



Fact Sheet 8

What is the way forward?

Town Ordinance 4-75 provides that, with input from the RCC, the BOS may from *time to time* authorize a controlled hunt of deer on open space lands. Neither the town ordinance nor the BOS suggest that the hunt be held annually but rather as needed and subject to review. Thus, the purpose of these fact sheets is to provide the background information that the public will need to know to make the decision whether to continue, stop, or modify the hunt going forward. First, in summary, what do we know? Then, how do we move forward?

What do we know?

- Out of 23 towns in Fairfield County, only six sponsor a controlled hunt on town land. Four of those towns restrict hunting to bow only. Only Ridgefield and Wilton close trails (Fact Sheet 1.2).
- After 13 consecutive years of controlled hunting, the Deer Committee in conjunction with DEEP estimates that deer populations in Ridgefield have declined from 40-80 per square mile in 2005 to approximately 20 at present (as reported by DEEP biologist Howard Kilpatrick during a 2017 RCC meeting), which is the often cited “goal.” However, current deer numbers in Ridgefield are likely to be more like 40 per square mile based on a 2019 aerial survey for Fairfield County (Fact Sheet 2.1). In fact, no one can really say for sure what the current deer density is.
- Fewer and fewer deer are being taken each year in the controlled hunt. In 2006 when Ridgefield approved the controlled hunt, 309 deer were removed from town open space parcels. The number of deer fluctuated over the next few years, first dropping to 268 in 2007, before increasing sharply to 365 in 2008. After reaching a high of 416 in 2009, for nearly a decade this number has steadily declined, reaching a low point of 155 in 2018 (Fact Sheet 2.2; Table 2.2-1). Anecdotal reports from local residents of fewer deer sightings in Ridgefield and neighboring Fairfield County towns are consistent with these findings.
- Despite recommendations in the 2005 Deer Committee report outlining the conditions for controlled hunting, several fundamental conditions have been left unmet. Ridgefield lacks a recent aerial survey upon which to accurately estimate local deer density (although there is one for Fairfield County). The Deer Committee has not consulted with Yale School of Forestry or another research institution in an effort to assess the relative success or failure of the controlled hunt and to locate current high density deer “hot spots” as outlined in the 2005 report.
- The current low point in the Ridgefield annual deer harvest coincides with a significant number of approved open space hunting sites. (Table 2.3-1). The BOS approved 15 parcels for the 2018-2019 hunting season, a slightly larger number of parcels relative to prior years. The 14th consecutive year of controlled hunting on town open space land in Ridgefield included closing off from public use a larger proportion of our open space land – while fewer deer are being removed.
- Culling is often viewed and utilized as last resort measure, typically part of a comprehensive 2- to 5-year plan based on current deer population numbers rather than an ongoing annual event.
- Since 2006 when the hunt commenced, the number of motor vehicle accidents and deer harvested in Ridgefield are both dramatically down (Fact Sheet 4). It should be noted, however, this downward trend in

accidents started 10 years before the controlled hunt commenced.

- A growing body of scientific research shows that deer numbers *per se* in a given region are unrelated to incidents of Lyme disease in humans (Fact Sheet 6).
- Consistent with the foundational 2005 report, closing open space from public access requires continued assessment.

How should the town move forward?

With the hunt in its 13th year, and in the context of (1) fewer deer taken in the 2017/18 hunt (and some public reports of “fewer deer”) and (2) with growing concern about restricting public access to public open space, the BOS has decided to hold a public hearing in the Spring 2019 timeframe on the future of the hunt.

There are several possible alternatives regarding the future of the hunt:

- Keep the annual controlled hunt essentially as it is today – the status quo.
- Permanently stop the hunt.
- Continue the hunt but reduce its intensity. This could be accomplished in a number of ways, including but not limited to:
 - Conducting the hunt every 2-3 years, instead of annually.
 - Reducing the number of open space properties allowed for hunting.
 - Reducing the length of the hunting season.
 - Restricting the type of weaponry allowed (e.g., archery only).

Ridgefield Conservation Commission Recommendation

Based on the information available, the RCC recommends continuing the hunt but in a modified form, preferably (as suggested by Yale), conducting the hunt every 2-3 years. Modifying the hunt should result in fewer closures of open spaces for shorter periods of

time, allowing residents more time to enjoy use of our natural resources. Deer management decisions and changes to deer hunting protocols on town open space impact hikers and wildlife enthusiasts alike - and therefore must reflect the interests and perspectives of these groups.

However, as they say, the devil is in the details and the procedures for continuing the hunt must be formulated into a short-term (say, 5-year) deer management plan for the town. The Deer Committee needs to develop this plan and oversee annual assessments and ongoing objectives.

Furthermore, objectives to consider going forward include:

- Promoting safe and careful recreational hunting on state land as a “first choice” tool to manage deer populations.
- Encouraging participation in venison donation programs and similar mechanisms to foster local use of the deer resources.
- Educating hunters on their potential role impacting local deer populations and herd composition.
- Guiding hunters in making harvest decisions that are appropriate for current town needs and goals. This may include discouraging the harvest of bucks.
- Promoting landowner-hunter cooperatives for voluntary implementation of specialized deer management programs on private land. (See *Dept. of Environmental Conservation Management Plan for White Tailed Deer in New York State 2012 – 2016*. https://www.dec.ny.gov/docs/wildlife_pdf/derplan2012.pdf.)

