

## Norristown Farm Park – Whitetail Deer Management Program Q&A

**Question:** Why is a controlled deer hunt needed at NFP?

**Answer:** Urban sprawl perpetuated the loss of open space and agricultural lands in this part of the County, thereby displacing and/or eliminating countless species of wildlife along with the habitat they once relied upon. Deer being highly adaptive and advantageous, quickly took refuge within the park thus dramatically increasing the size of the park's herd. Soon after, staff members began to see a sharp decline in the number of plant species as the woodland understory disappeared due to the deer foraging, commonly referred to as browsing. Native plants were selected as a food source first, which then allowed for non-native species to proliferate thus altering the ecosystem making it less diverse and less advantageous to both native and migratory species seeking food and sites in which to nest. Additionally, agricultural crops and newly planted trees and shrubs were targeted as well, despite efforts to protect both.

**Question:** How many deer can the Farm Park support?

**Answer:** Wildlife biologists nation-wide agree that a healthy herd should consist of approximately 35 deer per square mile. How does that compare to the Farm Park? At 725 acres, NFP is roughly 1.1 square miles in size. Based upon the recommendations of wildlife biologists, the park could safely and adequately support 35-40 deer at any given time.

**Question:** How many deer are in the park?

**Answer:** While the numbers can fluctuate for many reasons (food availability, time of day, season, the rut, etc.), it is estimated that there are approximately 150 deer living in the park. This is based off of recent counts conducted by the USDA. Note however, that the herd size is 3x's greater than the recommendation. In 2005 (before we implemented our deer management program), the herd was in excess of 500 individuals.

**Question:** Are there any alternatives to a hunt?

**Answer:** Yes and No. This remains a very complex issue, with multiple agencies having say over what can and cannot be done. That being the case, there is no simple answer or solution.

**Question:** What are some of the alternatives to hunting?

**Answer:** (1) Immunocontraceptives, (2) Trap and Transfer, (3) Perimeter Fencing, (4) Streiter Lites © or (5) Simply doing nothing.

**Question:** Why haven't you tried these options?

**Answer:** All possible scenarios were considered. The information below (including many restrictions) shaped our deer management program.

(1) Immunocontraceptives are not permitted in the State of Pennsylvania. The measure is currently in the testing and development stage and its effective use, efficacy and potential to impact to hunters who consume the meat for a deer harvested off-site, is being evaluated. Studies done in New Jersey in the early 2000's yielded varied/inconclusive results. Utilizing contraceptives would require that each doe be trapped, inoculated, tagged, monitored and a booster given at the precise interval to ensure its continued effectiveness. This is a very stressful not to mention, costly option and would require the Game Commissions approval and outright participation.

(2) Trap and Transfer, this would have to be approved and completed by the Pennsylvania Game Commission. This practice simply relocates deer to other area and could potentially cause an overabundance of animals elsewhere. Additionally, this is upsetting to the deer and its digestive microbiota. Additionally, there is the potential that diseases and/or parasites could be transmitted elsewhere. Examples of disease's that could be spread include but are not limited to, Lyme's Disease and Chronic Wasting Disease.

(3) Perimeter Fencing, fencing 1.1 square miles would be costly and impractical. Additionally, it would serve to cut off the natural "migration paths" of the deer, sequestering them and their DNA to the site. Over time, the herd will deplete the available food sources and slowly starve. Additionally, they would become inbred and their overall health and vigor would suffer due to the lack of genetic diversity. Additionally fencing the park would be aesthetically unappealing and would make the park look like a military installation, or correctional facility.

(4) Streiter Lite Barriers ©, the jury is out on the effectiveness of this product. Again, installing a perimeter "restraint" of any kind around the entire park would be both costly and impractical.

(5) Simply doing nothing, if left unchecked, the size of the herd would increase, the biodiversity of the park would suffer effecting both resident and migratory species, vehicle accidents would increase, our agricultural output would suffer making the land less attractive to farming, damage to neighboring vegetative landscapes would increase significantly, native plant species would be lost and invasive plant species would take over forever altering the landscape and ecosystem and the chances for disease transmission would increase dramatically as the deer population expands unchecked.

**Question:** Are you willing to explore other alternatives:

**Answer:** Yes, we are constantly looking for new ideas and alternatives. This is by no means a static management plan. We are continually revisiting this subject and we often converse with the game commission and others, seeking their input and/or advice as it relates to this matter and we would certainly consider other options should they be approved or shown to be effective in terms of control and cost.

**Question:** What is being done to control the herd?

**Answer:** In 2005, we implemented a one-day controlled hunt using licensed hunters. This became a highly regulated (annual) event, continuing up until 2019. While this program was effective and served to remove nearly 500 deer from the herd, it was barely keeping the herd in check. Studies concluded that the doe within the park were predominantly having triplets as opposed to single fawns or twins, which is the norm.

In addition to the time spent planning this annually, it proved to be a costly option and it required that the park be shut down for the entire day thereby inconveniencing our guests/visitors. The hunt was suspended in 2000 and 2021 due to Covid. Seeking a better, cost effective and more humane alternative, the park contracted with the USDA for the first time in 2022/23. A comprehensive study was conducted prior to the hunt and it showed that the average herd size was well over 150 animals. It did not take into account the number of deer off-site and within the neighborhoods surrounding the park.

In March of 2023, USDA sharpshooter's removed 50 deer from the herd on one occasion, overnight. Utilizing their services, proved to be very efficient and more importantly, humane. Additionally, this option proved itself to be extremely safe and cost-effective. It did not require months of pre-planning, excessive staff involvement, paid overtime, etc. and we were able to avoid having to close the park. In addition, all of the meat was professionally processed and immediately distributed to local food banks, helping to feed those who are less fortunate within our community. Notably, the day after the hunt more than 70 deer were observed in the park.

**Question:** Where do we go from here?

**Answer:** We are continually reviewing the latest recommendations as it relates to this matter and we are open to exploring new ideas, perspectives and practices. However, any such recommendation must be practical, cost-effective and grounded in science and not strictly guided by emotion. The situation is unfortunate, but simply doing nothing is by no means, "the answer".

**Conclusion:** We do not enter into this decision lightly and we are committed to maintaining and improving the park for the benefit of the wildlife that resides here as well as for those who choose to visit and find recreation here. As stewards of the land, we are given a great responsibility to manage the lands we are entrusted with for the benefit all.

Decisions such as this are weighty and require that we look at this carefully and from all angles, but most importantly, from a humane perspective as the deer are an important feature and resource within the park's ecosystem, something we do not wish to see disappear due to mismanagement. It is important to remember that deer are a "keystone species". If they properly managed, they can have a positive impact on the health of the environment, but if left unchecked they (like anything else) can wreak havoc and this could lead to their untimely demise, or the demise of other creatures, the ones that are not so prominent and are less thought about.