



Department of Conservation's Policy Statement on Deer Control

FEBRUARY 2001



Department of Conservation
Te Papa Atawhai

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Ministerial Foreword

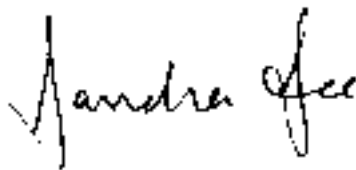
The New Zealand Biodiversity Strategy adopted last year and funded with an unprecedented \$187m over five years underlined the Labour-Alliance coalition's commitment not only to halting the loss of indigenous biodiversity but also to restoring natural habitats along with indigenous animal and plant species.

Wild deer will continue to be valued as a recreational and commercial hunting resource, but under the Biodiversity Strategy the protection of our unique plants and animals and the places they live takes precedence over introduced species. We will not place at risk those things found nowhere else on earth such as our indigenous forests and grasslands which give New Zealand - and its people - a unique identity.

The release of this policy statement marks the end of a period of consultation on deer management that began in 1997. It is not a plan in the mould of the Department of Conservation's possum and goat plans, which list and rank areas for control. Rather, it is a starting point for working with the many people with an interest in deer - commercial and recreational hunters, iwi, deer farmers, conservationists and other agencies - with a clearer idea of the outcomes the Department is working towards and the approach it will take to achieving them. It signals a move from single species control plans to a more integrated approach to controlling the range of threats to indigenous biodiversity, of which deer are just one of many.

The right of New Zealanders to hunt deer on public conservation land for recreation, trophy value and venison is being enhanced through this policy statement. The existing hunter permit system will be streamlined and restrictions on recreational hunting will be removed, as a first step towards removing the need for hunting permits entirely. This will make it easier in future to hunt deer.

The uniqueness of New Zealand's indigenous biodiversity and the fact it can not be conserved anywhere else in the world means that responsibility for its protection rests with each of us. Under this policy statement, every group involved with deer management has a crucial role in working to protect and enhance native species, their natural habitats and ecosystems.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sandra Lee". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'S'.

Sandra Lee
Minister of Conservation

1. Introduction

THE DEER PROBLEM

Deer are a serious pest on public conservation land. There is clear scientific evidence that deer pose a significant and ongoing threat to New Zealand's native forests and grassland ecosystems. Deer prevent regeneration of favoured plant species, which causes significant changes to the structure and composition of native ecosystems. At critical sites, non-replacement of canopy species can lead to canopy collapse.

There is no evidence that equilibrium has been reached between deer and the native ecosystems they inhabit. Deer continue to inhibit forest regeneration even at low density. Because many native plant species can live for hundreds of years, it will be many decades, if not centuries before the longer-term adverse impacts of deer on native forests become clear. In at least some areas, deer induced changes to forests and flow-on effects to other native species are likely to be irreversible.

DEER AND TB

Deer are also considered to be a pest by the Animal Health Board and other agencies responsible for TB control. The fact that deer can disperse long distances means that they have the potential to spread TB and re-infect possum populations from which the disease has been eliminated.

BACKGROUND

In 1997 the Department convened a working party to advise on development of a deer control plan. Public submissions on a discussion document prepared by the working party reflected two significantly different and strongly held views.

Most of the Conservation Boards, Regional Councils, environmental, tramping and botanical organisations expressed the view that wild deer are a pest which threaten New Zealand's native vegetation and ecosystems and therefore should be eradicated or controlled wherever possible.

Hunting organisations and most farming organisations expressed the view that eradication of deer is neither possible nor desirable and their impacts on native ecosystems can be minimised by managing deer as a game resource.

Despite the fact that one or the other of these views tended to be reflected in most submissions, the proposed goals, strategic directions and priority rankings outlined in the discussion document were acceptable or partially acceptable to most submitters who responded to questions on them.

THIS POLICY STATEMENT

This policy statement sets out the approach the Department will take to deer control. The Department will take a targeted control approach, which is designed to achieve clearly stated outcomes for the protection of indigenous plants and ecosystems.

Unlike the Department's national possum and goat plans, this policy statement does not prescribe areas where deer will be controlled over the next ten years. Priorities for deer control will be assessed using a decision support system that is being developed by the Department, which will allow control of deer, possums, goats and other threats to be better integrated.

The proposed approach will not affect management of deer on private and Maori land, except for control of new and isolated populations and regulation of deer farming. The Department will retain the ability to use powers under the Wild Animal Control Act to enter onto land to control deer causing damage to native flora and fauna.

2. Goal and Guiding Statements for Deer Control

LEGISLATION

The legislative framework for managing deer impacts is provided by the Wild Animal Control Act 1977.

The Wild Animal Control Act provides for:

“The control of wild animals generally, and for their eradication locally where necessary and practicable.”

and for coordination of commercial and recreational hunters,

“To ensure concerted action against the damaging effects of wild animals on vegetation, soils, water and wildlife.”

GOAL

The Department’s over-riding goal for deer control is:

To reduce the impacts of deer, along with other threats, on public conservation lands so as to maintain and enhance forest regeneration and indigenous ecosystem protection.

To achieve this goal the Department’s management actions will be guided by the following:

FIRST CONCERN

The department’s first and over-riding concern is the protection of New Zealand’s unique indigenous biodiversity, which takes precedence over the recreational and commercial value of deer as a hunting resource. This policy statement supports objective 1.3 of the New Zealand Biodiversity Strategy (February 2000), which is to *Prevent, control and manage plant and animal pests, to maintain or improve the condition and health of habitats and ecosystems important for indigenous biodiversity.*

SCOPE OF THIS POLICY STATEMENT

This policy statement applies primarily to deer control on public conservation lands but also includes actions to restrict the feral range of deer, which will occur across all lands.

ROLE OF COMMERCIAL AND RECREATIONAL HUNTING

The department recognises that commercial and recreational hunters value deer as a hunting resource and that commercial hunting in particular provides effective control in those areas that are most suitable for hunting by helicopter.

ACCESS FOR COMMERCIAL AND RECREATIONAL HUNTERS

The department will continue to encourage both commercial and recreational hunting on public conservation lands where this is consistent with management for conservation. Commercial and recreational hunters will generally have open access to public conservation lands.

INTEGRATION OF DEER CONTROL WITH MANAGEMENT OF OTHER THREATS

Over the next two years, the Department intends to move towards more integrated decision-making for managing threats to biodiversity. A generic decision support framework is being developed which will assist managers to set priorities for control of conservation pests including deer on a site by site basis. In time, this decision support framework will replace or integrate the single species plans and priority ranking systems that are used at present for possums, goats and thar.

MAINTAINING EFFECTIVE WORKING RELATIONSHIPS

The department will seek to maintain effective working relationships with commercial and recreational hunters, conservation groups, farmers, other landowners, and other agencies with an interest in deer control such as regional councils and the Animal Health Board.

CONSULTING WITH IWI

The department will consult with iwi to give effect to the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi:

- To act reasonably and in good faith;
- Make informed decisions;
- Consider whether active steps are needed to protect Maori interests;
- Avoid actions which could prevent redress of Treaty claims.

3. Priority Outcomes for Deer Control

INTRODUCTION

This section sets out the high level outcomes to which deer control contributes and outlines the approach the department will take to achieving these outcomes.

BIOSECURITY

The Biosecurity outcome for deer control is:

The feral range of deer, or species of deer, should not be allowed to expand into new areas, including deer-free regions, catchments and islands, and where possible the existing feral range should be reduced.

Strategic Direction

Actions to prevent deer establishing in new areas and to reduce the current feral range of deer should be taken where feasible and practical and where the long-term threat justifies the cost.

Control Plans

Priority will be given to developing and implementing control plans for areas that have been historically free of deer such as Northland and Taranaki and to containing range expansion of deer species (for eg. keeping the South Island free of sika deer).

Regional Pest Management Strategies

The department will encourage regional councils to include deer in Regional Pest Management Strategies, particularly in those regions that include areas that have historically been free of deer.

Deer Farms

The department will work with deer farmers to reduce the risk of farmed deer escaping and forming new wild populations. New regulated and non-regulated areas for deer farming and associated fencing standards will be gazetted following consultation. No changes are currently planned to areas where farming of deer is generally prohibited, or to requirements relating to holding deer in safari parks.

Illegal releases

The department will take active measures to raise awareness of the serious problem of illegal releases of deer and, where appropriate, increase enforcement actions in cooperation with regional councils and the Animal Health Board.

BIODIVERSITY

The Biodiversity outcome relating to deer is:

Natural habitats and ecosystems will be maintained in, or restored to, an indigenous natural character, through effective control of deer and other threats.

Strategic direction

Deer control will be undertaken where this is the most cost-effective way to achieve priority outcomes for places or values managed by the Department. Priority outcomes will be determined using a range of tools. The Department is currently developing improved and integrated decision-support systems that will contribute to the setting of outcomes, identification of priorities, and identification of cost-effective mechanisms.

Priority outcomes

At the national level, priority will be given to:

- maintaining and restoring a representative range of natural habitats and ecosystems and maintaining and restoring outstanding habitats and ecosystems;
- preventing irreversible structural or compositional deterioration of representative and outstanding areas; and
- preventing irreversible loss of genetic variability within indigenous species.

Decision-making

In making decisions on deer control a range of factors will need to be considered, including:

- the conservation value of the site
- the threat posed by deer to these conservation values
- the cost, feasibility, efficacy and urgency of control actions
- integration with other weed and animal pest control work
- synergies with other management actions such as threatened species protection work.

Adaptive management

An adaptive management approach will be needed to allow control to be varied in response to the observed effects of management.

4. Working with Others

COMMERCIAL DEER RECOVERY

Effectiveness

Commercial helicopter hunting achieves effective control in grassland and open-canopy forest, which includes large areas of the South Island.

Access to department managed areas for aerial recovery

A concession system is now in place for commercial helicopter recovery on public conservation lands. Public conservation land is open to commercial hunting unless a proper consideration of the legislative provisions establishes reasons for restrictions or closures. Restrictions are generally in respect of time periods allowed for aerial recovery and are usually dealt with by way of conditions in the concessions document. Reasons for limiting areas/time periods available may include:

- Where toxins are being used;
- Where there is high visitor use;
- Where there are risks to native wildlife;
- Where it is necessary to comply with a specified statutory strategy or plan.

Strategic direction

Commercial helicopter hunting will continue to fluctuate depending on the price of venison. The industry collapse predicted in the 1980s now seems unlikely to occur, however, because most operators have other sources of income and are able to move in and out of the deer recovery business as venison prices rise and fall.

The Department will periodically monitor the overall level of commercial deer recovery as well as monitoring ecosystem condition at priority sites. Where necessary, the Department will supplement control to maintain protection of indigenous biodiversity.

RECREATIONAL HUNTING

Effectiveness of recreational hunting

Although recreational hunters kill large numbers of deer in total each year, recreational hunting provides less stringent control than commercial hunting. This is because recreational hunters tend to harvest deer from a few high-density populations without reducing deer densities to low enough levels to protect ecosystems from damage.

Recreational hunting is most effective in accessible areas that are close to a population centre, within 2-3 kilometres of a vehicle access point. In general, however, recreational hunting is not able to reduce deer densities to low enough levels to allow regeneration of palatable seedlings and saplings.

Regulation of recreational hunters

The department currently regulates recreational hunting by issuing hunting permits. Recreational hunters have open access to almost all public conservation lands with few restrictions on what deer they can kill and when they can kill them. Some restrictions do exist, however, for popular herds such as Fiordland wapiti and Blue Mountains fallow, where systems of ballots and bag limits are in place.

Proposals for hunter management

Many of the submissions from hunters and hunting groups argued for management of deer as game animal.

However, proposals for game management are based on two main assumptions that are not applicable to the New Zealand situation. These are that deer and the ecosystems they inhabit are at, or are close to, a stable equilibrium and that recreational hunting can be manipulated so as to maintain this equilibrium while improving the trophy potential of the deer herd.

The Department considers that setting up hunter managed areas would exacerbate existing problems by:

- perpetuating conflict between hunters and conservation managers over desirable goals and deer densities;
- risking fixing deer at current densities and restricting control to a few of the highest priority sites; and
- ignoring biodiversity decline in hunter-managed areas.

Strategic direction

The Department will continue to encourage recreational hunting where this does not affect the management of public conservation lands for conservation. The Department will not set up areas to be managed for recreational hunting and will not seek to devolve the issuing of hunting permits to a hunter organisation.

The Department will streamline the existing hunting permit system and where appropriate move to longer-term area wide permits.

In the longer-term, the Department will explore the option of removing the requirement for written hunting permits for deer entirely. This would require legislative change.

The status and management of existing recreational hunting areas will be reviewed as and when necessary in order to facilitate deer control to protect conservation values, as provided for in Part III of the Wild Animal Control Act.

TANGATA WHENUA

Working with Tangata Whenua

The department will consult and work closely with iwi/hapu on the implementation of this policy statement.

Department's responsibilities

Section 4 of the Conservation Act 1987 requires the Department, in interpreting and administering that Act, to give effect to the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi. In working closely with Maori, the Department will be guided by the following principles:

- To consider whether active steps are needed to protect Maori interests;
- To avoid actions that would prevent the redress of claims;
- To avoid further Treaty breaches;
- To make informed decisions;
- To enable the government to govern.

Working with Ngai Tahu

As part of the Crown's settlement with Ngai Tahu the department is required to consult with Te Runanga O Ngai Tahu and to consider their views on "any programme to eradicate pests or other introduced species" where the areas in question are covered by the Deeds of Recognition.

DEER FARMERS

Working with deer farmers

The department will work with deer farmers to reduce the risks of deer escaping and establishing new populations. Regulation of deer farming is under the Wild Animal Control Act which enables the Minister of Conservation to:

- Specify areas or places in which deer farming generally or farming of any particular species of deer is either prohibited or permitted;
- Specify fencing requirements for deer farming generally or for deer farming in specified areas or places;
- Regulate deer farming in areas where deer farming is permitted.

Prohibited and permitted areas

These are described in the Deer Farm Notice No. 4, 1986 (NZ Gazette 1986). Areas where deer farming is generally prohibited include parts of Northland, Auckland, North Coromandel, Mt Taranaki, Chatham Islands, and most offshore islands. The farming of certain species of deer such as sika deer is also prohibited outside defined areas.

No changes are currently planned to areas where farming of deer is generally prohibited.

Safari parks

Safari parks (sometimes referred to as Game Estates) are farms where income is derived from wild animals being hunted on the farm. Under the Wild Animal Control Act safari parks must have a permit from the Department of Conservation. The areas where deer may be held in safari parks are those specified for deer farming in the Deer Farm Notice No. 4, 1986. Other wild animals such as thar and chamois can only be held on safari parks where safari parks are within the feral range of those animals.

No changes are currently planned for requirements for holding deer and other wild animals in safari parks.

Strategic direction

The department intends to specify regulated and non-regulated areas for deer farming and is proposing to apply controls to deer farms in regulated areas, including enforcement of a 2m high fencing standard. Under these proposals deer farms will require a permit and an approved fence plan and the Department will need to be notified of any deer escapes. The Department will carry out periodic inspections of deer farm fences in regulated areas to check compliance with the fencing standard.

In areas specified as being non-regulated areas, the 1.7m high industry approved fencing standard will apply. No permit will be required from the department. However, the department may inspect deer farm fences if it suspects that they do not comply with the fencing standard.

Regulated and non-regulated areas, and associated fencing standards will be gazetted by the Department following consultation.

OTHER AGENCIES

Pest management strategies

Regional and national pest management strategies (RPMS and NPMS) are the primary mechanisms under the Biosecurity Act for coordinating pest management actions across lands of different tenure within a region and nationally.

Strategic direction

The Department will work closely with regional councils and the Animal Health Board where deer are included in pest management strategies.

The department will encourage regional councils to include deer in Regional Pest Management Strategies (RPMS), particularly in deer-free areas where preventing farm escapes and illegal liberations and eradication of new populations should be given high priority.

5. Research

INTRODUCTION

Formal research on wild deer in New Zealand began in the 1950's when questions were asked about the impact of deer and the way they were managed. Research has focused on:

- Monitoring the effectiveness of commercial hunting effort in reducing deer populations;
- Understanding the effectiveness of recreational hunting effort in reducing deer populations;
- Determining the long-term impacts of deer pressure by monitoring permanent exclosure plots.

CURRENT RESEARCH NEEDS

The department believes that further research is needed to enable managers to make decisions on deer control using its decision support system. For example, managers will need information to make decisions about whether deer control is needed (and what level of control is required) to achieve the stated conservation outcomes for a particular site. Decisions will need to be made in the context of what other pest control work is required at that site.

Specific research is needed on:

- susceptibility of different species and ecosystems to deer browse;
- target density levels to achieve specific conservation outcomes;
- cost-effectiveness of deer control methods and better control techniques;
- monitoring methods;
- inter-relationships with other conservation pests.