

**New York State Department of Environmental Conservation's Pilot Program to
Obtain Public Input About Deer and Deer Impacts: Progress Report
May 2016**

The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) has initiated a pilot program to obtain public input about deer and deer impacts on a larger scale than was used previously. DEC has grouped the existing 92 wildlife management units (WMUs) used as administrative boundaries for deer management into fewer, larger WMU *aggregates* to allow for better use of management data and improved deer population monitoring. Public input for deer management will now be gathered from citizens across the WMU aggregates rather than within the smaller individual WMUs. A pilot public input effort was initiated in central New York and includes a group of three WMUs (7H, 8J, and 8S) that encompasses 1,325 square-miles of Seneca County and portions of Ontario, Wayne, Yates, Schuyler, Tompkins and Cayuga counties. This WMU aggregate is called the Central Finger Lakes Management Unit.

The pilot program began in 2015 with a survey of 3000 randomly-selected residents of the Central Finger Lakes Management Unit. The survey collected information from residents about the benefits and costs they experience from the local deer herd: values they attribute to deer, their experiences with deer, and their concerns about deer impacts. The pilot also included an educational effort in January 2016. The core of that effort was a set of two webinars designed to help the public understand DEC's deer management program, share results of the aggregate-wide public survey, and convey information to the public regarding deer, deer impacts on people and the environment, and deer management issues and challenges. Following the webinar series, a small group of interested citizens, referred to as a stakeholder input group (SIG), was convened twice in March 2016 for the purpose of identifying and prioritizing the benefits and costs associated with deer. The SIG was an alternative public input technique being piloted as a replacement for the citizen task forces used previously by the DEC for seeking public recommendations on desired deer population levels within individual WMUs. The citizen task forces were first used in 1990. The SIG was designed to address shortcomings of the task force model, which were identified through interviews conducted in 2013 and 2014 with various participants in the former task force approach.

To read the press release from August 2015 regarding the launch of the pilot, please visit: <http://www.dec.ny.gov/press/103053.html>

This brief report provides information on the results of the resident survey, evaluation of the webinar series, and the prioritization of impacts identified by the SIG participants. This report concludes with an overview of the next steps to promote public input as part of the pilot effort.

Resident Survey: Central Finger Lakes Management Unit

During spring 2015, Cornell's Human Dimensions Research Unit conducted a DEC-sponsored mail survey to learn about area residents' interests and concerns regarding deer and deer management. This information was intended to be available to the SIG for use during their deliberations in 2016. Specifically, the goals of the survey were to characterize residents':

- Interests in and concerns about local deer
- Experiences with deer and perceptions of change in the level of human interactions with deer
- Opinions about the importance of addressing various types of deer-human interactions
- Overall attitude towards deer
- Perceptions of the cost/benefit ratio associated with the presence of deer

A random sample of 3000 residents within the Central Finger Lakes Management Unit was mailed questionnaires; of the 2870 questionnaires delivered, 1456 were completed and returned, for a response rate of 51%. The average age of respondents was 61 years, and 64% were male. Most respondents resided in rural areas of the aggregate and associated small villages and hamlets: 11% of respondents lived on a farm, 30% in a nonfarm rural area, 39% in a village or hamlet, and 18% in a small city.

Residents reported that it was very important or extremely important to them that deer managers address Lyme disease and other tick-borne illnesses (73%), deer health and wellbeing (66%), and deer-vehicle collisions (64%). Fewer residents indicated it was very important or extremely important that managers address crop damage (53%), damage to natural plants (43%), or damage to plantings near homes (39%).

With respect to attitudes about deer, approximately one third of respondents (32%) reported they enjoy deer and do not worry about deer-related problems. Over half of respondents (54%) enjoy deer, but worry about deer-related problems. About 8% of respondents did not enjoy deer and regard deer as a nuisance. Approximately half of respondents (53%) believed that the costs and benefits of deer in their local area were about an even tradeoff, while about 27% of respondents believed the costs of deer in their area exceeded the benefits.

To view more survey results, please refer to the report located at:
<http://blogs.cornell.edu/cerp/deer/>

Deer and Deer Management in New York State: Webinar Series

On January 20 and 27, 2016, the webinar series “Deer and Deer Management in New York State” was held. Concurrently, Cornell Cooperative Extension provided the opportunity to view the webinar series onsite at three locations: Wells College, Seneca County CCE, and the Village of Trumansburg Office. The webinar series, as well as individual presentations, can be viewed here:

<http://blogs.cornell.edu/cerp/deer/>

The webinar series was advertised statewide, but mostly directly to individuals and stakeholder groups and organizations within the Central Finger Lakes Management Unit, on local news radio channels, on the DEC website, and in relevant local newsletters and newspapers. Of the 227 individuals who registered for the webinar series, 71 (31%) were from within the Central Finger Lakes Management Unit counties. The first webinar was viewed by 155 individuals, the second by 98 individuals.

Webinar viewers were encouraged to complete an online evaluation of the webinar series, and 80 did so. Generally, these webinar viewers were satisfied with the series (45% very satisfied; 35% somewhat satisfied). A majority of respondents believed that the content generally met their expectations (64%), improved their understanding of deer impacts (69%), and improved their understanding of the DEC’s pilot stakeholder engagement process (76%). However, some viewers believed that the webinar series left questions about deer and deer management unanswered (41%). Approximately half of respondents reported they were likely to view the webinar series again (54%), and most were likely to recommend the webinar series to others (79%). Over half of respondents had never participated in Cornell Cooperative Extension programming before (58%), but most reported they were likely to attend deer-related programs co-hosted by Cooperative Extension and the DEC in the future (88%).

In addition to the online evaluation, researchers at Cornell University conducted interviews with a sample of webinar viewers to gain further insight into individuals’ perceptions of the series. Generally, interviewees felt that the information was well organized and relevant, and that presenters were knowledgeable on the topics covered. Interviewees appreciated learning about the deer management process as well as the pilot public engagement effort, but some were unclear about the next steps for the pilot. Interviewees who already had in-depth knowledge about deer and deer impacts felt the information presented in the webinars was more basic than they would have liked, though they generally acknowledged that such basic information was valuable for many residents of the Central Finger Lakes Management Unit.

Stakeholder Input Group (SIG)

The stakeholder input group (SIG) component of the pilot effort relied on self-identification of interest in volunteer participation. Following the webinar series, residents of the Central Finger Lakes Management Unit who were interested in participating in the SIG were encouraged to submit a statement of interest online. The online submission form was advertised to webinar registrants. In addition, the submission form was available on the website <http://blogs.cornell.edu/cerp/deer/>, and a hardcopy was provided to interested individuals who attended the webinar series at one of the three onsite locations. One expectation for anyone invited to participate in the SIG was exposure to the webinar series, either participating in the webinars in real-time or viewing them online afterward.

While a number of emails were sent to webinar participants to encourage those who were aggregate residents to consider volunteering to serve on the SIG, we received only 24 statements of interest, of which only 15 were eligible. Eligibility was contingent on: (1) an individual residing within the aggregate boundaries, (2) viewing or intending to view both webinars, and (3) being available for both SIG dates, March 1, 2016 and March 15, 2016. Given the prescribed size limitation of the group, all 15 applicants could not be invited to participate in the SIG; a committee of seven individuals from Cooperative Extension, DEC, and Cornell selected a set that it felt best met the objective of creating a diverse group of SIG participants. Names of prospective SIG members were withheld during the selection process. In total, 12 individuals were selected for the SIG. Despite efforts to include a diverse set of stakeholder interests on the SIG, there were fewer people reflecting some interests and impacts than expected due to the low number of volunteers.

The main task for SIG participants was to identify and prioritize public interests and concerns about deer within the Central Finger Lakes Management Unit. During the first meeting on March 1 in Ovid, NY participants discussed and identified impacts of deer within the aggregate. During the second meeting on March 15 in Ovid, participants discussed the resident survey and prioritized these impacts. All 12 selected individuals participated in the first meeting; 10 individuals participated in the second meeting (2 were absent due to illness). CCE of Seneca County facilitated the meeting, and two DEC wildlife biologists participated as well. DEC staff did not participate in the decision-making portion of the SIG deliberations, but were there to answer questions and act as advisors to the process.

The following table indicates both the prioritization of impacts, as identified by SIG participants, as well as results of the resident survey:

SIG Prioritization of Impacts (public interests and concerns re: deer)	Management Priorities from 2015 Resident Survey
(1) Deer hunting opportunities	(1) Lyme disease and other tick-borne illnesses
(2) Lack of deer	(2) Deer health and wellbeing
(3) Effects of deer on forests and woodlots	(3) Deer vehicle collisions
(4) Deer herd health	(4) Deer damage to farm crops
(5) Deer damage to crops and agriculture	(5) Deer damage to natural plants and forests
(6) Deer viewing opportunities	(6) Deer damage to gardens and plantings around homes
(7) Deer damage to landscaping and gardens	(7) Problems with deer hunters
(8) Human-deer health concerns (Lyme disease and deer vehicle collisions)	(8) Deer viewing opportunities
	(9) Deer hunting opportunities

As evident in the table, the SIG results and the survey results differed substantially in priority of impacts for DEC deer managers to address. The number one priority for the SIG, deer hunting opportunities, was viewed as least important by surveyed aggregate residents; Lyme disease was identified as the number one management priority by surveyed aggregate residents, yet was identified by the SIG as least important for DEC to address, along with deer vehicle collisions. The results of the survey were intended to inform the SIG deliberations, and the SIG used the survey to expand the list of impacts identified at the first meeting. The different outcomes of impact prioritization will need to be reconciled as DEC deer managers take these and other sources of input into consideration in their management decisions for the aggregate unit.

Next Steps

Moving forward, the DEC will be considering input from the aggregate-wide survey of residents and the SIG, as well as data on ecological and economic impacts of deer and deer-related impacts in order to make decisions regarding deer population goals within the Central Finger Lakes Management Unit. While the outcomes of the SIG and the survey differed, generally they reflect a desire for DEC to work towards healthy deer, fewer conflicts, and an opportunity for the public to enjoy the deer resource. The

actions DEC takes to address these desires may not be as simple as increasing or decreasing the deer herd, but may involve other elements such as education efforts.

In addition, the pilot program will be evaluated for its effectiveness as a tool for aiding management decision making within the aggregate. Decisions about any modifications to the pilot stakeholder input process will be made later this year, following completion of the evaluation.

As webinar and SIG participants observed, deer management decision making is a complex undertaking, involving diverse public interests and values, which may be conflicting. Designing a decision-making process that addresses this complexity satisfactorily presents several challenges. We will be evaluating the pilot for both strengths and deficiencies in achieving this task.

For more information about the pilot project, please visit
<http://blogs.cornell.edu/cerp/deer/>