

Deer Hunters Ask “What About that Private/Public Thing?”

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This week Senator Kathleen Vinehout writes about the upcoming deer hunt and changes made to deer hunting rules.

ALMA, WI - “What happens if I have a public permit because I’m not rich enough to afford a private one?” the deer hunter asked me. “I shoot a deer and it runs across the road. There’s my deer. It’s not dead. But I don’t have a private permit to go get it.”

“It just seems to me that the new rules are set up to force people to lease hunting land because there are more permits on private land than public land.”

Deer hunters taking to the woods in Wisconsin are facing a slew of new hunting rules. Hunters will experience the long-talked-about rules of the Texan ‘Deer Czar’ James Kroll.

In the DNR’s words, the new rules change the “season framework, management units and antlerless deer hunting permits”. DNR press releases tout their “robust public outreach” and the “Deer Trustee Report” guiding this year’s changes.

Gone are “management zones” setting deer overwinter population goals. Gone are free tags & \$2 tags in highly populated or CWD areas; gone are landowner deer tags. Soon-to-be gone is registering your deer at the local bar or convenience store.

Deer management units – usually set by natural boundaries and major highways – are replaced by county borders and four major ‘management zones’. Urban areas have their own “metro units”. DNR is pilot testing deer registration on-line. Next year all registration will be on-line.

Rules about antlerless tags are the biggest rule changes affecting hunters. Everyone who purchases a license will receive one buck and one doe or youngster (antlerless) tag. Many hunters, including our family, hunt for food. Filling the freezer with many critters, especially with hamburger prices rising, can make a real difference in the food budget. Buying tags was easy, cheap and –when deer were plentiful – families could easily fill up freezers for the year.

Now those ‘extra tags’ are limited. First, you do not get an extra tag when you buy archery and then a gun license. The new deer-hunting license is not weapon specific – meaning you can shoot an antlerless deer in archery season - that’s it for the year.

Second, tags are more expensive (6 times more expensive), limited, and depend on whether you hunt a private or public area.

Many times Secretary Cathy Stepp repeated, “The rules have changed, but the tradition remains.” Hunters whom I’ve spoken with wonder if all we’ll have years from now is the fond memory of what used to be Wisconsin’s very equal deer hunting tradition. Many things are changing. New rules could hasten the loss of our populist deer hunt.

For years those who live in the Northwoods have hunted paper mill land. Now the companies don’t need the pulp and they are selling off the land. Hunters concerned about the deer rule changes reminded me, “open for public hunting” is different than “public land”. Mostly land up north is corporate owned but “open to the public”.

What happens when the land is sold?

Cash strapped counties up north are contributing to the problem. As one Eau Claire hunter whose family hunts up north told me, “Starve local government and things suffer. Local government looks for cash. The state isn’t giving them enough to keep up with the demand for

services. So they clear-cut the county forest. The deer are driven out of the forest because the forest isn't there anymore.”

Convenience store owners and hunters are also concerned about on-line registration. Storeowners are worried folks won't stop for coffee and a doughnut if they register deer on-line. Hunters tell me: change the rules, make it hard to get public tags, expensive to hunt in private land and leave folks on their own to register a deer? Isn't this asking for trouble?

Murmuring among hunters I've heard deals with the 'artificial' boundary between public and private. Deer don't know who owns what. “If I shoot a deer on public land and he wanders across to private land, do I go get him and break the law, or let him suffer?” The general consensus was.... You can imagine.

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