

CLIMATE CHANGE, ENERGY, AND ENVIRONMENT COMMISSION

c/o Department of Environmental Services
2100 Clarendon Blvd., Suite 705
Arlington, VA 22201

July 25, 2024

Honorable Libby Garvey, Chair
Arlington County Board
2100 Clarendon Blvd., Suite 300
Arlington, VA 22201

Re: Arlington County Deer Management

Dear Chair Garvey:

We commend the County Parks and Recreation Division for undertaking the background research needed to demonstrate with data the deleterious effects of white-tailed deer on our forests.

Deer preferentially browse native species, leaving exotic invasive plants to expand in cover, effectively replacing native herbaceous plants and reducing the regenerative capacity of our forests, as native tree seedlings are selectively browsed by white-tailed deer. When a large canopy tree comes down, there are few smaller trees available to take advantage of the light gap, giving exotic invasive plants the advantage. Between exotic plants and deer browsing on native tree seedlings, we are losing our woods.

Two County-funded studies have been conducted collecting white-tailed deer population data and vegetation effects. According to the White Buffalo report, overall, 88% of all stems examined across Arlington exhibited browse damage by deer, and mean deer browse rates on native understory in the study plots were high, ranging from 83–92%. This level of damage is harming Arlington forests, which a range of native wildlife from invertebrates to birds depend on.

Recent research and anecdotal evidence from some of our nearby jurisdictions has shown that even keeping the deer population to 15 deer/square mile, while helpful in reestablishing cover, is not enough to reestablish species diversity (Knauer, et. al. 2024). Potentially active management may be necessary to reintroduce native species that may have been locally extirpated along with invasive plant treatment. Also we recommend incorporating flexibility in the deer management plan should the vegetation response not be adequate with 15-20 deer/square mile.

We urge the County to move forward with deer management, focusing on sharpshooting. Sterilization is stressful for animals, and research has shown that it is not effective in open populations.

We also urge the County to monitor vegetation to document the ongoing effects of deer browse on native cover, seedling stocking rate, and species diversity. All three metrics need to show improvement to maintain a healthy forest. Restricting data collection to vegetation and deer population data will clarify the county goals of forest restoration rather than straying from this primary goal by collecting ancillary data such as tick borne diseases rates and deer/vehicle collisions.

Finally we urge the County to monitor deer population yearly. There are multiple methods of censusing the white-tailed deer population from cameras to spotlighting (either by roads or on foot following transects), to pellet counting. Neighboring jurisdictions use the yearly population numbers to help set that year's cull rate, and it would be helpful for County managers to have this information yearly.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Cindy Lewin". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Cindy Lewin, Chair

Citation:

Can. J. For. Res. 53: 379–390 (2023) | [dx.doi.org/10.1139/cjfr-2022-0234](https://doi.org/10.1139/cjfr-2022-0234)