

## **Kinzua Quality Deer Cooperative**

### **Testimony**

**HB 870, HB 1146, HB 1370, HB 1724, and HB 1726**

**March 19, 2014**

The Kinzua Quality Deer Cooperative (KQDC) would like to thank the Pennsylvania House Game and Fish Committee for the opportunity to provide comments on the deer management bills currently being considered during the March public hearing. We request that our comments be entered into the record.

The KQDC is a partnership established in 2000 to test new approaches to management of white-tailed deer and forest habitat on 74,000 acres of public (USDA-Forest Service Allegheny National Forest and Northern Research Station) and private land (Collins Pine, Bradford Water Authority, and Forest Investment Associates) in McKean County open to public hunting. Our goals are to improve deer herd quality, forest ecosystem health, and the hunting experience. For the past 12 years we have monitored deer populations and habitat as new deer management strategies such as antler restrictions, concurrent buck and doe seasons, and the Deer Management Assistance Program (DMAP) were implemented. With the possible exception of the Game Commission, we are the only organization in Pennsylvania that has monitored deer densities, deer weights, antler characteristics, and deer habitat as these deer management strategies have been implemented over the long term.

Without going into extensive details, our data clearly indicate that deer densities on the KQDC have been reduced to levels that are more in balance with their habitat than during the 1990's. Deer weights have increased, antler characteristics (beam diameter, number of points, and antler spread) have improved and habitat conditions have recovered while browsing impacts have declined. As a result of the deer management strategies implemented by the Game Commission over the past 12 years, habitat conditions on the KQDC are the best they have been in more than 20 years. Pennsylvania forests can once again regenerate without the use of expensive deer fences. We have attached a copy of a recent paper published in Boreal Environmental Research by Dr. Susan Stout and others that provides more details of the scientific basis and success of Pennsylvania's deer management program, as applied on the KQDC.

Our consistent experience, through a decade of research and cooperation on the KQDC, is that every aspect of the deer/habitat system is very dynamic. The legislative process is by its nature

slow and deliberate. Legislating the details of deer management is inherently counterproductive and should be left to the professional staff of the PA Game Commission.

The general theme running through the House deer management bills being discussed today, seems to be the desire to return to the high deer populations and short hunting seasons that Pennsylvania experienced in the 1980s and 90s. The rationale is that more deer will generate more interest in hunting, increasing the sale of hunting licenses and improving the local economy. But a simple look at the data from 1982 to 1999, clearly shows that deer populations, deer harvest, and hunter success increased, while hunting licenses sales decreased by 300,000 (Rosenberry 2009). Some may argue that the changes in deer management that began in 2000 are the reason for the decline in the number of hunters, but again the data shows that license sales have declined at a steady and predictable rate since 1982 regardless of the changes in deer management strategies. More recently license sales have begun to stabilize despite lower overall deer populations in most of the state.

Let's not forget what else was going on in Penn's Woods in the 1980s and 90s. More than 60,000 deer were being killed on Pennsylvania highways. Farmers were reporting crop damage from deer that was costing millions in lost revenue. The Pennsylvania Bureau of Forestry was spending over \$750,000 annually on fence construction to allow forests to regenerate. This meant that early successional habitat created by timber harvest was not available to deer. Private landowners who could not afford fencing, were unable to regenerate the diverse mix of trees that they once harvested on their property. Much of Penn's woods had a distinct browse line, shrubs and herbaceous plants were disappearing from the understory, and the quality of habitat for most game species was in a steep decline.

DMAp is the essential tool that allows public and private landowners to focus deer harvests in areas of particular need within the broad habitat goals of the Wildlife Management Unit. For example, the Allegheny National Forest used DMAp aggressively when it was first available to achieve the deer density goals of its Forest Plan, and stopped requesting coupons when the herd reached the target levels. Within the KQDC, the public and private landowner partnership has tailored its DMAp requests annually to detailed local data about deer density and impact, with our requests ranging from a high of 3000 DMAp coupons to a low of 150 DMAp coupons, reflecting changes in deer density.

The following are some specific comments on the House Bills being considered:

**HB 870** Eliminating DMAp on public lands would be a major step in the wrong direction for the KQDC. DMAp has been one of our most successful tools for balancing deer populations with their habitat. There is no evidence that increasing the number of deer will increase the number of licenses sold.

**HB 1146** – Removing antler restrictions for seniors has not been an issue on the KQDC. If senior hunters need additional special regulations consider expanding the Junior/Senior antlerless deer hunt rather than eliminating antler restrictions.

**HB 1370** – There is no data to suggest that restricting the doe season to three days after the buck season will significantly increase excitement and maximize hunter participation as the sponsor of this Bill suggests. This Bill will make it more difficult to balance deer and their habitat at sustainable levels.

**HB 1724** – Going back to a county system of wildlife management units is not more scientific than the current WMU system and will not ensure that Pennsylvania will remain one of the top deer hunting states in the nation as the sponsor suggests. The current WMUs are based on similar land use types and are delineated by easily identifiable boundaries such as roads and rivers.

**HB 1726** - The author of this Bill confuses the meaning of “maximizing”, “sustaining”, and “optimizing” as used in the science of wildlife management, and will likely *increase* the controversy and confusion surrounding deer management in Pennsylvania, as stakeholders weigh in with battles over definitions and interpretations. Any dramatic increase in deer populations from the current level is not sustainable and would result in habitat deterioration and eventual loss of species diversity.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments.



/s/ Ned Karger  
Kane Hardwood/  
Collins Pine Company



/s/ Ken Kane  
Generations Forestry Inc.  
for Bradford Water Authority



/s/ Mike McEntire  
Forest Investment Associates



/s/ Erin Connelly  
Allegheny National Forest



/s/ Susan Stout  
Northern Research Station.



/s/ Brad Nelson  
Kinzua Quality Deer Coop.

Attachment: The Kinzua Quality Deer Cooperative: can adaptive management and local stakeholder engagement sustain reduced impact of ungulate browsers in forest systems?