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OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES IN HANDLING NUISANCE WILDLIFE DAMAGE IN NORTH CAROLINA

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ABSTRACT: The current procedure for handling wildlife nuisance problems in North Carolina requires the landowner, manager, or lessee to obtain a Wildlife Depredation Permit from the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission (CWRC), except when an animal is caught damaging property. The Wildlife Damage Committee of the North Carolina Chapter of The Wildlife Society has evaluated the policy. Current laws and regulations do protect valuable, native wildlife species, but these requirements are unsatisfactory for handling routine nuisance wildlife problems. Citizen demand for assistance could be satisfied better if existing legislation were rewritten to provide the Commission more latitude in declaring certain animals pests under certain conditions. Additionally, private pest control operators could be trained and licensed to handle wildlife nuisance problems. The rationale and consequences of these policy changes are discussed.

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North Carolina is a rapidly growing state, with development expected to continue well into the next century. This development will place an increasing number of residents in contact with wildlife, whether they desire it or not. The calls from homeowners and managers of buildings and grounds to public officials for help with snakes, opossums, raccoons, groundhogs, voles, bats, and other vertebrates will continue to increase. The current system requires issuance of a Wildlife Depredation Permit from North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission (NCWRC) to the landowner or resident prior to taking of wildlife, except when an animal without special protection is caught doing damage. People involved with wildlife damage management are dissatisfied with the system. Pressure from extension agents, wildlife biologists, and citizens resulted in the formation of an ad-hoc committee on Wildlife Damage Control of the North Carolina Chapter of The Wildlife Society in 1992. The committee was charged to evaluate the current situation and recommend improvements. This paper reports the preliminary findings of the committee and encourages constructive suggestions for resolution of problems.

ASSESSMENT OF CURRENT POLICY

The regulation of primary concern is called Wildlife Killed for Depredations or Accidentally (15 NCAC 10B .0106). This regulation requires the issuance of a Wildlife Depredation Permit before taking of any wild animal, except for the control of rats and mice in buildings and exotic pests, starlings, English sparrows, pigeons. Animals other than endangered or threatened species may be taken while in the act of damaging property. Furthermore, the person taking any game animal or game bird, furbearing animal, nongame animal or nongame bird for which there is no season must report such taking to the Commission. Proper disposition of carcasses is also specified.

The committee has determined that the policy is too restrictive to efficiently handle nuisance wildlife damage problems. Wildlife enforcement officers and wildlife biologists are burdened by citizen requests for permits for problems with moles, snakes, bats, groundhogs, squirrels, opossums and so on. The staff costs associated with wildlife damage management are carried at the expense of programs paid for

by licensed hunters, rather than by general funds. Extension Agents feel the requirement that their clients get a permit prior to trapping is frequently unjustified. The bureaucratic procedure is a barrier to private entrepreneurs who would serve the demand, if the process could be streamlined. The committee suspects that the current policy results in numerous violations by citizens who either do not know the law or willingly take animals in knowledge of the regulation.

Notwithstanding the problems caused by wildlife, the committee believes that wildlife not causing problems should continue to be protected.

OPTIONS FOR IMPROVING POLICY

Option 1: No Change

As with Environmental Impact Assessment, an option is to leave things as they are. Some faults of the current system are listed above. The positive side of leaving the system unchanged is the saving of professional time and expenses that would be involved in evaluation and selection of a preferred option and then the implementation costs of new policy.

Option 2: Declare Certain Animals Pests in Certain Situations

The vast majority of wildlife nuisance complaints arise from native wildlife that disturb residences, places of work, and yards and grounds associated with people. Typical species involved include rabbits, opossums, skunks, gray squirrels, voles, moles, bats, and snakes. It is within the purview of NCWRC to declare such species pests under General Statute 113-300 for the purpose of legalizing specified pesticides. This statute could be rewritten to allow trapping, removal of nest materials, and other direct control activities, as well as specification of pesticides. The landowner could either conduct the control operations or contract with a licensed wildlife damage operator to do the work.

Option 3: Establish a Program to License Wildlife Damage Operators

This option would entail amending General Statute 113-273 to create a new category of license. Implementation of the legislation would necessitate continuing appropriation from the North Carolina General Fund. The legislation would authorize the training, testing, licensing, and monitoring of wildlife damage management operators, just as pesticide applicators are handled by the Pesticide Section of the North Carolina Department of Agriculture. The training function could be carried out by the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service (NCCES).

DISCUSSION OF OPTIONS

The no-change option cannot be tolerated without increasing aggravation in North Carolina. Pressures to serve the wildlife damage management function are increasing annually. Services provided routinely decades ago by NCWRC biologists and wildlife enforcement officers are no longer done without costs to programs that are more aligned with the primary mission of the organization.

As outlined above Options 2 and 3 are tied together. Identification of the species of wildlife that would be declared pests and the mechanism for licensing wildlife damage management officers would require careful work of wildlife biologists and legislative aides. It would require review and support from various interest groups, including the North Carolina Chapter of The Wildlife Society, statewide conservation groups, trappers organizations, humane societies and other organizations.

CONCLUSION

The Wildlife Damage Committee of the North Carolina Chapter of The Wildlife Society recommends Options 2 and 3 be pursued. Provided support from agency administrators can be secured, the committee believes that details necessary to revise legislation and make the appropriate rule changes can be developed in approximately one year. It could take an additional year to obtain sufficient support in the state for passage of the necessary legislation and associated rules.