

RESOLUTION #2

AGRICULTURE AND DEER DAMAGE

For many years, the agricultural community has made known to the Division of Fish, Game and Wildlife (F,G&W) the extent of the problem that deer and other wildlife pose to agriculture. Each year New Jersey farmers are experiencing increasing losses to grain, nursery stock, fruits, vegetables and field crops. Economic losses to Garden State farmers caused by excessive numbers of deer are a crisis threatening the very existence of some agricultural operations.

The Cook College Center for Wildlife Damage Control 1998 study indicates that deer-inflicted crop damage is costing many individual farmers tens of thousands of dollars in lost annual income. The study reported overall crop loss caused by deer estimated by those farmers who responded at between \$5 and \$10 million. Industry wide, agriculture estimates between \$15-30 million of income lost through crop damage, reduced harvests and loss of potential sales which are (Erectly related to wildlife damage. These disastrous losses have caused some farmers to stop farming and many others to abandon tillable fields or to cease growing their preferred crops. At a time when the preservation of farmland is a major statewide initiative, many farmers are unable to make a profit because of the states excessive deer population.

Deer are a natural resource owned by the public yet excessive deer populations cause a variety of losses. Farmers are not the only victims of the state's excessive deer population. Significant financial losses suffered by homeowners and businesses from landscape vegetation destroyed or damaged by deer are widespread and growing. Deer are seriously reducing forest regeneration and biological diversity as well. In rural and suburban areas the motoring public's safety and auto insurance coverage are also adversely impacted by automobile accidents caused by deer. In 1996, reporting services of the New Jersey Department of Banking and Insurance indicated claims paid from losses involving motor vehicle accidents with deer was approximately \$20 million. Because of the impact of deer damage to all segments of the public, part of the solution requires public involvement and funding of programs dealing with deer management and control.

The agricultural community can no longer tolerate the level of economic losses created by excessive deer populations and the burden placed on farmers to deal with deer depredation issues. The agricultural community must be the driving force for a prompt overall resolution of the deer problem. The extent of the deer damage brings to question whether the established deer management goals and formulas factor in all damages to agriculture, automobiles, forests and environmental degradation, and landscape materials of homeowners and businesses. The goals and formulas need revision to adequately reflect those factors. In addition, there is a need for revision of ordinances against the discharge of firearms and rules against hunting in some areas or distances from home, schools or businesses.

Deer harvest formulas for the Division of F,G&W must be revised to account more effectively for all damage from deer. Management goals must include an aggressive reduction of deer herds in designated deer management zones and site-specific farming areas by hunting or other means to reduce and prevent the unnecessary losses borne by agriculture. The goals must also include a reduction of deer herds in appropriate areas to reduce, overall losses from deer incurred by homeowners, businesses and the motoring public, and to reduce or prevent the environmental degradation and loss of regeneration of forests and woodlands and negative impacts upon other wildlife species.

The Farmers Feeding Excessive Amounts of Deer, a committee of the Hunterdon County Board of Agriculture, has taken the lead in creating an accelerated program proposal to deal with the deer damage crisis in their area. Located in a county which the Cook College Wildlife Damage study identified as one of the most seriously affected agricultural areas of the state, they have organized a cooperative effort among farmers, landowners, sportsmen, local legislators, and others and put forward a solid program to resolve their tremendous problem. We wholeheartedly support their overall efforts and commend them as a pilot program to lead the statewide agricultural effort in dealing with this major issue.

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, that we, the delegates to the 84th State Agricultural Convention, assembled in Atlantic City, New Jersey, on February 3, 1999, emphatically urge the New Jersey Division of Fish, Game and Wildlife to:

1. Immediately implement, as a priority, all actions necessary to aggressively reduce deer populations to minimal levels within one year in all areas incurring significant observable losses to agriculture, the natural environment landscape vegetation and motor vehicles attributed to deer.

2. Make restitution to farmers from appropriated funds for cost of materials and labor expended, for deer damage prevention.

3. Promptly complete the comprehensive analysis of the deer population, especially its impact on agriculture, and submit control recommendations to the Governor, in consultation with the, Department of Agriculture, as required by terms of the Governor's conditional veto of Assembly bills 1932 and 1933.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that we respectfully request the New Jersey Legislature to:

1. Immediately pass legislation authorizing and funding the Division of Fish, Game and Wildlife to make restitution to farmers for costs incurred for materials and labor used to prevent damage caused by deer.

2. Pass legislation to annually appropriate to the Department of Agriculture not less than \$500,000 to fund a statewide venison donation program whereby hunters and farmers can donate harvested deer to charitable feeding organizations.

3. Pass legislation which requires all publicly-owned lands purchased or operated with any public funds on which deer are found to develop a site-specific deer management plan, approved by the F,G&W and the Department of Agriculture, and which requires deer population reduction where economic or environmental damage is incurred in the area.

4. Enact legislation requiring insurance companies doing business in New Jersey to gather, maintain and submit annually to the Department of Insurance and Banking and F,G&W data on automobile accidents involving deer,

5. Evaluate and strengthen the Landowner Liability Law to provide additional protections for landowners, especially for those who allow essential hunting to control deer damage, and to encourage the opening of additional lands for that purpose,

6. Enact A-1441 which would allow farmers to use free permits on leased noncontiguous agricultural lands; and to amend current legislation dealing with the baiting of deer to permanently extend the baiting provision to the entire state.

7. We request that no action be taken for a period of one year on S-1378 and A-2549, legislation for general fee increases for F,G&W's licenses and permits. This will allow time to evaluate F,G&W's responsiveness to agriculture's deer damage issues.