

July 28, 2023

Honorable Christian Dorsey, Chair
Arlington County Board
Ellen M. Bozman Government Center
2100 Clarendon Blvd, Suite 300
Arlington, VA 22201

Re: Correcting Misinformation on Deer Management Project

Dear Chair Dorsey:

The Forestry and Natural Resources Commission (FNRC) recognizes and appreciates the thoughtful and substantively sound approach taken by the Department of Parks and Recreation on the important issue of deer management. As the FNRC previously described in our letters of October 2020, November 2021, and June 2023, we believe that reducing the size of the deer population in the County is critical for preserving and enhancing the County's natural resources on public and private land.

The Commission also understands that deer management can be an emotional issue, with strong opinions on both sides of the issue. That is why it is so important that the discussion and the public education efforts be firmly grounded in facts, not emotions, supported by the best scientific research.

It is especially unfortunate, therefore, that the Animal Welfare League of Arlington (AWLA) has been publicizing incorrect and misleading information about deer management. The FNRC has been a strong supporter of AWLA in the past, and the Commission is reluctant to criticize such an important community organization. But in this case, the FNRC believes we have no choice. In keeping with the key mission elements in our charter, the FNRC has a civic duty to point out and formally object to the disinformation from the AWLA, which could cause serious harm to the County's natural resources.

Here are the most damaging incorrect or misleading statements that the AWLA has posted on its website or sent out in emails to its supporters:

- As explained in the contractor's report to the County, the natural resources of the County are clearly suffering from the efforts of deer overpopulation because the number of deer exceed the so-called "carrying capacity" of the

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environment. The AWLA, however, disputes the conclusion of overpopulation, arguing that “carrying capacity” is a “political judgment that is not rooted in biology.” That is simply wrong. The concept of carrying capacity has been explicitly recognized for more than 180 years, is taught in nearly every ecology textbook, and has been successfully used to study the populations of thousands of different species, including many individual populations of deer.¹ AWLA is likely confusing “cultural carrying capacity” with “ecological carrying capacity.”

- AWLA states that “that hunting deer can negatively impact other animals such as snakes, salamanders, amphibians, and many invertebrates.” Not true. All the evidence, including numerous peer-reviewed scientific studies, shows the exact opposite: Deer overpopulation has devastating effects on the songbirds, small mammals, reptiles, amphibians, insects, and other creatures that depend upon the understory habitat that overpopulations of deer destroy.²
- AWLA erroneously states that Arlington County does not have a deer overpopulation problem. They use the number of deer spotted in the drone survey (290) to calculate that Arlington County has 13 deer per square mile, within the scientifically accepted carrying capacity for deer of 5-15 animals per square mile. But this argument is both wrong and absurd. First, the survey contractor clearly stated that the drone count was an absolute minimum count, and the number of deer is likely higher. More egregious, the AWLA argument assumes that all of Arlington—including the extensive urban corridors and single-family neighborhoods—provides active deer habitat. In fact, as the drone survey clearly documented, the deer population is concentrated in County and private park and recreational land. When one uses the “open space” or “historical natural areas” in the County as the denominator of the calculation, the population numbers rise to a staggering level—60 to 250 deer per square mile. The studies done by contractors Steward Green and White Buffalo for the County show that the deer in these areas are having devastating effects on the vital forest understory and other plants, with browse rates “ranging from 80-100%.” Restoring a healthy environment requires significant reductions in these browse rates.
- AWLA opposes deer management options that would reduce deer numbers through hunting, arguing that Fairfax City has effectively controlled its deer population with deer sterilization in Fairfax City. This is not correct. The Fairfax City project was a five-year study, it has been stopped and did not show success. Indeed, we understand that the Department of Wildlife Resources will not approve of sterilization as a population management tool. In contrast, successful culling programs have been implemented in scores of urban and suburban

¹ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/agricultural-and-biological-sciences/carrying-capacity>

² https://www.fs.usda.gov/nrs/pubs/jrnl/1994/ne_1994_decalesta_001.pdf
<https://ecosystems.psu.edu/outreach/youth/sftrc/deer/issue-deer>

communities across the United States, bringing dramatic improvements in the local environments.

Frankly, the FNRC is puzzled by the AWLA's opposition to reducing Arlington's deer population, because studies also show that lower numbers of deer in the County would result in healthier deer, an outcome that an animal welfare organization should support.

Finally, the FNRC objects to the AWLA's characterization of advocates for deer management as being "anti-deer." Nothing could be further from the truth. The FNRC believes deer are beautiful examples of the magnificent nature that surrounds us. Deer are native to our area and they belong in our forests. However, our precious natural environment is now significantly out of balance. If the County fails to manage the deer population, the deer will continue to destroy the habitat that sustains all local wildlife—including that of the deer themselves.

Thank you for this opportunity to share our views on this important topic.

Sincerely,



Phil Klingelhofer, Chair
Forestry and Natural Resources Commission

Cc: Members, Arlington County Board
Mark Schwartz, Arlington County Manager
Jane Rudolph, Director, Department of Parks and Recreation
Samuel Wolbert, President and CEO, Animal Welfare League of Arlington