



RHODE ISLAND
DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT
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Block Island Deer Management

Frequently Asked Questions

Why is the Town of New Shoreham (Town) working with the Department of Environmental Management (DEM) to implement a deer management program?

- DEM has expertise in habitat and wildlife management and thus plays an important guidance role in this deer management effort in partnership with the Town
- This effort is a partnership between the Town and DEM. DEM is facilitating this work at the request of the Block Island Deer Task Force, which is the subcommittee charged by the Town Council to address deer management issues on behalf of the Town.
- Deer were introduced to the island in the 1960s by DEM at the request of town residents.
- The current deer population is at an ecologically unhealthy level.
- Based upon population surveys conducted by DEM, it is estimated that there are 80 to 100 deer per square mile, with as many as 1,000 deer island-wide, which far exceeds the recommended range of 8 to 15 deer per square mile.
- As a result of this large population, there has been and continues to be significant habitat destruction on the island which:
 - limits coastal shrubland regeneration
 - prevents state endangered wild flowers from reproducing
 - allows for the expansion of invasive plant species that may be un-edible to deer
- These impacts have been confirmed by scientists on the island, and are supported by many scientific studies on the impacts of deer over-population on habitat.
- These studies show:
 - many wildflowers begin to decline when deer densities exceed 10-15/square mile
 - songbirds using ground and shrub layers are affected (foraging, nesting, cover from predators) at densities of 20 deer/square mile .
- Additional local research shows that deer browse 97% of the state endangered northern blazing star drastically reducing the seed production needed to regenerate and sustain this species.

What evidence is there to show deer are the problem?

- There are no other wild large grazing mammals on the island.
- The deer browse line is quite obvious in most of the habitat types on the island.

What are the alternatives – why aren't they being implemented?

- Fencing and repellents: difficult to maintain and not practical on an island wide scale.
- Capture and release: limited or no appropriate release areas; extremely expensive with no clear impact when dealing with a population as large as the one on Block Island.

- Immunocontraception: current methods are not effective for open free ranging populations and provide no short term or immediate resolution at a large population level.
- No action/continued hunting: while hunting assists in harvesting between 150 and 200 deer each year the population continues to increase exponentially, which leads to:
 - further loss of native vegetation (including state endangered wildflowers)
 - prohibits successful shrubland regeneration
 - Leads to an increase of inedible invasive species plant species
 - potential for dramatic decline in deer population due to starvation when food resources become depleted.

What is the cost of the Program and who is paying for it?

- The cost for the deer reduction program over 5 years could be as high as \$650,000, however significant cost savings may be realized through in-kind services from the community. The funds required for the first year of the program have already been raised by the Block Island Deer Task Force. No public funds or local tax dollars are being used to fund the first year of the deer reduction effort.
- DEM, like other state wildlife agencies, is authorized and funded to provide technical advice and assistance for the purpose of effective deer management; however, there is neither federal nor state funding available for implementation of local culling operations. Nevertheless, DEM continues to provide many hours of in-kind staff time to assist with the deer reduction efforts in the Town, and will continue to allocate significant staff resources to this effort.
- Without exception, in other areas in the region that have undertaken deer reduction efforts the cost of baiting, culling, processing, and disposal has always been covered by some entity other than the natural resource agency.
- This effort is a partnership between the Town and DEM. DEM is completing this work at the request of the Block Island Deer Task Force which has already raised the funds for the first year of work.

Why is bait and shoot considered the most effective method of control?

- The current recreational hunting opportunities offered on the island have been successful in harvesting deer; however, the existing harvest has not been significant enough to stabilize or decrease the growing deer population on the island. The Block Island Deer Task Force, the Town and DEM have evaluated all possible methods of deer reduction (see alternatives section) and bait and shoot has the highest impact and is the most cost effective for dealing with the current unique situation that exists on Block Island.

Won't fewer deer create conditions favorable to increased offspring production?

- The goal for this cooperative effort is to reduce the deer population to a level that ensures the population is not stressed and reproductive rates are stable. To achieve this goal, the Town must work with DEM over the next several years to stabilize the population, and after that stabilization is achieved, continue to ensure a healthy population is maintained.

How is the safety of the public being taken into account?

- Safety is of the utmost concern. With guidance from the Block Island Deer Task Force and the Town, DEM will contract with a very experienced and highly regarded company working on deer population management, White Buffalo, Inc. White Buffalo, Inc has

worked cooperatively with governmental and community partners to remove over 10,000 deer since the start of their company in 1995 and have a robust and standardized safety protocol.

- All baiting areas will be closed to the public. Appropriate signage will be placed for public information in collaboration with local law enforcement officials. The expert marksmen working for White Buffalo, Inc will be shooting down from elevated positions to ensure safety and precision.
- White Buffalo, Inc has significant experience working in suburban areas, and is familiar with and has tailored their safety protocols to accommodate areas more populated than Block Island.
- The Town, the Block Island Deer Task Force, and DEM will work very closely with White Buffalo, Inc to ensure safety during the bait and shoot operation.

How long will this management effort last?

- This is the first year of a multi-year effort, which is estimated to last up to 5 years or more. Once the population is reduced to the desired level of 80-150 total deer, the population will be closely monitored and maintained via recreational hunting opportunities. Following completion of this management effort, DEM will continue to work with the Town, the Block Island Deer Task Force and property owners to ensure adequate population management in the future.
- The baiting will begin approximately near the end of January and will last approximately 5 weeks. Harvesting will occur during the period beginning 2-3 hours before sunset terminating approximately 2-3 hours after sunset under most circumstances in late February or early March. The goal is to reduce the deer population by 200 deer in the project area during the first year of this management effort.
- Upon completion of this multi-year management effort, DEM will closely monitor the deer population via hunting harvest and population survey data. Additional efforts beyond hunting may be necessary at times in the future.

How many people are harvesting deer and for how long?

- Baiting of about 25 sites will occur in January.
- Harvesting at these sites will occur at night over a 2 week period in late February to no later than March 12 by a small crew of trained professionals from stationary elevated positions. Harvesting will be overseen by the Town and DEM and will be carried out by White Buffalo, Inc.

Will the meat from harvested deer be used?

- Yes – there will be a mobile processing unit on island and all meat will be donated to island residents, soup kitchens, game dinners, and other interested parties.

How will the effect of removing deer be measured?

- Annual aerial population surveys have been completed by DEM in monitoring the herd on Block Island over the last several years and population counts will continue to be done by DEM to determine the size of the population as herd reduction is implemented.
- Yale University will continue their research on deer ticks, their vectors, and disease transmittal.

How is the Town, DEM, and Partners managing the island for biodiversity?

- Control of non-native invasive plant species has been ongoing for many years.
- Restoration and maintenance of grassland habitat.
- Continued efforts to protect additional ecologically important lands on the island.

Why not eradicate the deer?

- The goal of this deer management program, developed in coordination with the Town and the Block Island Deer Task Force, is to reduce the deer population to an ecologically healthy level. The goal of the program is not eradication, and eradication is not necessary to achieve the needed habitat improvements and to adequately address the public health concerns associated with the current deer population.
- A substantial reduction of the deer herd, as requested by the Town and supported by DEM, is considered to be a balanced response that will provide sufficient protection to preserve Block Island's unique plant communities and habitat values while still allowing for public enjoyment of this wildlife species (e.g., viewing, hunting).
- Due to the structural density of the habitat complete eradication is not practical from an expense standpoint.

Why are local hunters not being employed to carry out the bait and shoot operation?

- The bait and shoot operation on Block Island, authorized under emergency regulations filed by DEM on November 7, 2013, is not a recreational hunting activity. The emergency regulations provide for a strategic and systematic culling operation based on the science of animal behavior and the use of highly skilled sharp shooters. The knowledge of animal behavior and the discipline and skills in marksmanship are more advanced and strategic than those necessary to be a successful recreational deer hunter. It is necessary for DEM to engage an experienced and professional agent with an outstanding safety record and a proven track record of success for reasons of public safety and for the overall success of the project.

Do all the conservation organizations agree that bait and shoot is the best course of action?

- Yes. For the first time The Nature Conservancy, Block Island Conservancy, Block Island Land Trust, United States Fish and Wildlife Service, and Audubon Society of Rhode Island all agree this is the best course of action to address the deer problem. Each organization has tentatively agreed to open their holding (where legally allowed) to this effort.

I care about Lyme Disease why aren't you addressing the public health concerns?

- While DEM's purview and efforts relate directly to habitat protection and wildlife management, the Department and Town recognize that many residents are concerned about Lyme's Disease and how the large deer population may affect public health.
- To that end, the Block Island Medical Center has engaged the Department of Health, and both have indicated support for the deer reduction program.
- For more information about Lyme's Disease on Block Island, please contact the Division of Infectious Disease and Epidemiology, Rhode Island Department of Health, at 401-222-1577.