



The Izaak Walton League of America

Defenders of Soil, Air, Woods, Waters, and Wildlife

April 15, 2024

Re: SD IWLA Comments on Draft Deer Action Plan

South Dakota Game, Fish, and Parks Department
523 East Capitol Avenue
Pierre, SD 57501

The South Dakota Division of the Izaak Walton League of America appreciates the opportunity to comment on the Draft South Dakota White-tailed and Mule Deer Action Plan. The plan will guide deer management for 2024-2028. Many members of the Division, as well as thousands of other South Dakotans, enjoy deer hunting.

This action plan will attempt to provide sustainable numbers of both deer species and their habitat. The plan states deer populations should correspond with human needs, land use and carrying capacity. The plan will be evaluated every four years and updated as needed.

The Division requests your consideration of our comments on the following topics:

Disease Monitoring

The Division is concerned about the diseases impacting deer populations in South Dakota. We're especially troubled by the continuing spread of Chronic Wasting Disease. We consider CWD to be the biggest threat to deer, and deer hunting, in the nation today. We urge GFP to continue to inform hunters on what they must do to stop the spread of this always fatal disease.

Epizootic Hemorrhagic and Blue Tongue cause localized losses of deer in South Dakota. Hot, dry conditions increase midge populations and can result in higher incidents of these diseases. We support removing all leftover tags in the affected units and reducing future license allocations in disease impacted areas. We also support continuing a hunter's ability to return a license before the season if he or she feels that disease has negatively affected the opportunity to harvest a deer.

Working with Landowners

The Division supports cooperative partnerships with private landowners on deer management. Landowners can experience crop and other damage. We support the use of loaner panels, other fencing, and depredation hunts - when needed - to protect livestock food sources. We appreciate GFP's attempts to balance deer hunting opportunities with landowner tolerance of the impacts deer can have on private land and property.

Habitat Management

Abundant high-quality habitat, on private and public land, will reduce deer damage, especially during severe winters. The ongoing conversion of grassland, wetland, and woody habitat further exacerbates deer damage to private property across the state.

Deer, and other wildlife, must have readily available food sources and thermal cover to survive what can be harsh winter conditions. Well-designed and placed food plots can provide a viable winter food source for deer and other wildlife and will help decrease deer depredation.

Objective 1

The Division supports an acceptable deer population in every management unit. This includes increasing deer numbers in units that are below management objectives. We favor surveying landowners, hunters, and the public on deer populations and management needs. We support surveys that assess populations, and impacts of disease, drought, habitat loss, and severe winter conditions.

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This states that GFP will access deer-vehicle collision data provided by the South Dakota Department of Transportation to evaluate deer trends and coordinate mitigation strategies. The Division asks how the deer-vehicle collision information is collected. Does the information also include the many “unreported” deer-vehicle collisions? We believe deer-vehicle collision data should be considered as a management factor in all management units.

Objective 2

We agree with efforts to maximize hunting opportunities and simplify license regulations. We also support managing mule deer populations according to the habitat available and increasing mule deer numbers in all units that are below management objectives.

The Divisions asks how is the recently adopted license draw system working? Is it producing the results that were hoped for? Is the new system putting more hunters in the field as predicted? Prior to the change, all special buck tags were sold. The last few years there have been special buck tags left over. In addition, in the first draw, a hunter is only allowed two choices. This change has left many doe tags unallocated while all buck tags are sold. How is this impacting herd management?

Objective 3

We support collaborating with the landowners experiencing deer depredation and encourage their enrollment in the Walk-In Area, Controlled Hunting Access, or the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP). All these programs allow free public hunting access and expanded hunting opportunities while helping landowners address depredation issues on their land.

Free public access to high-quality habitat is key. If the average hunter cannot find access to hunt deer, they will stop applying for licenses and even quit hunting. This could explain some of the tag situations we cited above, we hope this isn't the case. But if it is, in the future, hunting and hunter harvest, could become a less meaningful tool in deer herd management.

Objective 4

The Division supports working with landowners and public land managers to create, enhance, restore, and protect deer habitat. This includes enhancing high-quality woody habitats on private and public lands. We support striving for at least 10 cooperative riparian habitat development or restoration projects, and at least 5 hardwood release projects in the Black Hills. We also support

enrolling at least 1,100 Food Plot Program cooperators with seed mixes for east and west river and the restoration or establishment of grassland and wetland habitats.

Objective 5

We support leasing an additional 5,000 acres of private land for deer hunting annually through the James River Watershed and Big Sioux River Watershed CREP, Controlled Hunting Access, and the Walk-in Area programs. Voluntary enrollment by landowners in these programs will provide the average South Dakotan places to hunt and will help obtain the goal of the R3 Initiative, to Recruit, Retain, and Reactivate more hunters in the state.

Summary

The Division recognizes the difficulty in balancing the need of deer management for landowners, hunters, and the public and trying to keep all interests happy. Future management decisions must consider landowner tolerance along with the tradition and the tremendous economic impact deer hunting has to the state and local economies. We urge continued and expanded communication with hunters, conservation, and ag groups on deer management objectives.

The South Dakota Division of the Izaak Walton League of America thanks you for the opportunity to comment on the Draft South Dakota White-tailed and Mule Deer Action Plan and for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,



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