DEER BAITING ANALYSIS

By Dick Zook, Rev January 2020

To bait, or not to bait? The question cannot be answered without extensive discussion, debate, and disagreement. It is riddled with misinformation, unfounded allegations, and subjective personal observations. The primary concern is the spread and prevalence of CWD (Chronic Wasting Disease) and survival of Michigan’s wild and free ranging whitetail deer herd, and it’s survival. The only primary factor to consider in the baiting issue today is CWD. If it were not for CWD, we, the hunting community, the MDNR and the NRC, would not even have this issue before us. We must use and depend on the best scientific evidence available today.

CWD was identified about 50 years ago and is now found in 26 states, it is always fatal, and historically spreads at an increasing rate. CWD is a detriment to hunting, and a detriment to retaining hunters who essentially control the deer population and fund wildlife management. The presence of CWD in Michigan is the most serious conservation issue with the highest consequences for the MDNR and the hunting community to face in our life time. The **URGENCY** for both reaction plans and prevention measures to stem the spread of CWD cannot be overstated. The issue today is not simply baiting. It is utilizing the best scientific knowledge available, as required by law, in **implementing a baiting ban** as a **required action** for both a CWD reaction plan and prevention measure. It is nearing five years since CWD was found in Michigan’s wild and free ranging whitetail deer herd and here we are defending the best science against subjective opposition based on weak secondary factors.

The MDNR is charged with protecting and preserving our very valuable natural resources with the best science. They provide a very high level of professional expertise, knowledge, and advice. They have very effectively provided the guidance for regulating our natural resources for a very long time, and react to and make changes when appropriate. The MDNR’s CWD ACTION PLAN was established in 2002 because it was considered a disaster if CWD was found in Michigan. That plan, which is used today, mentions that **prevention** is more important than reaction to the presence of CWD. The MDNR with the CWD Action Plan, the results of the CWD Symposium, the expanded scientific research today, the historical evidence, and Michigan’s management within the CWD zone all indicate the presence of CWD is a disaster. The vast majority of the scientists, researchers, and wild life professionals agree that baiting will enhance the spread of CWD. There is an absence of both scientific support and rational for considering agriculture and retail bait sales as a factor in the management of CWD in the wild and free ranging deer herd.

~~T~~he effectiveness of baiting in increasing the overall deer harvest has been claimed as a need to continue baiting to increase deer harvest. From subjective observations, an individual hunter using bait may spend less time in harvesting a deer but drawing the conclusion that the total deer harvest would be diminished without baiting is unfounded.

An analysis of the potential of baiting to effect the overall deer harvest starts by identifying the primary components and becoming aware of how they react with the major factors that affect them during the period of interest. The primary components in this case are the deer and the hunter. There are numerous other secondary elements/factors in this situation that affect either the hunter or the deer. This would include the time frame that must be focused on for study, which would include the annual deer seasons of nearly three months, and the time the deer hunter typically hunts over the bait which is typically for a very limited number of days. Then consider that hunting over bait is isolated to a specific location while the deer are in a near constant moving/travel pattern. This analysis is made on a wide geographic basis as conditions are more prone to be stable than on a small parcel where other local conditions not included throughout the wide area could show a different result. For instance, there is not much doubt that any individual hunter is likely to harvest a deer in less time with bait than without. However that does not consider the deer component or other factors.

Consider the dispersion of the deer population over the landscape as compared to the dispersion of the number of hunters on the landscape for a limited number of days. The wild and free ranging whitetail deer herd is in near constant change of location over time, and this is what all deer hunters depend upon for observing deer while afield. Hunters harvesting deer over bait are isolated, limited to daylight hours, and further limited by the number of days afield. Further consider the difference in deer dispersion over the landscape during the hunting period between when baiting is utilized and when it is not utilized. Obviously it could have both the effect of drawing deer to the bait reducing the deer dispersion in other areas. This could have the effect of increasing deer observations and potential harvest for those hunters that hunt over bait, while decreasing the deer observations and potential harvest by other hunters. Also any deer harvested over bait reduces the number of deer dispersed over the landscape and available for harvest by other hunters. Any increase in the total harvest of wild and free ranging whitetail deer is significantly minimized as any deer harvested over bait may be considered as a displacement of harvest by another hunter at another location at a different time. This is typical of all hunter convenience materials like calls, rattling, scents, decoys, cameras, tree stands, and camo blinds.

There are many variables that affect the harvest of wild and free ranging whitetail deer, with time spent in the woods at the right location and time being the very important, regardless of baiting. Typically hunters, as well as bait hunters, try to select a deer travel area/corridor for placement of a blind. The bait hunter typically harvests only one deer regardless of the number of deer observed, and quite probably would have harvested a deer at that location without baiting. Other hunters in the same area may be limiting deer movement to a baiting location. Deer movement in general is probably the most important variable in evaluating the effectiveness of deer baiting. Deer movement is an important behavior in a deer’s survival, and it also exposes them to hunters. Other factors that can negatively affect benefit of baiting include the availability of natural food (acorns), some baits are more effective than others, periods of reduced deer travel, deer movement being more nocturnal, adverse weather limiting deer and hunter activity. Also there are no guarantees of harvesting a deer or observing deer by using bait as many bait hunters have learned.

Considering all of the variables that can detract from increasing the overall deer harvest, it is highly improbable that the total deer harvest could be significantly increased by baiting. A ban on deer baiting is needed as the science indicates that baiting will enhance the spread of CWD, CWD is a disaster, and there is no objective evidence that baiting can be effective in increasing the overall harvest. **Baiting needs to be banned to help reduce the spread and prevalence of CWD.**

Thank you for reading.