

HARVEST DATA—A NECESSITY OF DEER MANAGEMENT

Harvest data collection is a real necessity of any deer management program. It tells you about the current and past health history of your deer herd. It helps establish trends in antler and body production. It gives you averages and percentages. It allows you to break out segments of your deer herd for closer scrutiny and evaluation. It takes away the emotions of the hunt and the eye appeal of the antlers. It is black and white and it is objective. It does not lie and it does not make excuses.

So, what type of harvest data should you collect? This answer is a moving target, but in a nutshell, the more detailed data you collect, the more you can do with it. Simply put, the landowners that utilize the popular Managed Lands Deer Permit system to gather age, field dressed body weight, and basic antler measurements are required to gather it. Ranchers desiring more detailed information might gather age, live and field dressed body weights, gross Boone and Crockett score, lactation rates and photographing each buck. Either way, let's take a look at the basic requirements of data collection:

Sex (Buck or Doe): This is obvious, but creating subcategories for the bucks will prove beneficial for better evaluation. Differentiate between bucks which are selected for their antler characteristics, such as cull/management, spike or trophy class. Designate a letter such as "C" for cull, "M" for management, "S" for spike, "T" for trophy, etc. This will help to further evaluate each category of bucks produced. Buck fawns should be recorded as bucks and not does.

Age of the deer: Properly aging a deer is important. The tooth wear and replacement method is not a sure thing, but it is the best method currently available for field use. This data set will help to establish age-specific trends and correlations that can prove very valuable when combined with additional information. If you are unsure of how to age a jawbone, extract and label it and put it in the freezer until someone with more experience can view it. If taken to a taxidermist for mounting, request the jawbone is returned to you. Collecting other data without recording the age is useless, so age determination is very important and should be mandatory on every animal harvested. Jawbones collected from a ranch can eventually be accumulated to build a reference collection.

Field dressed body weight: This is one of the most common measurements of deer herd health. Weights are taken immediately after field dressing and measurements should be taken to the nearest pound. The old cotton scales in the barn are usually not accurate enough, so invest in a good set of scales that can measure more concisely. Leave the head, hide, and legs on the carcass when weighing.

Antler measurements: Since antler quality is the objective of most management programs, it should be mandatory to measure each buck harvested, regardless of its classification, and yes, even measure the spikes. For most TPWD programs, basic measurements such as main beam length, inside spread, and basal circumference from

one antler are required. For best data evaluation however, complete Boone and Crockett score is recommended. Gross scores, before any deductions, are preferred.

Lactation Rate: This data can be used to confirm or adjust the current year's fawn survival rate. If your survey method indicated one survival rate and your lactation rate indicated another, the lactation rate is the more accurate of the two. Lactation rate data is usually good only for the first half of the general deer season, so be careful when using throughout the entire season. Fawn survival rates are critical to any deer management program because it represents the "profit" or "interest" of the deer herd. In order to establish a harvest recommendation, the manager must know what is being added to the population before he knows what to remove from the population. Without a buck fawn being produced one year, you certainly can't harvest him as a trophy five or six years later. Fawn survival rates are critical to know and understand each year.

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