

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

What Can We Do About Whitetail Deer

By Bill Fortune

I'm starting to wonder if the timber stand improvement that I started three years ago on my property really will be an improvement. My management plan is that I remove less desirable trees and count on regeneration to provide better ones, an improvement. After the first year I saw the sprouts coming up from the oaks and maples just as anticipated. It wasn't long after when reality set in. I expected the deer to nibble the sprouts a little but I wasn't prepared for the extent of it. About 90 % of my sprouts were gone. Being an eternal optimist I thought next year would be better but it wasn't. It was worse. Sadly, after about three years the stumps will stop sending up sprouts and I'll be hoping for the even less reliable method of sprouts from acorns and seeds. No new trees is not an improvement.

I have allowed hunting of deer on my property for years, consistently getting four to six deer per year, seemingly a good balance, enough to have regeneration of both deer and trees. Over the last few years the scale has been tipped in the deer's favor. I've been talking to other tree farmers and I'm not alone. One tree farmer told me that he is consistently harvesting more than twenty deer per year on his property and still is seeing no regeneration at all. The reality is that the deer population is growing and the interest in hunting and the regeneration of hardwoods is down. RIFCO and several other governmental and nonprofit conservation agencies are also starting to recognize this. There are several ideas on how to decrease deer damage including building massive networks of fencing and sterilization of does, both of which are expensive and impractical. Tom Rawinski of the U.S. Forest Service gave a presentation on deer damage at RIFCO's February 22, 2014 Woodland Owner Workshop. Not only did he highlight how deer damage affects a wider range of things such as increase in Lyme disease and invasive plant populations and decrease in native wildflowers and other threatened plants, he also stated how he believed that we were rapidly approaching a tipping point with the deer population. This should be something to really get our attention.

The Providence Journal printed a letter to the editor on April 4, 2014 that I submitted on behalf of RIFCO. In the letter I referenced the deer problem on Block Island and went on to note the magnitude of the problem in southern New England. I finished by asking RIDEM for help with this issue. RIFCO has been petitioning RIDEM over the last few years with a modest proposal for help. We proposed that tree farmers who engage in hunting of deer on their property (under normal hunting season and bag limits) and can demonstrate that regeneration of hardwoods is significantly reduced due to deer browse will be eligible for a nuisance hunting permit. We thought that the nuisance permit could be extended to tree farmers, similar to the permits that are currently available to other agricultural producers. RIDEM acknowledged that there is a problem and that our proposal sounded like a good idea but unfortunately it is not easy to change state laws and they would need additional staff, which they don't have, to administer this proposed program. So what do we do? Start by spreading the word. RIFCO's next woodland walk scheduled on May 3, 2013 will incorporate this topic. Encourage starting or increasing

safe lawful hunting of deer on your property. Contact your local state representative and or RIDEM and ask for help with this issue. Hopefully the squeaky wheel gets the oil sooner than later and we can recover the balance between deer populations and healthy productive forests.