

Deer Permits For Farmers

(Continued from Page A1)

There is no fee for the deer control permit, but farmers must keep records (on provided forms) of the deer killed and, for practical purposes, send weekly reports to the local commission wildlife conservation officer — whether or not any deer were killed.

Deer taken are to be tagged with a special tag provided by the commission.

All unused tags and permits are to be returned to the commission within five days of the expiration of the permits.

Within the realm of approved devices for taking whitetail deer, the farmer can further restrict what type of firearm or bows can be used on his land to kill deer during the off-season.

As it is now, deer causing damage on farms are to be destroyed by farmers at a rate as those deer are used by the farmer.

Under this new program, the

farmer doesn't have to do any shooting, processing or consumption of deer killed for crop damage. He can issue a subpermit to someone else, most likely a deer hunter familiar to the farmer, to do those things.

In order to be eligible to participate in this new program, a farmer must first allow public deer hunting on his property for at least two years under the existing Deer Damage Area Program (also known as the Hot Spot program).

Public access during the regular deer hunting season continues under this new program.

But, now the farmer has control over hunters when the farmer actually needs crop-damaging deer killed.

Spring and late summer are key periods for crop damage by deer. Spring is crucial for crop establishment and late summer and early fall are critical preharvest periods. The approval of the program

represents a negotiated agreement between crop farmers, sportsmen organizations, and the Game Commission.

In retrospect, the core of the long-standing controversial issue has been that crop farmers value crops over deer, while sportsmen value deer over crops.

Also key to that has been a reluctance by the commission and sportsmen to allow landowners additional deer harvest rights.

Merely offering landowners the ability to kill more deer would most likely provide an incentive for more posted land, more claims of deer damage, allow those not suffering deer damage to take advantage of deer harvest rights, and make herd management more difficult.

Additionally, wild whitetail deer are commonwealth property, and making commonwealth prop-

erty more legally accessible to landowners rather than non-landowners could spark cries of preferential treatment and unfairness.

This new program attempts to address the issues all around.

Details have been worked out so as to come up with a mutually agreeable and fair program to all interested parties.

It provides for public hunting during the regular deer hunting seasons.

It allows crop-damaging deer to be killed when most of the damage is likely to occur and killing is more likely to be an effective tool.

It allows the farmer to decide who gets on his land to kill excess deer, and he has some control over the number of permits issued and thus the number and behavior of people attempting to kill deer off of the farm.

It also allows the farmer to decide what type of legal method for killing deer best suits his farm and activities.

The new program has been praised by the Pennsylvania Farm Bureau (PFB), that has, along with other organizations, been seeking some type of system to allow farmers more control over deer populations on their farms.

According to Joel Rotz, wildlife damage specialist for the PFB, the commission's approval of the permitting program comes after at least five years of effort.

"Obviously we're elated that it's finally passed," he said this week. "It came about as a result from compromise and input from sportsmen's groups. And with their support we were able to get the Game Commission's support."

Rotz said the approval from commission comes as good news during a year in which weather and commodity prices have worked against the farmer.

"We feel it's at least a glimmer of good news or the farmers who've been getting bad news with weather and drought. Farmers further disadvantaged by this (deer damage) problem will have another tool to use.

"Our concern is to keep Pennsylvania farmers economically competitive with the rest of nation," Rotz said. "We're no longer in protected markets and the more we can do to keep a level playing field the better."

He said that the program offers some recourse to farmers suffering from deer damage.

Further, Rotz said the PFB is ready to help make the program a success.

"We stand ready to work with the Game Commission to resolve any concerns or problems that result from this program," he said.

The outlook for acceptance from the public seems good.

The general deer hunting public has seen a great reduction in land available for trespass.

Over the past 20 to 30 years, vast areas of previously open land has been closed with changes in ownership and legal decisions.

Some largely blame court judgements about landowner liability, and the unavailability of insurance or high premium rates charged if landowners allow public trespass.

Whether correct or incorrect, other reasons cited by people for the lack of open land to the public includes increased demand and abuse of the land by the general public; an increase in traditional hunting grounds being used for residential or other commercial development; an apparent decrease in desire by landowners to share the benefits of the land; and an increase in animal (Turn to Page A35)

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