

Deer Depredation Permits—Good or Bad from a Law Enforcement Officer's Standpoint?

Seth E. Mott, *Game Division, Mississippi Department of Wildlife Conservation, P.O. Box 451, Jackson, MS 39205*

T. J. Jennings, *Law Enforcement Division, Mississippi Department of Wildlife Conservation, P.O. Box 451, Jackson, MS 39205*

Curtis Green, *Law Enforcement Division, Mississippi Department of Wildlife Conservation, P.O. Box 451, Jackson, MS 39205*

Abstract: Deer depredation permits bring about mixed emotions across the state of Mississippi. Through the diligent work of local conservation officers, the cooperation of landowners, and the Deer Management Assistance Program (DMAP) all parties have a clearer view of the permit system, and realize that it will only work when we all work together.

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The issuance of deer depredation permits always brings mixed emotions to local residents and sportsmen. The hunter who buys a license each year for the opportunity of harvesting a deer cannot understand the need to kill deer during summer months. The landowner, conversely, sees little point in protecting nuisance animals that cause him monetary loss. Caught between these attitudes is the local conservation officer, whose job requires that he respond to both interests. Each year, conservation officers, biologists, and area managers handle hundreds of complaints stemming from agricultural depredation of deer.

The problem of deer depredation increased as Mississippi's deer herd recovered from low numbers in the 1940s and 1950s. In 1957, Mississippi reported that damage by deer was slight (McDowall and Pillsbury 1959). In 1977, there were 127 complaints of deer depredation and 360 deer were destroyed (Moore and Folk 1978). In 1987, more than 100 complaints of deer depredation were received by the Department of Wildlife Conservation (DWC) which resulted in 36 permits issued and over 108 deer destroyed as of 1 September. A decline in deer depredation from the late 1970s has been noted, due in part to the decrease in acreage planted in soybeans. State Statute 49–7–31 authorizes the DWC to issue special permits for the killing of deer when they are depredating crops. This statute also requires that the

killing be supervised by Department employees and that the meat from such animals be salvaged. Present policy of the Department requires that all complaints of deer depredation be referred to a local officer for verification that actual damage is occurring. The officer then requests that a depredation permit be issued by the chief of enforcement. The permit is issued only to DWC personnel and any harassment or killing of deer must be done under his supervision. The permit stipulates that actual killing of deer be allowed only if nonlethal techniques (scare cannons, shell-crackers, firecrackers, etc.) are ineffective and that any shooting is restricted to fields where depredation is currently taking place. The permit is valid for 30 days and it is the responsibility of the officer to deliver the carcasses to local jails, hospitals, or other charitable institutions and obtain a receipt. The officer must file a report with the main office detailing the measures taken, number of deer observed, and number and disposition of any deer taken.

To objectively assess the deer depredation situation, the conservation officer must consider both positive and negative viewpoints concerning the depredation permit.

Negative Aspects

- (1) Time and effort required by the conservation officer.
- (2) Adverse public reaction.
- (3) Increased headlighting activity.

Positive Aspects

- (1) Protection of crops.
- (2) Use of scare techniques instead of killing.
- (3) Increased cooperation between landowners, sportsmen, and conservation officers.

One of the most important aspects of the depredation permit to the conservation officer is the time and effort required to adequately administer its use. Generally, heaviest depredation occurs from late June through July. During this period officers may be required to devote their days to inspecting damaged fields and submitting permit requests while their nights are occupied supervising depredation activities scattered across the county. Often the process of disposing the carcasses is especially difficult. The summer heat requires that the meat be moved to a cooling facility and processed promptly, but many counties lack an institution to which the officer can deliver whole carcass deer. This necessitates time-consuming hours on the road to the nearest county with an adequate facility, if the meat can be kept from spoiling in transit.

In many areas, the killing of depredating deer is unpopular with local sportsmen and hunting clubs. These people desire large deer populations for hunting purposes and help the officer protect the herd by reporting violators. It seems incongruous to them that the DWC permits the killing of deer they have helped protect and could have been harvested by licensed hunters. It is especially unpalatable for

these people because many of the deer taken are does that may have recently dropped fawns which then starve or are taken by predators.

In some areas the general knowledge that deer are being killed under depredation permits leads to increased headlighting activity. Potential violators recognize that the conservation officer is busy supervising the depredation permits and that any shots heard at night may be mistaken for scare cannons or depredation shooting under permit.

The first objective of the depredation permit is to provide a mechanism for the farmer to protect his crops and thus his livelihood. In the past, some farmers have attempted to extirpate deer from their land by clearing any remaining patches of wooded cover. Most farmers are willing to accept some damage if they know the DWC and the conservation officer are willing and able to provide some relief and prevent major losses. The show of concern for the farmer's situation by the DWC fosters a willingness by landowners to accept the presence of deer.

The existence of the depredation permit program also allows the DWC to better control any harassment activities. Most officers believe they would have difficulty obtaining convictions on landowners for killing deer raiding their crops if a suitable alternative did not exist. The permit process also allows the conservation officer to prescribe nonlethal harassment as a prerequisite to any actual shooting. This limits the number of deer actually killed, pleasing the local sportsmen. Perhaps the major benefit of the depredation permit is that it can open a dialog between the major parties in overall deer management—the landowners, sportsmen and the DWC. In general, farmers want less deer, hunters want more deer, and the conservation officer is often caught in the middle. Some officers in Mississippi have used the depredation permit to bring the 2 groups together and reduce their workload.

In Warren County, officers were caught between these 2 interests for a number of years. Soybean farmers and a large hunting association leased the same tract of land from third parties. A large part of the acreage is wooded and traditionally supports a dense deer herd. Each year large numbers of deer were shot in the fields, to the chagrin of the clubs which leased the hunting rights. The deer clubs restricted antlerless harvest because they felt too many were shot in the summer. The conservation officers were able to sit down with representatives of both groups and negotiate a better alternative. The farmers agreed to a curtailment of lethal depredation control. The hunting association agreed to purchase and maintain a number of scare cannons in the farmers' fields and increase their antlerless harvest under the Mississippi Deer Management Assistance Program. Both parties now at least recognize the other's concerns and are willing to seek compromise. The officers now spend less time on depredation and the deer herd is under better management. The depredation permit is no panacea. Numerous studies have shown that the best solution to agricultural damage is to keep deer populations in balance with available habitat through antlerless harvest (Behrend et al. 1970, Shope 1970, Baynes 1974, Matschke et al. 1984). To accomplish this, landowners, sportsmen, and the state wildlife agency must all recognize the problem and agree to work together. At best, the depredation permit can be used to stimulate this cooperation. Otherwise, the

depredation permit remains as a stopgap measure that is used to make a distasteful situation tolerable until a better solution to deer depredation is found.

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