

January 7, 2011

Regulated Deer Hunt on Dover Open Town Land

The first annual deer hunt by experienced, volunteer, bow hunters on Dover Open Town Land has been successfully implemented and completed. Directed by the Lyme Disease Committee of the Dover Board of Health this pilot program was held during the MA State Hunting Season (October 18th through December 31st, 2010). Hunting hours began ½ hour before sunrise and closed ½ hour after sunset on Monday through Saturday with no hunting on Sunday. Hunting was not permitted within 150 feet of roads or 500 feet of buildings or dwellings. Hunting was from fixed tree stands placed away from marked trails. The tree stands are in the process of being removed. There was extensive signage on trails and entrances to the selected properties.

All hunters were authorized by the Board of Health and underwent extensive qualifying interviews by Lyme Disease Agents (LDA) of the Lyme Disease Committee as well as a background checks by the Dover Police Department. Authorized hunters were required to carry Board of Health identification cards on their person, displayed on the dashboard of their car and on their tree stand. A total of 31 qualified bow hunters participated in the program.

The LDAs were informed by the hunters within 48 hours as to the location, date and time of all deer taken. A complete listing was maintained by the LDAs and the Board of Health. As of October 18, 2010, the following six properties participated in this pilot program: The Gregg Property (Dover Land Conservation Trust), Snow Hills Reservation and Claybrook Road property (Conservation Commission with approval of the Dover Board of Selectmen), along with Chase Woodlands, Peters Reservation and Powissett Farm (The Trustees of the Reservation). A total of approximately 200 acres were identified as suitable for hunting.

As of December 31, 2010, a total of 19 deer were culled - 16 does and 3 bucks. No injuries and/or complaints were reported to the Police Department, the Board of Health, or the LDAs. Two letters of concern about the concept of killing deer were received by the Board of Health prior to the beginning of the hunting season. Several authorized hunters discovered evidence of illegal hunting on town land, but were unable to identify any subjects. Illegal tree stands were removed from various locations.

It should be noted that based on substantial research over the last several years, two surveys of town residents, and a Lyme Disease Forum, the Board of Health declared Lyme Disease a health threat to the town's residents. Black-legged ticks, often infected with Lyme disease as a result of first feeding on mouse blood, prefer the white-tailed deer when seeking a larger host. The more deer there are, the higher the chances of Lyme disease spreading to humans.

In order to manage this health threat, the Board of Health implemented a three-pronged approach over the last 2.5 years:

1. Continuous education of adults and school children about the means of personal protection from tick bites. Current efforts include distribution of materials such as tick cards and instructions on the town website doverma.org (Lyme Disease Advisory) and school information channels.
2. Continuous education of residents and organizations how to create tick-safe zones on private and recreational properties in Dover by distribution of materials and instructions on the town website.
3. Responsible management of the deer population via progressive reduction of deer density through a strictly regulated and monitored deer hunting on Open Town Land and Spaces.

As outlined previously, the now completed pilot hunting project was based on Mass Wildlife (MWL) experience and guidance together with Dover-specific rules and regulations. With the success of this pilot program, we expect the controlled hunt on Town land to continue during next year's hunting season, and for several years thereafter. It is our hope to collaborate with adjacent towns and develop our program into a regional program. Dover is located in Zone 10 of MWL with one of the highest incidence rates of Lyme Disease in the state and a deer population of 25-30/square mile of forested land. A healthy deer population density is considered 6-8 deer /square mile.

The Dover Board of Health and Lyme Disease Committee believe that a controlled hunt to progressively reduce Dover deer density to a healthy and reasonable deer population will:

- Reduce deer tick density with a concomitant reduction of the incidence of Lyme Disease
- Reduce vehicle-deer collisions
- Provide a healthy ecological balance of natural and man-made vegetation
- Provide for a healthy deer population