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## CITIZEN TASK FORCE ON DEER MANAGEMENT

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## CITIZEN TASK FORCE ON DEER MANAGEMENT

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In spring 1990, as part of an intensified effort to involve the public in wildlife management decisions, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) and Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE) implemented a new public input program. Citizen task forces were organized in 15 deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*) management units (DMUs) across the state. The task force purpose was to choose a desired deer population level for their particular DMU.

DEC and CCE designed task forces to include a broad range of interests, in order to balance the viewpoints of various groups affected by deer. CCE agents and DEC staff identified groups of "stakeholders" (people with an interest in deer management such as farmers, sportsmen, foresters, conservationists, motorists, tourism, landowners, small business, etc.) in each DMU. CCE agents then selected individuals to serve as members of a citizen task force. The task forces averaged 8-10 members, each member representing a particular stakeholder group. The charge to each member was to contact as many people as practical in his or her stakeholder group and bring their views on deer to the task force.

Task force meetings were facilitated by CCE agents. Wildlife biologists from DEC were present to act as technical advisors by answering questions about deer biology and management. In addition, DEC staff presented background information at the first meeting to give each member a basic understanding of the New York State deer management system.

At the second meeting, each member shared their stakeholder-group's interests and concerns about deer with the rest of the task force. As a group, the task force then discussed the costs and benefits of deer populations at various densities, and determined a population level best suited for their particular DMU. '

Thirteen of 15 task forces achieved consensus and agreed on a desirable deer population for their DMU. Results varied, with some task forces wanting a slight increase in the deer

population, some wanting a slight decrease, and others calling for no change from the present deer population. DEC wildlife managers agreed to manage deer in each DMU for the next 5 years to achieve the level desired by the local task force. Two task forces were deadlocked when 1 or 2 members would not compromise their positions. In both cases, DEC balanced the input of all members to determine a desired deer population.

Most task forces completed their work with 2 meetings. A third meeting was held when a consensus was not reached at the second meeting. Facilitators played a key role in eliciting a community decision on the desired population level. Task force members were encouraged not only to express their stakeholders' views, but also to be receptive to other views, and to be willing to compromise when necessary.

The process was well received by most of the participants. Follow-up interviews with task force members indicated that they learned about deer biology and management, and the interests of other stakeholder groups. They were especially impressed that the DEC was actively soliciting public input and actually using it in deer management. A survey of stakeholders not actively involved in the process is nearly complete.

DEC biologists were favorably impressed with the results of the task force process and eager to use it in additional **DMUs**, and with other species (i.e., beaver [*Castor canadensis*]). Some administrators were wary of allowing the public to decide on a deer population level in such a direct manner, however, many agreed that a group of reasonable people, when given sufficient facts, will come to a reasonable consensus. Apparently the New York State Legislature agreed, as they granted the DEC broader authority to manage deer than ever before.

The key factors contributing to the success of the task forces were the selection of reasonable individuals, the narrow focus on a specific objective, allowing the task forces to make decisions that would be accepted and used, and facilitation by a CCE agent.