

The Unified Sportsmen of Pennsylvania
March 19th Deer Management Hearing Testimony
by Randy Santucci

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Good morning Chairman Causer and Chairman Haluska, and to all committee members and legislators present. Recognition is also deserved for the residents in attendance who traveled from across the commonwealth. My name is Randy Santucci, President of The Unified Sportsmen of Pennsylvania. I would like to thank the committee for the invitation to testify today on behalf of our organization, and for all sportsmen that support our position regarding the downward trend of Pennsylvania deer hunting.

First, I would like to address HR576, changing the opening day of deer season from the Monday following Thanksgiving to the Saturday following Thanksgiving. We believe this resolution is not wanted and damaging to our deer hunting heritage. This change will be met with a cataclysmic divide between camp hunters and owners, and those that hunt from home. Representative Lucas has already identified responses to this idea are running around two thirds against this proposal. A Saturday opener would be the final nail in the coffin of traditional camp deer hunting in Pennsylvania, already deeply damaged from the excessive reduction of our deer herd which is being addressed here today by other legislation. The camp experience involves opening a closed cold camp, unloading equipment, supplies, addressing any problems encountered in this opening, such as water, furnace, or other utility issues. Saturday and Sunday include activities such as scouting, and accompanying a new or youth hunter, into the area he or she intends to hunt to choose a hunting spot. All this is done as part of hunt preparation, and also for safety reasons, we all will be venturing out before daylight on opening day. Does anyone here today honestly believe that all this can be accomplished in the dark, Friday evening after arriving at camp, then subsequently awakening at 5 AM to hunt Saturday?....The last and equally important aspect is the camaraderie of the camp experience, often encompassing family and friends. Hunters discuss strategies over dinner, and share experiences and stories around the camp fire. In short a Saturday opener will ruin, the traditional camp experience enjoyed by many hunters, and it will further contribute to the economic demise of northern tier rural businesses.

Moving forward, the following deer management related bills, directed at changing Pennsylvania's failed deer program, are not extreme or over-reaching in nature, nor conceptually new, in fact, they are no more than re-instituting proven parameters, that existed previously for decades and served our sportsmen and commonwealth very well.

HB1146 excluding seniors from antler restrictions, is strongly supported by Unified. Aging hunters have paid their dues over their lifetime as license buyers, also age brings with it hurdles not experienced by younger hunters. The challenges that senior hunters experience, include reduced stamina, limited travel distance and accessibility in the woods, and reduced acuteness of all senses. Health related concerns also limit exertion and cold temperature exposure, particularly to hunters with a history of heart problems. And perhaps the most directly related issue to this bill, is waning eyesight that hinders antler identification, particularly brow tine recognition. Frustration from antler identification is contributing to senior hunters hanging it up prematurely in disgust. Increasing their chance of success and enjoyment afield is inconsequential to any deer management program, and undeniably beneficial to senior hunters. There will be no negative impact to the herd, and this burdensome needless restriction is taken off the shoulders of our seniors. There is not always much we can do to extend involvement of our hunting patriarchs, but this certainly is one. It is difficult for me to understand how any sporting organization would not support this bill.

HB 870 removing utilization of the DMAP program from public lands, is a bill that was born from hunter outcry identifying public land deer densities which are dangerously low, and not sufficient to adequately support hunting activity. Although DMAP tags only make up a small portion of the total antler-less harvest, exerting additional hunting pressure in areas that have deer densities of possibly as low as 4 to 8 DPSM, contributes to the ongoing hunter disgust and departure from the sport. Game commission doe allocations already encompass public lands. DCNR recently revealed they employ zero individuals for improvement of habitat, food or cover for wildlife. With that aspect known. why are they in the deer reduction business rather than in the forestry habitat business to enhance all wildlife, especially game species that drive revenue thru hunting. They cannot have it both ways! They state their mission is not to manage deer, that is the responsibility of the PGC, as I was told by past DCNR secretary Richard Allen at a meeting where I disputed and proved his claim to be inaccurate that hunters still “flock” to the northern region. (please see letters provided) DCNR openly submits a plan to the PGC, accepts DMAP doe harvest tags, distributes and willingly uses the DMAP tool originally intended for private land owners, to reduce deer on public land for forest certification goals. DMAP is also being used and abused by private lease-owners. This legislation will align their mission as it was identified by Secretary Allan with reality. It also has been revealed the return of DMAP harvest reports, a mandatory requirement of receiving a tag, is running less than 48% as recently identified by PGC executive director Mr. Matt Hough, February 18th 2014, adding to the already questionable estimated PGC harvest numbers not accepted by most hunters.

HB 1370 Rep. Kula's explanation is spot on..... “For decades, this is how deer season was structured in Pennsylvania. The separation of two highly anticipated opening days - one for buck season and one for doe season – created an air of excitement, and maximized hunter participation. Unfortunately much of that excitement and participation has disappeared, along with the deer, due to the lumping together and overlap of those seasons by the Game Commission. Hunters who I have spoken with want to return to the years gone by where deer sightings were much more plentiful and doe season was its own special occasion. This legislation will do just that.” May I add to representative Kula's explanation, that currently PGC commissioner Tim Layton, understanding the benefits of the 3 day season, has instructed the deer staff to research the possibility of returning to the 3 day season following buck. Most hunters I encounter want the return of this season structure, and comments are now flooding the PGC comments link supporting commissioner Layton's proposal. Many claim the concurrent season structure benefits youth hunters, that claim is completely false, and I can support that position today with PGC data and in the graph presented, showing the accelerated steady decline in youth hunting license sales that were actually increasing prior to 2004. We have taken away most of the deer, and the thrill of identifying a buck, and reduced the experience to brown its down to our youth. The adrenaline rush is diminished, and what was jovially identified by hunters as buck fever is now sadly cured..... Additionally and equally important, were the degrading economic aspects of departing from this season structure. For one example, hunters would previously travel to their camps on the last Friday of the buck season, hunt buck Saturday, stay and patronize local businesses Sunday, and again experience excitement of a second first day..... Monday, into Tuesday and some even Wednesday. The last Saturday now is one and done for the very few that venture out. Legislating the return of this season structure will insure that future misguided philosophies of biologists with tunnel vision, not realizing the social economic consequences of their actions, will never again ruin the tried and true benefits of this season structure.

HB1724 Returning to county based management units. The most glaring benefit of this bill, is subdividing the state back to the previous 67 county units, as established in 1951 by the general assembly versus the now 23 units, which have been controversial since their creation in the late 1990's. In many areas these existing units are too big to manage, consisting of large tracts of varying habitats. Going back to county units certainly will not align perfectly with varying habitats, but answer this question, will not smaller unit sizes permit a more concise break down, to address our statewide diverse habitat? The answer is unquestionably yes. County treasurers will again become more involved resolving sportsmen problems with licensing, adding an additional benefit to hunters from the one dollar per license they now receive. A little known aspect in the development of these large units was the back door attempt, to remove county treasurers from the licensing process. The intent of 1724 as stated is very good, and with the addition of perhaps having the county unit boundaries being set up as the closest physical definitive marker such as roads or rivers, while maintaining majority land mass of the county, would be a suggested improvement to this bill. We must remember departure from this county unit structure was not from problems nor hunter request, it simply was part of the now identified poorly thought out wholesale change, implemented to enter into today's value laden deer program.

HB1726 This bill, MSY (Maximum Sustained Yield) is returning deer management to the successful program used for decades, that was instrumental in making Pennsylvania one of the top deer-hunting states in the nation. A little over 12 years ago, this traditional method was replaced by a subjective, value-laden deer management system, that has proven to be not only unsuccessful as "sound science" but also particularly detrimental to social and economic aspects previously linked to Pennsylvania deer hunting. It may be the best program on paper, but if it does not work for our state, then it must be eliminated. I used the term "sound science" because that term was continually used to describe this deer program.....The June 21st 2013 article in the Penn State News Publication authored by Jeff Mulhollem, quoted biologist Duane Diefenbach identifying the failures of this program after 13 years, may I quote.....*"In the last decade, deer impacts were reduced in many wildlife management units with lower deer populations,"* he said. *"Anecdotal observations suggest forest regeneration has improved, but large-scale, quantitative forest analysis and monitoring, has failed to indicate major changes in tree regeneration."* Another statement from that article *"The ability to explain the lack of change in tree regeneration despite deer impact reductions is critical to the Game Commission's deer-management program"* He went on to say *"The commission needs more information about how the measure of deer browsing impact as it is related to deer populations and forest regeneration."* If these biologists identify in this article deer reduction has not shown improving regeneration, no pun.... then aren't we barking up the wrong tree? Legislators please stop this madness. MSY is a deer management method to assign deer densities, balanced with specific habitat. The guiding parameters are now being put together into 1726 as an amendment based on decades of MSY data, overlaid with today's forest habitat. The agency has deliberately deceived the public avoiding accuracy regarding deer numbers and harvests. Before this program, hunters needed to identify whether deer harvests were on private or public lands. That was eliminated to further mask the low harvests on public land. At the April 11th 2011 Commissioner's meeting, Head PGC deer biologist Dr. Rosenberry curtly responded to Commissioner Tom Boop when Tom asked the question: approximately how many deer do we have in the commonwealth? and I quote t Dr. Rosenberry *" we do not need to know how many deer there are in the state, as long as we meet the goals of the deer management program...it doesn't matter"* That statement has resonated to align with where we stand today, too few deer, too many biologists and goals now being realized as not in the best interests for sportsmen or the commonwealth.

In summary the wholesale changes implemented to institute today's failed value laden deer program, have proven not to be in the best interests of sportsmen or the commonwealth as a whole. Sportsmen have identified a steep increase of posted property in the last decade, in part from many landowners exiting the farm and game program to post their property to save the few deer they have left. Large tracts of game-lands are still being purchased, while existing game-lands remain pathetically under managed for habitat, as the compliment of food and cover workers has steadily decreased, while positions are increased for biologists and foresters. Forest certification combined with a team of biologists that lacked an understanding that the biology must be balanced with social economic needs, has proven to be disastrous. We have the determinations of the November 2012 independent Legislative Budget and Finance Committee study, revealing hundreds of millions of dollars of lost revenue to the state annually, compounding into billions over the last 13 years. May the Elk in Benezette Pa. validate what the presence of big game will do for small town economies. We have the very architects and managing biologists admitting the deer program has largely failed to produced forest regeneration... When forest indicators at the beginning of this program are relatively the same as at the end, it demands and deserves the recognition, that deer reduction in the middle served little to no beneficial purpose. The white elephant question is now, why are we dragging the state along under the parameters of a failed program, while the biologists undertake a 5 year study to determine their miscalculations? Thank You

I welcome and would like to address any questions before yielding my remaining 5 minutes to Mr. Martin Salinas