

Good afternoon Chairman Rothman and Chairman Brewster. Thank you for the opportunity to talk about programs the Game Commission offers to help landowners limit crop damage on their properties.

Section 103 of the Game and Wildlife Code establishes that the Game Commission shall use hunting as the method of managing wildlife. Consistent with that directive, the Game Commission administers several programs to allow landowners to work with hunters to manage wildlife populations.

First is the Hunter Access Program. Created almost 90 years ago, the Hunter Access Program provides for a formal agreement between the Game Commission and a landowner whereby the landowner agrees to provide reasonable access to their property for hunting and trapping. In return, the landowner gets numerous benefits, including enhanced surveillance and law enforcement on their property, free wood products and tree and shrub seedlings from the Game Commission's Howard Nursery, and a reduced-cost landowner hunting license. And most notably, landowners get increased hunter presence, which is key for managing the wildlife populations on that property.

Enrolling in the Hunter Access Program does not require a landowner to provide unlimited public access. The landowner is still able to restrict the number of hunters on their property, the type of species those hunters can pursue, and the days of the week when hunting is allowed.

Currently there are over 10,000 landowner agreements, resulting in over 1.8 million acres of private land being opened to public hunting as part of the Hunter Access Program.

The second program that links landowners with hunters who can help limit crop damage is the Deer Management Assistance Program, or “DMAP,” as it is commonly called. Antlerless deer permits are made available for a property enrolled in DMAP. Landowners can choose whether to allow hunters to purchase permits directly at license issuing agents or require hunters to obtain coupons from the landowner that then can be used to purchase permits. A permit is valid only on the specific property enrolled in the DMAP program. This way hunters can harvest additional antlerless deer from that property, beyond what would have been permitted just through having an antlerless deer license.

The standard rate of permits issued is one coupon for every 5 acres of cultivated land, or 1 permit for every 50 acres of non-cultivated land. But landowners can request permits beyond the standard rate by outlining the specific problem they are facing and how additional DMAP permits will help them achieve their goals.

While the Hunter Access Program provides landowners with a mechanism for allowing more hunters on their properties, and the DMAP program provides hunters on private lands the ability to harvest additional deer, both programs take place during the established hunting seasons.

A third program, the Agricultural Deer Control Program, goes beyond the regular hunting season structure and provides a method for controlling deer populations during months when hunting seasons are closed.

Under this program, a landowner can allow hunters to access their property and harvest deer that are damaging cultivated lands, fruit trees or vegetables. Hunters can harvest

antlerless deer between February 1 – April 15, and then again from August 1 – September 15, excluding Sundays.

Recently, the Game Commission worked with stakeholder groups - including agriculture, forestry and land management interests - to identify strengths and areas for improvement in the Agricultural Deer Control Program. Subsequently, the Board of Commissioners approved several changes, including increasing from one to four the number of permits a hunter can receive under this program; removing the requirement that the landowner property be enrolled in the Hunter Access Program; removing the requirement that the landowner report a harvest – instead putting that responsibility on the successful hunter; and allowing non-resident hunters to participate.

Additionally, the Game Commission provides qualifying landowners the ability to receive an Agriculture Damage Depredation Permit authorizing them to appoint up to two designated individuals to harvest wildlife that are causing crop damage. The goal is to allow landowners who may not have the time themselves to take wildlife for crop damage to designate other qualifying individuals to act in their stead and harvest wildlife on their behalf. Under this program, wildlife can be harvested year-round, not just during an established hunting season, provided crop damage is taking place.

These programs are all designed to give landowners greater tools for controlling deer populations on their properties. They allow landowners to work with local hunters to access their land and harvest additional deer and do so outside of the normal hunting seasons.

These programs are in addition to recent statewide changes made by the Board of Commissioners. Those changes, enacted over the last several years, provide more hunting opportunity, namely through increases in the number of antlerless deer licenses to help achieve management goals and moving the opening day of firearms deer seasons to a Saturday to allow more hunters to participate.

While so far I have discussed programs the Game Commission offers, and changes to regulations made by our Board of Commissioners, I'd be remiss to not mention the recent changes that have taken place legislatively. Specifically, the change in the law allowing for additional days of Sunday hunting. One takes place during the firearms deer season; one during archery deer season; and one has been held during the firearms bear season. These days have proven popular among our hunters, with an estimated two-thirds of hunters having participated in at least one of those Sundays.

In the three years since Sunday hunting was expanded, there has not been even one single incident in which a non-hunting member of the public was involved in a hunting accident, either through being mistaken for game or being in the line of fire.

But while those extra days of hunting are a significant first step, there is more that can be done.

This fall alone, there are six Sundays during the statewide archery deer season, and two more Sundays during the extended archery seasons held in the agricultural-heavy areas of the southeast and southwest, when hunting is not permitted. Expanding Sunday hunting to include those dates could significantly increase participation.

Increasing Sunday hunting opportunities has a long-term benefit as well.

As I mentioned, the Game Commission is directed to use hunting as a mechanism for controlling wildlife populations. Our hunter-centered programs are therefore dependent upon there being a significant number of hunters who can help landowners control the wildlife populations on their property.

As everyone on this committee is likely aware, hunter numbers have been declining nationwide for decades for a variety of reasons, including changes in demographics and the shift from living in rural communities to more urban and suburban areas. And while Pennsylvania is doing better than most states in maintaining hunter numbers, we are not completely immune to that decline, and have seen a decrease from our peak hunter numbers in the early 1980s.

Therefore, it is in the best interests of both the Game Commission, which relies on hunters to manage wildlife populations statewide, and landowners, who depend on hunters to manage populations at a local level, to take steps to increase the number of hunters afield.

Expanding Sunday hunting opportunities would do just that.

Sundays provide an opportunity for hunters – particularly younger ones – who may have school or work obligations that limit their amount of free time throughout the week. For many of those individuals, Sundays may be the only day on which they are able to hunt. Currently, the law limits them to just a handful of days each year when they can participate. That puts them at risk for not continuing in the sport, further accelerating the decline we are already experiencing.

Keeping hunters involved by giving them additional days to hunt would be a significant step toward ensuring the next generation of hunters is in place to help landowners use the existing programs to control wildlife populations on their properties.

That concludes my prepared remarks. I thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding this important issue and highlight the programs we have in place to help landowners manage wildlife populations.

I fully recognize that this subject has been, and likely always will be, a controversial one. There are competing interests on the question of the appropriate size of wildlife populations, from landowners to wildlife enthusiasts to Pennsylvania's approximately one million hunters and the countless businesses that depend on the economic activity those hunters generate.

We are not likely to ever reach a point where there is universal agreement regarding the appropriate number of wildlife in the Commonwealth.

This is the challenge inherent in managing wildlife in a state as diverse as Pennsylvania. But our responsibility is to apply scientific management principles to strike a balance that benefits all residents and future generations.

That is the goal we strive to achieve. Hearings like this one today, in which we can have this discussion and continue to receive input from members of the Committee and stakeholders, help keep us on track toward achieving that goal.

I'm glad to answer any questions you may have.