

## LMF Funding Needed to Restore Deer Population

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This week, the Appropriations Committee of the Maine Legislature voted (10 to 3) to approve LD 852, a \$5 million bond that would enable the Land For Maine's Future Board (LMF) to purchase lands and/or conservation easements that would protect deer wintering habitat in our state. If enacted and signed by Gov. LePage, LD 852 would appear before the voters during the November election as one of several potential bond questions seeking voter approval. On behalf of the Sportsman's Alliance of Maine, we urge lawmakers, the Governor, and the voters to approve this critically-needed bond.

The white-tailed deer has been a mainstay of Maine's rural economy for at least the past 125 years. Generations of Maine hunters and wildlife watchers, as well as thousands of nonresidents have depended on Maine's legendary white-tail populations for outdoor-based recreation, comradery with family and friends, and sustenance. In 1996, Maine had 160,000 deer hunters, and they contributed \$200 million to the economy of the state. Today there are fewer hunters, far fewer deer to enjoy, and the northern half of Maine is struggling economically.

Forty to fifty years ago, northern and eastern Maine was considered *THE* place to go to hunt and watch deer. White-tail populations were healthy, and abundant. Although severe winters occasionally cut their numbers, the herd quickly rebounded due to an abundance of quality wintering habitat, while aided by low predation (pre coyote) and regulated hunting. In 1970, deer in the northern half of the state had nearly one million acres of wintering habitat to shelter them during snowy, cold winters. Today, only a fraction (perhaps one-third) of that wintering area acreage remains.

During winter, deer seek out tall, dense, mature coniferous forests to shelter them from the cold and deep snow. Typically comprised of balsam fir, spruce, hemlock and/or cedar, the canopy of these forests intercepts snow and wind, provides a source of food, and offers shallow snow to make travel and escape from predators easier. When these mature conifers are removed, snow depths are much higher, and deer struggle to find food and to escape coyotes, bobcats and feral dogs. Deer survival is higher in high quality wintering habitat.

Beginning in the 1970s, deer wintering habitat in the northern half of Maine began a decline that continues to this day. First, the spruce-budworm insect infestation damaged or killed millions of acres of spruce and fir forests, including deer yards. This, in turn, precipitated a flurry of timber cutting, as industrial forest owners sought to salvage their damaged softwood timber inventory. Along the way, the world market for wood products increased, making the mature softwoods that deer favor more valuable in the marketplace than in the woods. Consequently, the coniferous forests that shelter deer are at a 40-year low in the northern part of the state. This reduction in wintering area acreage is a major factor limiting deer populations.

The Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife (DIFW) has not sat on the sidelines as our deer wintering habitat disappeared; yet they have not been completely successful in preserving and enhancing deer yards, either. The Department uses land-use zoning under LURC to regulate timber harvesting in a number of deer yards in Maine's unorganized territories. In addition, DIFW and the Dept. of Conservation jointly manage some publicly-owned deer wintering areas. During the past decade, DIFW has stepped up efforts to obtain cooperative agreements with timberland owners for the proper management of deer wintering areas. Finally,

conservation organizations have purchased conservation easements on more than 3 million acres of timberland in the northern half of Maine. Some of the lands placed in conservation easements include current and past deer wintering areas. These areas will likely see more deer-friendly forest management in the future.

Each of the above strategies employed by DIFW have their advantages and disadvantages. Currently, most deer wintering areas remain in private or corporate ownership, and this poses a serious obstacle to effective deer yard preservation. The coniferous forests that shelter deer are valuable timber resources. They are dynamic, ever-changing ecosystems that require expensive management to keep them in top condition for wintering deer. Deer yard management requires light timber harvesting, and frequent entry for cutting over relatively small acreages. In addition, timber stands are typically kept uncut for decades beyond their economic maturity, in order to benefit deer. This creates an important conflict with private and corporate landowners. Who should pay for the added cost of managing forests for deer? The white-tailed deer is owned by the state and managed in the public trust. Yet, private landowners are expected to pay the added costs of timber management for wintering deer. Most landowners are willing to incur some of these extra costs, but they cannot economically justify adding an additional half a million acres of deer wintering area to their high-cost timber management ledgers.

Within the next decade or two, thousands of acres of deer wintering habitat that were damaged by the budworm infestation and/or excessive timber harvesting will have regenerated a new forest that is reaching a growth stage that deer can again use during winter. Our challenge is to find strategies that will protect and enhance these regenerated deer yards and those currently available. We believe one of the most cost-effective approaches is to convert the most promising of these deer wintering areas from private to public ownership. Alternatively, the state could purchase timber easements that would compensate the landowner for holding and managing deer yards for the public benefits they offer.

The Land for Maine's Future Fund is a natural and appropriate vehicle for this land transfer. Deer hunting and wildlife watching has added billions of dollars to Maine's rural economy. We are hurting now, but it doesn't have to remain so. Investment in deer wintering area enhancement today can help restore healthy deer numbers in the northern half of Maine for all of us to enjoy and prosper from well into the future.

Please support passage of the Land For Maine's Future legislation and subsequent bond.