

Date: 4/23/18

To: Board of Park Commissioners

From: Wade Walcutt, Director of Parks

Subject: **Deer Management Plan Update**

BACKGROUND

Cincinnati Parks has been actively managing the deer herd in select parks since 2007. During the first two seasons we managed the herd using Cincinnati Police sharp shooters, since that time we have been using local bow hunters. Over the last nine years our bow hunting program has become well established. Meaning we have an exemplary safety record, our harvest numbers have been consistently high, we are making a difference, and we have used each season to help improve the next season. Improvements made to the program from season to season have resulted in higher harvest levels in some parks, and wider acceptance. Even with that said it needs to be understood that there are some that will never agree with or accept that we are managing the deer herd.

The chart below shows the parks we have worked in, harvest totals for the 2017 season, and the cumulative harvest from each park including the years we used sharp shooters.

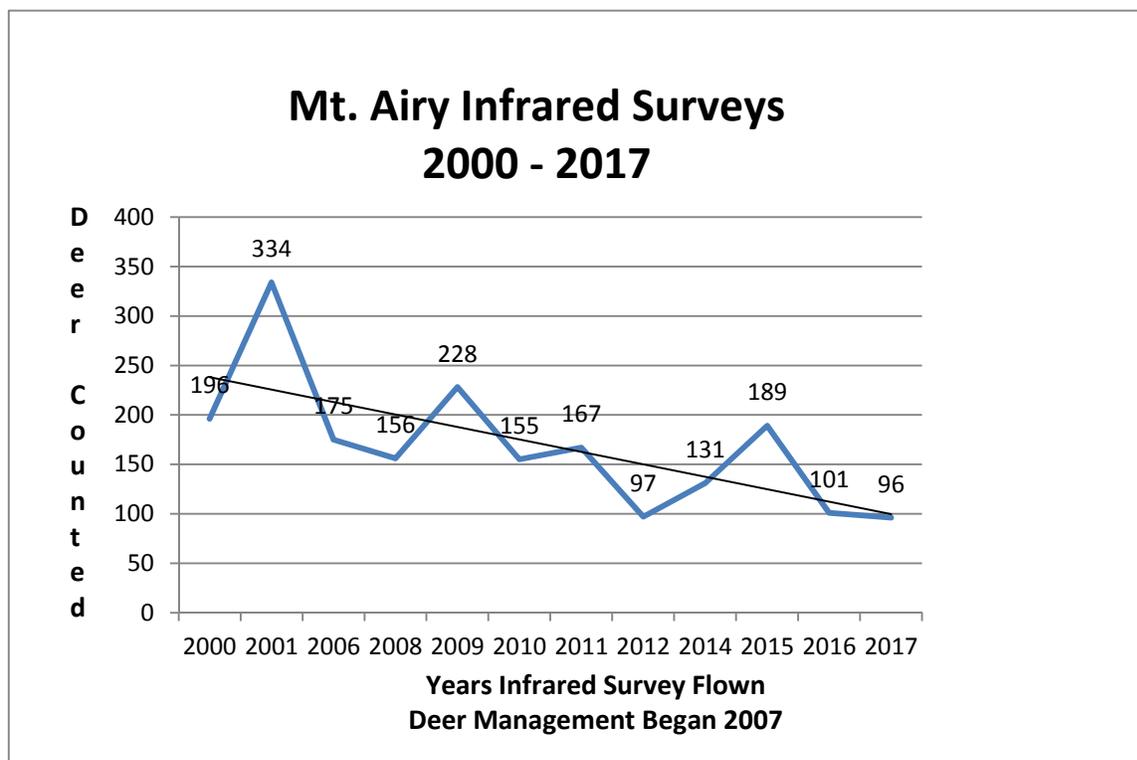
Cincinnati Parks Deer Harvest 2007 - 2017

Park	2017/18 Harvest	Total 2007 - 2017
Mt. Airy	66	1037
Magrish Preserve	6	57
California Woods	6	80
Ault Park	10	79
Stanbery Park	7	48
Alms Park	18	82
Drake Park	15	56
Miles Edward	2	12
Glenway Woods	3	13
Seymour Preserve	5	28
Total	138	1492

FINDINGS

Our deer hunting program has had nine safe, successful seasons reducing the deer herd in our key parks. The 2017/2018 season had 163 hunters successfully pass qualifications and safely harvest 138 deer from ten parks. Nineteen of those deer were taken during the night program. Overall harvest levels are down by 1 deer from the 2016/2017 season. While most of the smaller parks saw a higher or equal harvest compared to last season Mt. Airy's harvest was down by 7 deer. Staff is unsure of the reason for the steady decline in Mt. Airy Forest; the hope is that it is due to a decline in the population, the graph below seems to bear that out.

The trend for most parks still seems to show we are at least making up for reproduction and that there has been no significant increase or decrease in their numbers. However, we can see that we are making a difference in Mt. Airy Forest when we chart our infrared count numbers on a graph and add a trend line. The graph below shows the population gradually decreasing from the high of 334 in 2001 to the 2017 count of 96. It should be noted that deer management began in 2007. Were we to stop our efforts to reduce the population, numbers would spike dramatically, and we would be back to the 2001 level within 3 years. This would in part be due to the healthier condition of the deer and their reproductive rate. Figure 1. Is an excellent graphic to demonstrate the reproductive potential of deer.



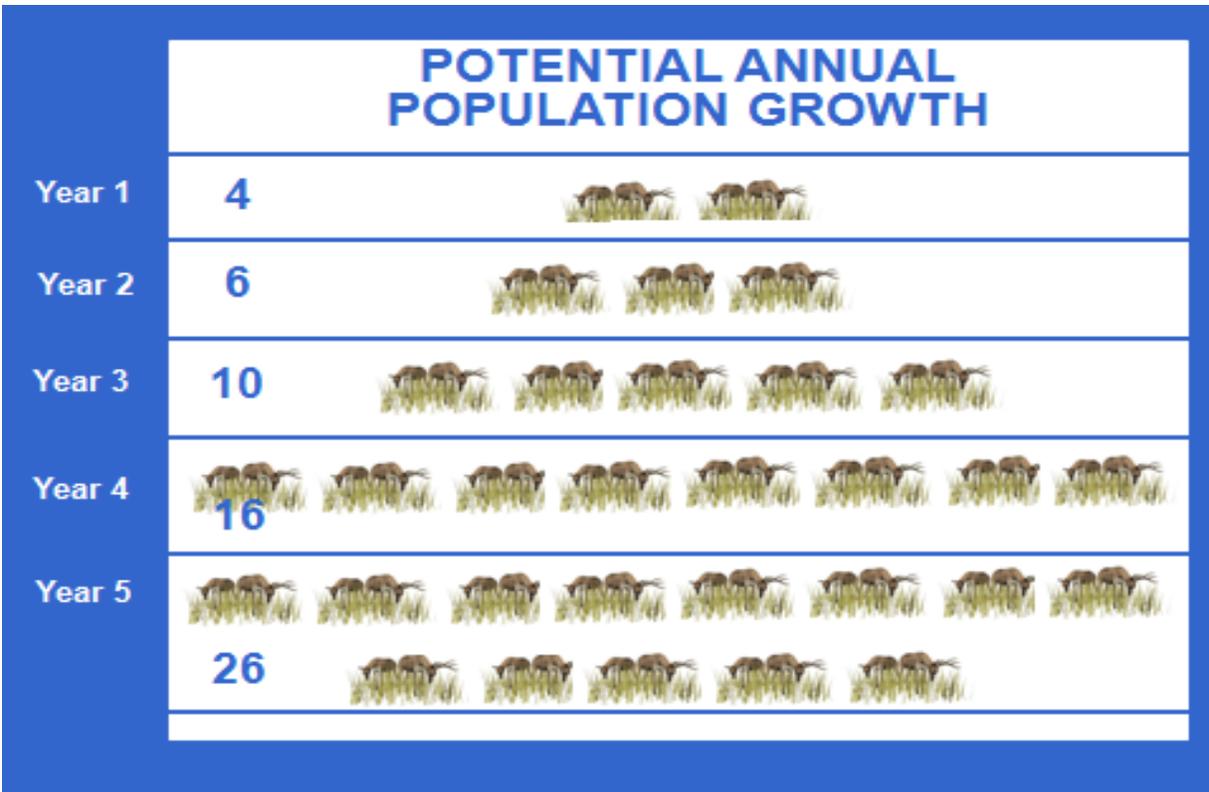


Figure 1. Demonstrates how quickly a population can grow by over 5 times in just 5 years

Park staff is continuing to develop innovative ways to increase harvest levels while keeping closures to a minimum. In the 2013/14 deer season the “Night Program” was developed for California Woods, and it has since moved into Mt. Airy, Alms, Ault, and Magrish. This program allows hunters to access our parks at night, using “Damage Permits” issued by the Division of Wildlife (DOW). In the 2017 season hunters were able to harvest 19 more deer (13% of total harvest) with no added disturbance to park patrons.

Over our 9 seasons of safe, effective hunting in our parks we have listened to our neighbors and patrons when they have comments or complaints. It should be mentioned that any deer management program will never be complaint free. However we have made adjustments to the program to address them to the best of our ability. During the 2017 season we’ve had concerns about safety, humaneness, effectiveness, and park closures. Staff attended public meetings in the City Manager’s office, California Woods, and Mt. Washington. Of the concerns aired in those meetings staff feels that park closures are the most pressing to address. A separate attachment with ideas to reduce closures is included.

It should be noted here that there are a few members of the community at large who will

never agree with or accept the need for what we are doing. They have made their voices heard since we began sharpshooting in 2007. While their *opinions* regarding “animal rights” should be respected, it should also be understood that they are just that – *opinions*. Our decision to reduce the herd is based on evidence gathered in the field by staff over a 12 year period, and research from outside experts. All of this demonstrated that our natural resources are being degraded by deer overpopulation, and that lethal removal is the proven method for reducing the population. While their voices are loud and their emotions strong, their “do nothing” stance is not in the best interest of our park’s natural areas, or the future generations who wish to enjoy them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Park staff feels the deer hunting program has been very successful, and that it should continue in all of the same parks as last season. There are adjustments to the schedules that can be made to reduce or eliminate the park closures. Probably the most effective schedule change would be to allow the parks to remain open during the hunting season. The night program has been successful at increasing harvest levels with no additional park closings. Staff feels that it should continue in California Woods, Alms Park, Ault Park, and Mt. Airy Forest. Staff also feels that a limited schedule of paid sharp shooters should also be explored.

As mentioned earlier in this report there is an attachment detailing different strategies to reduce or eliminate the amount of time the parks are closed. The most effective strategy will be to allow the parks to remain open while hunting. When first mentioned this sounds a little controversial. When thought out further it makes sense: State Parks have been doing this for all types of hunting and have been safe, bow hunting is and has proven to be safe around people and pets, many park patrons ignore our signs, and liability will not be increased. The “Closure Reduction Strategies” attachment will go into more detail on leaving the parks open.

One trend over nine hunting seasons is that the first two weeks of the season are the most productive with at least 25% of the season’s harvest achieved during this time. Another trend worth noting is that during the 2016 season 52% of the harvest occurred on weekends. It is important that we take full advantage of our most productive days of the season. It is also important that we don’t restrict public access during fall leaf change. If we are not approved to leave parks open during the hunting season we are proposing to close the hunting areas for the first 2 weeks of hunting season (September 29 through October 14) with no trail openings on Tuesday and Wednesday. This would leave those areas open to the public for the majority of October, and the same amount of time as last season (27 days). The “regular”

hunting season would then commence on November 10, with trails open on Tuesday and Wednesday. A detailed listing of parks and their schedules will be provided when staff recommendations are made to the Director and Board.

The night program in Ault Park, Alms Park, Mt. Airy Forest, and California Woods had good harvest numbers, and yielded 19 deer in parks where it has been difficult to harvest any during regular hunting hours. It also gained us 4 more deer in Mt. Airy Forest during a season where harvest levels were down. This program took place in February/March, after the regular hunting season had ended, using "Deer Damage Tags" which allow for harvesting after the regular hunting season, during night hours, and allows hunters to harvest more than the traditional bag limit. It should be noted that the 2017 night program yielded two more deer than 2015. Staff would recommend continuing in the 4 parks we were successful in during the 2017 season.

The key to reducing the deer population in our parks is to harvest more deer than are being born each year. This is difficult to measure accurately, the best method we have is to compare infrared survey results from year to year. This has to be done with some caution since these numbers are an estimation of the minimum number of deer found in an area. As mentioned earlier in this report staff feels we are just making up for reproduction in most of our parks. We are consistently looking for ways to increase our harvest numbers to further reduce the population in the parks.

One more tool we have is to use sharp shooters on a limited basis after the regular hunting season is over. A sharpshooting program would increase the number of deer harvested with a corresponding quicker reduction in herd size and reduced park closures. Staff estimates the cost per year to implement a sharpshooting program would be \$40,000.00. This figure includes personnel costs (Police and Park's), processing fees, and a contingency for equipment expenses. Staff estimates 13 nights spread over at least 2 parks (Mt. Airy and Ault Park), which would potentially yield 70 deer harvested in addition to the bow hunting totals.

Conclusion

Over the nine years of our bow hunting program, improvements have been made to gain wider public acceptance, increase harvest levels, stabilize and in some cases reduce the deer population. There were 163 hunters this season, with 138 deer harvested. Nineteen of those deer were harvested as part of the night program, 4 of them were from Mt. Airy which saw a decline in harvest. Staff feels the population is gradually trending down in Mt. Airy. Though some will never agree with bow hunting, or deer management in our parks, they are necessary tools to return biodiversity to our parks. The night program is working to increase harvest in sensitive areas such as Ault, Alms, and California Woods. Staff recommendations

are that the bow hunting program should be continued with similar strategies as last season, and that a sharpshooting program be implemented to increase harvest levels.