

# Panel recommends changes to game commission

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For The Patriot-News

A panel of scientists and resource managers yesterday recommended major changes in the Pennsylvania Game Commission to clear the way for a new system of ecosystem-based deer management that likely would reduce deer densities in parts of the state below those that this year generated complaints from hunters about the number of deer they saw.

In a 340-page report, promoted by Audubon Pennsylvania, the panel called for the state to follow adaptive resource management.

It described ARM as "a science-based way of learning by doing" that would involve setting deer management goals, testing competing theories and updating those goals based on the results.

"Anybody can play. You

just have to be able to quantify" theories, said Jan Beyea, facilitator for the panel.

Standing in the way, according to the panel, is the state's Board of Game Commissioners system. It said the system is bogged down by too few biologists, ecologists and "other scientifically trained staff," a reliance on funding from the sale of hunting licenses and timber sales and a narrowly defined mission.

The authors wrote, "[Until the commission] can successfully bring deer densities down to previously approved targets and be well on its way to implementing ecosystem management, an annual review ... should be conducted by an independent entity appointed by the governor and the general assembly."

Also, the panel wants to see a "more stable and equitable" system of paying for wildlife management "than funding

derived exclusively from sources such as license dollars and timber sales."

Beyea said, "Because hunter dollars are funding [the commission], everyone expects that deer are the only constituency. We need dollars from the [state's] general fund and then commissioners who see their responsibility to all citizens of the state."

Members of the panel are Beyea, senior scientist with Consulting in the Public Interest; Merlin Benner, wildlife biologist with the state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources; Cindy Adams Dun, director of the Office of Education, Communications and Partnerships in DCNR; Mary Ann Fajvan, silviculturist with the U.S. Forest Service; Ronald R. Freed, former chair of the Habitat Alliance; Marrett Grund, deer project leader with the Minnesota Department of Natural

Resources; Stephen B. Horsley, plant physiologist with the Forest Service; Roger E. Latham, ecologist and conservation biologist with Continental Conservation; Ann Fowler Rhoads, senior botanist with the Pennsylvania Flora Project; and Bryon P. Shissler, wildlife biologist with NRC Inc.

The panel, which included two staffers from DCNR but saw two former game commission biologists ask that their names be removed from the final report, also resurrected discussions of merging the game commission and the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission with DCNR.

However, DCNR secretary Michael DiBerardinis, contacted at a separate event yesterday, said, "Right now I'm not interested in merger. I don't think the governor is interested in merger."

Melody Zullinger, executive

director of the Pennsylvania Federation of Sportsmen's Clubs took exception to some of the report.

"While I have only read the executive summary thus far, my opinion is that the scientific information seems to be well written but the policy chapter shows a biased agenda that alludes to a merged agency as the only way to reach their goals."

Russell Schleiden, president of the board of game commissioners, said, "This report's claim that deer management can be better handled by a merged agency is an issue that was examined during the last legislative session and was proven to be merely a distraction from the primary objective: ensuring adequate funding for proper wildlife management."

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