.

Deer have been a serious problem for timberland owners for years. Too many deer mean too few young trees. Favorite commercial trees for food include ash, aspen, basswood, beech, birch, black locust, cucumber, dogwood, elm, hemlock, hickory, sugar maple, red, white and chestnut oaks, white and pitch pine, and yellow poplar, among others. If food is scarce, red maple and black cherry are eaten.

In a fenced woodland study, where the deer were maintained at 20 per square mile, such preferred food plants as yellow poplar, white ash, hemlock, oak and aspen were entirely eliminated. Deer also browse on rhododendron, mountain laurel, azaleas, blackberries, blueberries, raspberries, hazelnut, roses, witchhazel and a variety of ferns, some common, some rare. They love ginseng, lady slippers, trilliums, and most other herbaceous plants. The most beautiful lady slipper in the state, the white or showy ladies slipper, so rare and beautiful that even professional botanists were known to keep its colonies secret from one another, has been almost totally destroyed.

After studying deer in enclosures, the U. S. Forest Service in 1984 reported that the number of deer that can live in a forest stand without doing damage to be 17 deer per square mile. Another Pennsylvania study, reported in 1994, indicated the average number of animals in over-wintering white-tail deer populations should not exceed 21 per square mile.

Trees are West Virginia's No. 1 cash crop, yet, in 2000, when a bill was introduced in the Legislature to mandate DNR to reduce the deer population to an average of 30 per square mile, it failed miserably. The Legislators and special interest environmental groups either did not comprehend or do not care that the future ecological diversity of the state is at risk. At the time, the average deer per square mile in Braxton County was 71, Calhoun 72, Doddridge 93, Gilmer 84, Jackson 72, Lewis 92, Tyler 84, Wirt 78, Putnam 75, Mason 76, Ritchie 92, and Ohio 70.

More and more citizens are asking if they have a right to manage the overabundant deer herd on their land in the face of the game manager's failure. They worry about the loss of loved ones through crashes, the lowered agricultural crop production, about future recreation and aesthetics for their grandchildren, the loss overall of at least (as shown in a 1992 research paper reporting on a 10-year study by G. W. Winter) 80% in diversity, 8% forbs and 14% songbirds, and the threat of them or their children contracting disease from the deer ticks dropped in their lawns as the deer nonchalantly move in to graze the ornamentals they have in their landscaping.

What about future timber losses? The average acre of well stocked timberland in West Virginia produces about 200 board feet per year. At an average price of \$300 per thousand board feet, this is an annual loss of \$60 per acre. If deer browsing has retarded the growth by 20 years, about one-fourth of a rotation, it will cost the timberland owner \$1,200 per acre during his lifetime plus the property tax he has had to pay even though

the production was reduced. D. David Marquis, a research forester for the U. S. Forest Service, published that the damage was about \$13 per acre in Pennsylvania, but his work was conducted nearly three decades ago when inflation had not taken its toll and timber prices were much lower.

Can the deer herd be managed? Sure it can. But it's like killing weeds, sentiment can't be allowed to intrude. Deer multiply rapidly and there are few predators. The older does produce the most fawns and the average age of does killed in West Virginia is around three years. This means about 1.8 fawns per doe per year. One report mentioned there were 909,415 deer in the State in 1997. If 50% were does, about 454,707, the fawn production that year was 818,473. If one-third died of natural causes (272,824), 13,000 were killed by cars, 200,000 were killed by hunters, and 10% (81,847) were lost to poachers and unknown causes, the increase still would have been 241,802 or 26% more than the herd that started the year. The herd would have passed one million easily by years end.. Years ago an outdoor writer performed a set of similar calculations. At the time, the size of the herd was said to be about 450,000. In a few years, his figures showed the herd had passed one million animals. Not so, said the wildlife biologists, there were only a few more than 700,000 deer in the herd. So, he began anew. In a few years his figures again showed one million in the herd. Not so said the officials. The "official" figure released in 1997 was 909,415. If so, the current population is about 1.5 million or some 76 per square mile when it should be about 332,000 or 17 per square mile. It's time for timberland and landowner relief.

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