



Wisconsin Council on Forestry

Tony Evers, Governor
CouncilOnForestry.wi.gov

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To: [The Senate Committee on Financial Institutions and Sporting Heritage](#)

Chair Senator Stafsholt, Vice-Chair Senator Felzkowski, Committee Members: Senator Tomczyk, Senator Spreitzer and Senator Agard

Subject: The dynamic relationship between white-tailed deer and Wisconsin's forests

White-tailed deer are broadly recognized as a keystone wildlife species in Wisconsin. The intertwined relationship between healthy deer populations, hunter experience, and forest management is complicated. The Wisconsin Council on Forestry recognizes:

- Deer hunting and wildlife viewing are both economically and culturally important in Wisconsin.
- Wisconsin's forest products industry contributes \$24 billion annually to Wisconsin's economy, is our 2nd leading industry and employs nearly 60,000.
- Proper forest management sustains our forest products industry and at the same time improves access, ecosystem diversity, and wildlife habitat for a wide variety of game and non-game species.
- Providing desirable habitat at landscape levels will help to promote the broad distribution of white-tailed deer, encourage healthy populations, and benefit the hunter experience.

Successful tree regeneration is a critical component of sustainable forest management that can be negatively impacted by high deer densities. Finding the balance between white-tailed deer numbers and successful forest regeneration is critical to the future of our forests and the forest products industry in Wisconsin.

The ability to regenerate trees in Wisconsin's forests currently face significant challenges. Many counties have forest regeneration numbers below recommended levels according to the Forest Regeneration Monitoring white paper that reports 2023 stand survey data from 46 primarily forested counties¹:

- Half of the 46 counties have 50 percent or more of forest stands below regeneration density guidelines.
- The majority of sampled forest stands in the northeast did not meet regeneration guidelines. This is in large part due to over 80 percent of the sampled Northern Hardwood and 60 percent of the Aspen-Birch stands failing to meet requirements, the lowest among all regions of the state.



Figure 1. This photo from northern Wisconsin shows browse in front and a deer exclosure fence with higher regeneration behind it (photo by Hutnik).

Tree regeneration impacts to Wisconsin's forests in areas of heavy browsing are well documented. However, the true economic impact to Wisconsin's forest products industry is unquantified at this time, as is the ability of the forest to recover from heavy browsing.

The Forestry community understands that low deer populations can result in undesirable hunting experiences and decreased wildlife viewing opportunities. Contributions to Wisconsin's economy from hunting of white-tailed deer and wildlife viewing are important and deserve consideration. However, strategies to maintain or improve Wisconsin's hunting economy need to consider ramifications to the forest economy which is the State's 2nd leading industry and employs nearly 60,000.

In the past decade, development of County Deer Advisory Councils (CDACs) has empowered deer hunters and others with regulating deer populations in their respective counties. Many groups participate in these conversations, including hunters, foresters, tourism, transportation, tribal interests, urban interests, and agriculture. Rather than a one-size-fits-all approach across large regions of the state, this provides management that can be more nimble and locally tailored. It is important to note that having a seat at the table on a CDAC comes with a responsibility to consider the science of deer management and all of the related issues including the relationship between deer and sustainable forest management.

Wisconsin's Council on Forestry believes it is imperative to work toward better understanding of how goals for deer hunting and growing trees through sustainable forest management can complement each other to realize society's need for renewable forest resources. Wisconsin's Council on Forestry encourages decision-makers to value the voice of the forest industry, professional foresters, and all Wisconsinites who care about the future of forests and our overall ecosystem health when making deer management decisions. Hunting regulations and deer population goals must consider impacts of disproportionate deer densities that contribute to poor hunter experience in some areas and significant impacts on forests from deer browse in other areas.

Healthy forests are important to the citizens of Wisconsin and to all wildlife populations. A disproportionate balance between deer numbers and healthy forests will, in the long run, do a great disservice to our natural resources, Wisconsin's forest products industry, all aspects of outdoor recreation and our state's cultural heritage.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Tom Hittle".

Tom Hittle
Wisconsin Council on Forestry Chair

*Please note that due to the nature of their positions, Council member Representatives Jeffrey Mursau and Katrina Shankland, Senators Romaine Quinn and Jeff Smith, State Forester Heather Berklund, and Chequamegon Nicolet National Forest Supervisor Jenn Youngblood abstain as signatories.

ⁱ Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. 2023. Forest regeneration monitoring. 2 page summary of 2022 field season.