DEER BAITING ANALYSIS

By Dick Zook, June 2019

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.  What needs to be focused on today, with the presence of CWD in the wild and free ranging whitetail deer herd?  The only primary factor to consider in the baiting issue today is Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD).  If it were not for CWD, we, the hunting community, the MDNR and the NRC, would not even have this issue before us.

CWD was identified about 50 years ago and is now found in 25 states, it is always fatal, and appears to be spreading at an increasing rate.  How many other locations has CWD spread to but has not yet been exposed?  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 Michigan and the MDNR to face in my 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 **implementing a baiting ban** as a **required action** for both a CWD reaction plan and prevention measure.  It has been four years since CWD was found in Michigan’s wild and free ranging whitetail deer herd and here we are stuck in the mud and spinning our wheels on taking **urgent** preventative action where CWD has not yet been found.

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, experience, 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 immediate implementation of reactive deer management measures, including a baiting ban, emphasizes the **urgency** to implement preventative actions.  The vast majority of the scientists, researchers, and wild life professionals agree that baiting will enhance the spread of CWD.   Will the secondary issues of agriculture and retail sales of deer bait trump the survival of the wild and free ranging whitetail deer herd?  How can that be logically explained to the hunting community and the general public?  There is no rationale for considering agriculture and retail bait sales as a factor in the management of CWD in the wild and free ranging deer herd.

The NRC is a diverse and capable body responsible for the oversight of the MDNR.  Why does the legislatures see a need to restrict the MDNR’s and the NRC’s authority to effectively respond to the CWD disaster.  The legislative and political interference in managing the CWD situation in Wisconsin has been a detriment to the wildlife professionals and available science in stemming the spread of CWD. Consider the widespread expansion of CWD in Wisconsin, the adverse involvement of their legislative action in deer management, and the lack of implementing **urgent** effective action to stem the spread of CWD.  **CWD is a disaster**.  Michigan does not want the same result as Wisconsin.  Restricting the responsibility of the MDNR and the NRC only reduces their tools and effectiveness.   The best legislative action to help stem the spread of CWD would be to enact legislation to ban the sale of deer bait.

As a secondary consideration, the effectiveness of baiting in increasing the overall harvest has been presented as a need to continue baiting to maintain or 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.   Where is the scientific data that analyzes deer baiting and can conclude that baiting will not only increase the harvest but by how much?  There is still a lot to understand and know about the effectiveness of deer baiting.  The hunter typically harvests only one deer regardless of the number of deer observed, and quite probably would have harvested a deer without baiting.  Also, a deer harvested over bait probably has the effect of decreasing the harvest by hunters at other locations and times.  There are many uncontrolled variables that affect the harvest of wild and free ranging whitetail deer, with time spent in the woods at the right location being the most important.

Hunters baiting for deer almost always indicate an increase in observations.  However there is no definitive study or evidence to validate an increase in observations or how much of an increase.  Certainly, placement of bait does not guarantee that deer will be observed that would be harvested.  Baiting is no guarantee of harvesting a deer, and it is improbable that baiting could/would significantly increase the total harvest, other than for a small plot of land.  Deer movement in general is probably the most important variable in evaluating the effectiveness of deer baiting. Any assessment/evaluation of baiting for wild and free ranging deer must include the variables from the effects of deer dynamics and behavior, hunter activities, and statistics and probabilities.

Consideration of the variables is critical in evaluating the potential effect of baiting on the overall deer harvest as they provide a perspective on how significant an effect they have on deer movement, limiting exposure, and at some point being exposed to a hunter regardless of baiting.  Some of the variables from the deer hunter perspective include blind placement, deer travel corridors, deer observations and density, time of day, and available natural food.  Some of the variables from the deer dynamics perspective  include deer movement and exposure to other hunters, feeding patterns, preference for natural foods, deer density and competition for food, physical condition and need for food, available natural food, distance to food, hunter density and disturbance, nocturnal behavior, and predator influence.

Considering all of the variables, many of which provide insight into deer dynamics and probable exposure to many hunters, it is highly improbable that the total deer harvest could be significantly increased by baiting.  There are too many variables to conclude that baiting increases deer harvest, specifically with the tendency of the deer herd to continually move, feed on natural foods, and be exposed to other hunters.  A ban on deer baiting is needed as CWD is a disaster, the science indicates that baiting will enhance the spread of CWD, and there is no objective evidence that baiting can be effective in increasing the overall harvest.  **Baiting needs to be banned to reduce the spread of CWD.**

Thank you for reading.

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