

Weston Select Committee on Deer Management

Selected Findings and Proposed Recommendations

Set forth below are selected findings of the Weston Select Committee on Deer Management (the "Deer Committee") and recommendations that the Deer Committee proposes to make to the Board of Selectmen. The findings and proposed recommendations will be discussed at a public meeting to be held in the Meeting Room at Weston Town Hall at 7:30 PM on Tuesday evening, May 23, 2006. All Weston residents are encouraged to attend and participate. If you cannot attend the meeting, you can send written comments to the Deer Committee c/o Town of Weston, P.O. Box 1007, Weston, CT 06883, or by email to deercommittee@optonline.net

Weston's Deer Herd

BACKGROUND/ FINDINGS: Official aerial surveys indicate that Weston's deer herd decreased 26% between 2000 and 2004. The estimated population in 2004 was 25 deer/ square mile, which is at the upper end of the herd density goals of other Fairfield communities with much higher estimated current populations, including Ridgefield: 79 deer/ square mile; Greenwich: 52-68 deer/ square mile; and Wilton: 40-60 deer/ square mile.

The apparent lower deer population in Weston could be due to a number of factors, including (i) the fact that Weston has more open forest land than many of its neighbors (and consequently less edge, which is favored by deer), (ii) the historic, sustained levels of hunting on private land in Weston and the recent controlled hunts at the Devil's Den preserve, and (iii) increased predation by coyotes and perhaps other predators.

Although the estimated deer count would indicate that Weston may not currently have the same pressing need to take action as some other towns in Fairfield County, the number of deer in a population has the potential to grow exponentially. In any event, the issue is not the number of deer per square mile, but rather whether the number of new cases of Lyme Disease, the number of deer/auto accidents and the level of ecological damage to Weston's forests, are satisfactory. All of these are directly related to the density of the deer population, and while there are steps that can be taken to minimize the risk of Lyme Disease and to reduce the number of deer/ auto collisions, the most effective way to bring about reductions in new cases of Lyme Disease, deer/ auto accidents and ecological damage, if these are deemed to be at unacceptable levels, is to lower the deer population density.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- *Based upon available information about the estimated deer count, Weston may not currently have the same pressing need to take action as some other towns in Fairfield County. Nevertheless, the Town of Weston should continue to monitor (i)*

deer herd density and its effects, including any increases or decreases in the number of new cases of Lyme Disease, deer/ auto accidents and/or the level of damage to the forest ecology, and (ii) any advances in deer birth control and/or tick control technology, to determine whether any changes in current practices may be necessary or advisable in the future.

Lyme Disease

BACKGROUND/ FINDINGS: Lyme Disease is the most common vector-borne infectious disease in Fairfield County and in the US. Nearly 24,000 new cases were reported nationwide to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ("CDC") in 2002 and it is believed that many times that number of cases are not reported. Fairfield County has been a focal point in CDC studies of Lyme Disease, reporting 5500 new cases in 2000, compared with only 4500 new cases in all of New York State.

The symptoms of Lyme Disease are not always recognized, and if left untreated, Lyme Disease can result in arthritis, cardiac and central nervous system disorders and other serious consequences. Chronic Lyme Disease can also lead to cognitive disorders, learning disabilities and/or behavioral problems in children, who are at increased risk of infection because they spend more time outdoors.

The white-footed mouse acts as the principal "reservoir" for Lyme Disease. Spirochetes (coiled bacteria) that cause the disease are passed to ticks when they feed on the blood of infected mice and other small animals. Deer do not carry Lyme Disease, but are a primary host for adult female ticks that require a blood meal from a large mammal in order to reproduce, so the number of ticks in the environment is directly related to the density of the deer population.

Several studies have shown that reducing the number of deer in a given environment reduces the probability of contracting Lyme Disease. The CDC and the Westport - Weston Health District are testing "black boxes" that reduce local tick populations over a two-year time period by treating white-footed mice with a special insecticide. While early indications appear promising, this technology is expensive (\$2,000 per year for two acres of land) and is not yet commercially available, and careful consideration needs to be given to environmental impacts of introducing additional insecticides.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- *Encourage residents to obtain the latest available information on Lyme Disease and preventative measures from the Westport - Weston Health District (available online at http://www.wvhd.org/target_lyme_disease.htm) and other reliable sources such as the Centers for Disease Control. Parents in particular should be better educated regarding the potential consequences of untreated Lyme Disease.*

- *Weston should continue its participation in test programs such as the CDC/WWHD “black box” program referred to above and implementation of new technology should be encouraged, if it is ultimately proven to be safe and effective.*

Deer/ Auto Accidents

BACKGROUND / FINDINGS: Of the 2,778 deer roadkills reported in Connecticut in 2003, 592 were in Fairfield County. In 2004, 15 deer roadkills were reported in Weston. The Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection (“DEP”) estimates that only about 1 in 5 roadkills is actually reported statewide, and roadkill counts do not include accidents caused by near misses or collisions in which injured deer leave the site.

Deer/ auto accidents are most likely to occur on rural roads with 55 mph or higher speed limits. In Weston, routes 53 and 57 have the highest reported accident rate. Most accidents occur in darkness or at dawn/dusk during breeding season (October, November, December), which also coincides with hunting season.

Fencing is the most effective way to keep deer off roadways, but it is also expensive and impractical for long stretches of highway. Standard passive yellow deer crossing signs are thought to be widely ignored, but temporary signs displayed only during peak accident season have been shown to reduce collisions. The Strieter-Lite reflector system, using specially designed reflectors (at a cost of about \$7,000 to \$10,000 per mile, installed), has also shown some promise as a way to reduce collisions, although further studies are needed.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- *Educate residents about the peak season for deer/ auto accidents and encourage drivers to slow down and be more aware during this period.*
- *Step up enforcement of speed limits and consider the use of temporary warning signs (perhaps together with existing mobile radar speed indicators) at strategic locations during peak season.*
- *Encourage the clearing of brush and tall grass from roadsides to make deer approaching the roadway more easily visible.*
- *Select a section of Route 53 or Route 57 for a test of the Strieter-Lite Wild Animal Highway Warning Reflector System.*

Deer Impact on Ecology

BACKGROUND / FINDINGS: Deer are selective feeders. They prefer to browse certain plants such as oaks and cedars, and avoid others, such as the invasive plant

Japanese barberry. Consequently, deer overabundance can lead to loss of regeneration of some species of plants and can contribute to the spread of certain other alien invasive plant species. Significant reduction in native plant diversity and abundance causes a reduction in the number of some birds and other wildlife species.

Weston is losing forest lands due to land conversion. In addition, due to deer browsing, our remaining forests are experiencing a reduction in shrub and subcanopy regeneration, especially among some of our hardwoods, including oaks and hickories; a reduction in biological diversity, especially among herbs; and a reduction in the diversity in all subcanopy layers of the forest, and these changes are having an adverse effect on other wildlife.

Deer also cause significant damage to gardens and to trees, shrubs and other ornamental plants used in landscaping.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- *Establish vegetation monitoring plots at natural areas in town for qualitative assessments of deer browse, vegetative composition and plant regeneration. Plots could be on town open space as well as other public or private open lands.*
- *Encourage residents who would like to learn more about the effects of deer browsing on our forests and/or effective methods to protect gardens and landscaping from deer damage to contact the Nature Conservancy at the Devil's Den Preserve or other reliable sources of information.*

Hunting and Hunting Safety

BACKGROUND / FINDINGS: Although advances have been made in deer birth control technology, the only practical currently-available method to effectively reduce deer population density in open areas such as Weston is by hunting. There have been no known hunting accidents in Weston in the last 40 years. Nevertheless, as Weston becomes more residential and less rural, concerns over the safety of hunting in residential areas are increasing and there have been some complaints about apparent illegal hunting activities, solicitation of landowners by hunters and unwanted intrusion of hunting activities.

The DEP no longer collects the consent forms hunters are required to obtain from landowners before hunting on private land, as it has done in the past. Weston's Animal Control Officer believes that copies of such forms should be filed locally, so that he and other local law enforcement personnel can determine exactly who has permission to hunt on which properties, thus making it easier to detect and apprehend illegal hunters.

Hunting is regulated by the State of Connecticut. Weston cannot impose its own public safety restrictions without a change in State law or a waiver from the State legislature.

The Committee considered whether Weston should attempt to obtain a waiver from the Connecticut legislature that would permit the town to (i) require local filings of private landowner consent forms, and (ii) require notification of adjacent landowners prior to conducting hunting. After careful consideration and extended debate, the Committee decided (four to one) against making such a recommendation.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- *Weston residents should be reminded of State legal requirements for hunting on private land and should be encouraged to obtain the most current information about hunting regulations from the DEP's Bureau of Natural Resources Wildlife Division (the "Wildlife Division"). Copies of The Connecticut Hunting and Trapping Guide, published annually by the Wildlife Division, are available in the Town Clerk's office or on-line at www.dep.state.ct.us/burnatr/wildlife/fguide/fg06/fgindx.htm*
- *The Town should consider keeping a voluntary list of local licensed hunters available for landowners who are looking for someone to hunt on their property.*
- *Residents should be encouraged to voluntarily notify their neighbors as a courtesy when hunting will be taking place on their property and should be cognizant of the sensitivities of their neighbors.*
- *Residents should be advised to be judicious about whether hunting is appropriate on small properties.*
- *Residents should be encouraged to call a DEP Conservation Officer, Weston's Animal Control Officer or the Weston Police if they suspect that illegal hunting may be taking place.*
- *The Town's representatives in the state legislature should seek funding for additional local DEP Conservation Officers.*