Working to Help Utah's Deer Herds

Multi-year, multi-pronged effort is a top priority for wildlife managers

Mule deer numbers are declining across the West, and the 2010 deer hunt was particularly difficult for many Utah hunters. Poor weather and a shorter hunt contributed to lower success, and the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (DWR) heard about the lack of deer from frustrated sportsmen.

The DWR takes hunters' concerns very seriously and is focused on improving deer-herd numbers. This issue has been — and continues to be — a top priority for Utah's wildlife managers. Over the past five years, the DWR has invested tens of millions of dollars to implement a comprehensive deer-management plan and to help our struggling herds. This sheet provides a quick overview of the DWR's ongoing, multi-pronged effort to help Utah's mule deer.

Photo courtesy of Mike Keller

In many habitat-restoration projects, the DWR reseeds areas to grow the nutrient-rich shrubs that provide the largest part of a mule deer's diet.

Restoring crucial habitat

The DWR has launched a massive effort to restore mule deer habitat. It's the largest such initiative ever undertaken in Utah — and in the West. Over the past five years, the DWR and its many partners have improved mule deer habitat on more than 600,000 acres, at a cost of more than $70 million. Habitat-improvement projects often take a few years to pay off, but over the long term, this effort *will* result in healthier deer populations statewide. The Utah deer-management plan includes an objective to improve another 500,000 acres of habitat in the next five years.

Increasing predator control

Coyotes and other predators pose a substantial threat to mule deer fawns, which is why predator control is an important part of Utah's deer management program. In the last five years, the DWR has provided almost $3 million to USDA Wildlife Services to control coyotes in areas that are important to our deer populations. Last year alone, Wildlife Services killed more than 1,700 coyotes

in critical deer habitat areas, with the guidance of DWR biologists. The DWR is providing additional funding to expand its predator-control efforts in the future.

Reducing highway mortality

Deer-auto collisions are responsible for the deaths of thousands of deer annually. The DWR is working closely with the Utah Department of Transportation (UDOT) to reduce highway mortality. Over the past five years, UDOT has spent more than $45 million on fencing and highway-bypass structures around the state for both mule deer and elk. The DWR is also funding two Utah State University studies. One will identify the most effective types of highway-bypass structures, and the other will attempt to determine how many deer are killed on Utah highways each year.

Stopping serial poachers

The DWR has put more resources into catching serial poachers who steal deer from Utah sportsmen each year. Conservation officers have made several high-profile arrests of serial poachers who unlawfully killed multiple deer. Sportsmen have played a key role, alerting officers to illegal activity and improving law-enforcement success.

Limiting the spread of disease

Diseases can devastate deer populations. The DWR has spent more than $1 million over the last five years to research and monitor for chronic wasting disease and other diseases that affect mule deer.

Performing valuable research

In recent years, the DWR has launched numerous research projects to better understand the factors that negatively affect mule deer populations. Last winter, the DWR began a multi-year statewide radio-telemetry study to better understand the over-winter survival of both does and fawns. Hundreds of deer will be collared over the next few years — at an expense of more than $1 million — in order to gain better information about deer survival rates. The DWR is also planning a comprehensive productivity study to focus on the impacts of predators on mule deer fawns.

Monitoring deer herds and winter range conditions

Starting in early December each year, the DWR monitors individual mule deer herds on a weekly basis. Biologists look at both the deer and their winter range, assessing the following factors: snow depth, area temperatures, availability of forage, body condition (fat measurements) and depredation issues. If the deer fall below certain pre-established thresholds in three or more of these categories, the DWR is prepared to begin a supplemental feeding program to help them through the season.

Big bucks are vulnerable to poachers on winter range.

Throughout the winter, the DWR monitors the condition of individual deer herds and their winter range.

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