



A Position Statement of the Michigan Society of American Foresters White-tailed Deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*)

Position:

The Michigan Society of American Foresters advocates the sustainable use and management of all Michigan forest resources for the good of society. Forest management has a direct effect on deer habitat and excessive deer populations affect how forests can be managed. White-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*) populations must be low enough to allow for the regeneration of forests and the development of desired plant communities and wildlife habitats.

Issues & Background:

- Free-ranging white-tailed deer are a public resource owned by the people of the State of Michigan and managed by the Department of Natural Resources under the authority of the Michigan legislature.
- The Michigan Natural Resources Commission Policy 2007 on Deer Management, issued April 14, 1994, states:

The Department's goal is to manage the deer herd using management practices based on scientific research to:

Maintain healthy animals and keep the deer populations within limits dictated by the carrying capacity of the range and by its effect on native plant communities, agricultural, horticultural, and silvicultural crops and public safety.

Maintain an active public information program designed to acquaint the public with the methods of deer management and the conditions needed to maintain a healthy, vigorous herd.

- Research in Wisconsin and other states indicates deer populations exceeding 10-15 deer per square mile can affect forest sustainability and vegetation diversity in many forest types.
- Silvicultural practices, especially in hardwood systems, are often modified away from optimal standards to protect seedlings from deer browsing.
- Heavy deer browsing can harm the diversity of plants and animals. The field experience of many foresters indicates that such deer browse damage is significant in some parts of Michigan.
- Deer population and habitat condition data, and research from Michigan and elsewhere, indicate that deer population densities are too high in some parts of the state to sustain healthy habitats for deer and other species.
- Deer overabundance could impact the forest certification status of both public and private forest lands.

- Deer hunters are management partners and recreational deer hunting is a critical management tool that must be part of any solution.
- High deer densities contribute to car-deer collisions and the spread of certain diseases.

Recommendations:

- State-wide research and research-based deer population and habitat quality assessments and goals are needed in Michigan, including effects on forest management.
- A lack of site-specific research, however, should not prevent decisions to reduce deer populations in areas where unacceptable ecological impacts are occurring, as recognized by local resource managers and landowners.
- Policies, programs, and practices that encourage increased deer population should be reviewed against forest sustainability goals.
- Innovative deer-population control methods should be considered, especially where damage from deer is known and where current hunting strategies are ineffective.
- Additional education efforts are needed, especially for hunters and small forest landowners, to help the public understand the ecological consequences and tradeoffs of managing for increasing deer numbers
- Non-hunting funding sources should be explored for supporting statewide wildlife management.

Discussion:

Many issues of habitat management, deer population management, and natural resource management are highly contentious. Many challenges lie in funding, management philosophy, public outreach, and the application and implementation of the results of scientific research. Michigan is not alone in this situation. The stakes for current and future generations are high. Charting alternative courses will require the best resources which biological, social, and economic sciences can offer. The existing process for managing the white-tailed deer resource must be modified to allow for the input of all segments of the public. Affected publics must have ownership in the process. A degree of failure and learning must be expected and accepted, but the status quo is neither sustainable nor desirable. On-going dialogue about - and action on - these issues should be a high priority in the management of Michigan's natural resources.

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A position adopted by the Executive Team of the Michigan Society of American Foresters on 7 November 2006. Revised and adopted on 30 April 2013 and 29 May 2017. This Position Statement will expire after five years unless revised, extended, or withdrawn.

The Michigan Society of American Foresters is the scientific and educational association of professional foresters, including consultants, researchers, professors, students, and employees of public agencies and private firms. The Mission of SAF is to advance the science, technology, education and practice of professional forestry to benefit current and future generations.