



Plan to Lease State Forestland for Private Deer Hunting Dropped

AUGUST 17, 2018 -- A controversial plan to lease tracts of public forestland in Sussex County to groups of private hunters has been scrapped.

In April, Secretary of Agriculture Michael Scuse told lawmakers his agency -- which includes the Delaware Forest Service -- planned to lease the 820-acre Tunnel Tract, west of Georgetown, and 242-acre Long Tract, northeast of Millsboro.

Sec. Scuse said crop damage caused by deer had been unusually severe in the area of those tracts and that those properties had not been getting enough attention from hunters.

Under the proposal, the leaseholders would have had exclusive rights to hunt the tracts, but would have been required to meet certain deer harvest stipulations.

However, Assistant Forestry Administrator Kyle Hoyd said this week that the Forest Service did not receive any qualifying bids for the leases. Instead of reopening the process, he said the agency has decided to keep the tracts open to public hunting.

To address the problem of deer sheltering on state land and emerging to raid adjacent farms, Mr. Hoyd said they are working to improve accessibility to all tracts of Blackbird State Forest (Kent County) and Redden State Forest (Sussex County).

Roads once off-limits to vehicles will be opened September 1 through January 31 to accommodate hunters and allow deeper penetration into the woods. Mr. Hoyd said improvements to roads, and in some cases the creation of new parking areas, has been underway for about two months. "We will have everything in place," he said. "In fact, Redden is ready now and Blackbird is just behind it. Both will be prepared for the season."

The Tunnel and Long tracts will be open for Sunday deer hunting. All the other state forest tracts will remain closed on Sundays to allow other members of the public to use the land without conflicting with hunters.

In a departure from recent practice, all three state forests, totaling nearly 21,000 acres, will be open for the special antlerless deer seasons for 2018-19.

Mr. Hoyd said the Department of Agriculture is expected to launch a public awareness campaign in about two weeks to promote the changes.

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