

# Deer Management Plans for Private Lands in Texas

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*Abstract:* In 1979, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) initiated a program permitting landowners with department-approved management plans to harvest antlerless deer (*Odocoileus virginianus* and *O. hemionus*) in numbers exceeding those recommended for general areas by the department. Preparation of management plans and problems encountered with the program are discussed.

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Wildlife managers regard wildlife as a harvestable renewable resource that can be cultivated to produce a sustained yield. Although sustained yields have been maintained on most game species through restrictive harvest regulations, private lands in Texas have rarely been intensively managed for wildlife.

However, this attitude appears to be changing. Since the mid-1970s there has been a surge of interest in white-tailed deer management on Texas rangelands. Where in the 1950s and 1960s the TPWD spent much of its time promoting and defending antlerless deer hunting, in the 1970s it began receiving requests for more antlerless deer permits than the number allocated on the basis of TPWD surveys.

This placed the TPWD in a dilemma. Since the 1940s it had promoted the harvest of antlerless deer, generally with little success (Winkler 1981). Now it was faced with a small minority of landowners desiring to not only harvest all the antlerless deer recommended by the department, but to exceed these recommendations by a substantial margin.

Investigations revealed that many of the ranchers requesting additional antlerless deer permits had employed qualified wildlife biologists who had prepared detailed plans for the management of the wildlife resources on their property. In most cases, surveys of the deer population and the habitat had been conducted to support the requests for the additional permits.

In 1975, the department authorized its personnel to give landowners a

double issuance of antlerless deer permits if certain conditions were met. However, many of the surveys from private ranches indicated that more than a double issuance of antlerless permits was necessary to meet the objectives of the management plans. Consequently, in 1979 the department addressed this issue in its antlerless deer permit issuance procedures by stating, "unless a tract is operating under a department-approved management plan, the number of supplemental (antlerless deer) permits issued will not exceed the number for which the tract initially qualified." Although this was an indirect approach to the issue, the intent of these instructions was to authorize the issuance of as many permits as were necessary to achieve the objectives of a management plan.

It soon became apparent that guidelines for preparing and evaluating private management plans needed to be established to assist the field staff in carrying out the program. The remainder of this paper will be spent discussing the preparation of management plans and some of the problems that have been encountered.

### **Preparation of Management Plans**

What is a department-approved management plan?

A management plan is simply a written document detailing the practices that are to be implemented on a specific tract for the purpose of managing the wildlife resources on that tract.

Who may prepare a management plan?

Anybody can prepare and submit a management plan to the department for approval. The preparer of a management plan is not required to have formal training in wildlife management or ecology; however, such training is helpful in addressing the essential elements that must be included in the plan.

What are the essential elements of a management plan?

The most important element of a plan is the objective. This must be a clear statement of what the manager intends to accomplish and must be expressed in measurable terms.

Other essential elements of a plan are:

a. A description of the area (ranch) to which the plan will apply including geographic location, size, habitat types, land use, numbers and types of domestic livestock, fencing, type of livestock grazing system, agricultural crops, and any other information that may have an impact on the plan.

b. A general discussion of wildlife species present and relative abundance. This information is usually available from the preparer's personal knowledge of the property. If not, it can be obtained from a TPWD employee

who has a general knowledge of the wildlife situation in the area. The plan should also contain a record of recent deer harvests (past 5 years) and any other pertinent information, such as sex and age composition of the harvest, body weights, and antler development.

c. A description of the procedures that will be used to attain the objective. These procedures should include an annual census and a record system to measure progress toward the objective.

d. The signature of the person who prepared the plan, the date it was prepared, and the signature of the landowner indicating his concurrence with the plan.

What is the time frame for a management plan?

Management plans must be updated at least every 3 years. However, if used to justify hunting permits in excess of those available through normal issuance rates, the plan must be supported with annual census data and harvest records as evidence of compliance with the plan. Approval will be rescinded if evidence of compliance is not presented.

How much latitude does a landowner or manager have in implementing his management plan?

The landowner cannot exceed any legal restraints in implementing his management plan. In other words, he cannot harvest outside the legal season or beyond the prescribed bag limits, nor can he employ other than legal means and methods for taking game. Likewise, the TPWD will not approve a management plan that prescribes unsound ecological principles.

The initial review of a plan typically involves an evaluation of the objective to ensure that it is attainable and measurable and of the procedures to ensure that they involve a logical progression toward attainment of the objective. In subsequent reviews, progress toward attainment of the objective is determined through evaluation of deer population trends, herd composition, harvests, antler development, and body weights.

Is there a prescribed format for preparing management plans?

There is not a mandatory format, although the TPWD has a standard form for use by its personnel. The important thing is to include all of the essential elements discussed earlier.

How is department approval attained?

Department approval is obtained by submitting the plan to a TPWD biologist for review and evaluation. Typically, a management plan is reviewed and evaluated by a department biologist and forwarded to his district leader. The district leader is the lowest echelon at which a management plan may be approved.

## Problems

Very few problems have arisen since the program was initiated in 1979. Those most often cited by TPWD personnel are listed here.

### Volume of Requests

With less than 5 biologists assigned to the Technical Guidance Program it is impossible for the TPWD to handle the demand for assistance. That is why we have stressed that the plan must be "department-approved," but may be prepared by anyone.

### Unqualified Preparers

This is really a potential problem rather than an existing one. To date very few of the plans submitted have been unacceptable and most of these have been approved after a TPWD employee has discussed the plan with the preparer and recommended modifications have been accomplished.

### Timing

Most management plans are submitted immediately prior to the opening of hunting season, often when a landowner comes in to pick up his antlerless deer permits. This is a real problem and one that we simply have to get hard-nosed about. The evaluation and approval of management plans is simply an extra task taken on by the Wildlife Division and must be secondary to many other activities. Our personnel have been instructed not to attempt to review and evaluate a management plan on the spot, especially when other people may be waiting in line to get deer hunting permits through normal procedures. However, a landowner may obtain a normal issue of permits and submit a management plan with a request for additional permits, to be issued after the plan has been reviewed and approved.

TPWD requests that management plans be submitted as early in the year as possible to provide ample time for review and evaluation.

### Discrepancy in Quotas

Harvest quotas derived from management plans are usually much higher than those generated from TPWD surveys. Why is there such a large discrepancy?

This is apparently a function of the management objective of the plan and the intensity and the type of survey employed. Some survey techniques are inherently high and in many cases a ranch is not large enough to permit a truly representative survey to be conducted. A management plan that prescribes a significant reduction of the deer population or a major adjustment of the sex ratio will usually result in a high antlerless deer harvest recommendation.

## **Conclusions**

The acceptance of deer management plans for private lands was initiated to provide Texas landowners with an incentive for considering wildlife as an integral part of their ranching programs. At the present time more than 16 million acres are under some degree of management through TPWD's Technical Guidance Program and several million more are managed through the efforts of the Agricultural Extension Service, Soil Conservation Service, and private consultants. Most of these management programs are directed at improvement of the white-tailed deer resource. Benefits to wildlife have accrued as a result of habitat improvements, reduction of deer herds to carrying capacity, and more optimal utilization of the wildlife resources.

## **Literature Cited**

- Winkler, C. K. 1981. Texas antlerless deer hunting system—methods and effectiveness. Proc. Annu. Conf. Southeast. Assoc. Fish and Wildl. Agencies. 35: 292–296.