Alabama Baiting Committee Report

December 2011

FOREWORD

Hunting over bait is a controversial issue, to say the least, in Alabama and in many other states across the nation. This debate over baiting has come up many times in the past before the Alabama legislature and the Conservation Advisory Board and will likely do so again in the future.

This document was created to provide information on the pros and cons of this issue, nothing more. The discussion points are not exhaustive. Everyone involved in hunting has his or her own opinion, and non-hunters do as well. This represents a talking paper of sorts and does not express a position or conclusion on the issues of baiting and was never intended to do so. I do hope it will serve as a document to inform and educate decision makers and those not familiar with the baiting issue.

The committee members who helped assemble this document have diverse backgrounds and varied opinions on this subject. Statements expressed in this document are not necessarily the opinion or belief of any member of the committee. This document did require a great deal of time, effort, and sacrifice by the committee, and to each of the members I express my sincere thanks and gratitude.

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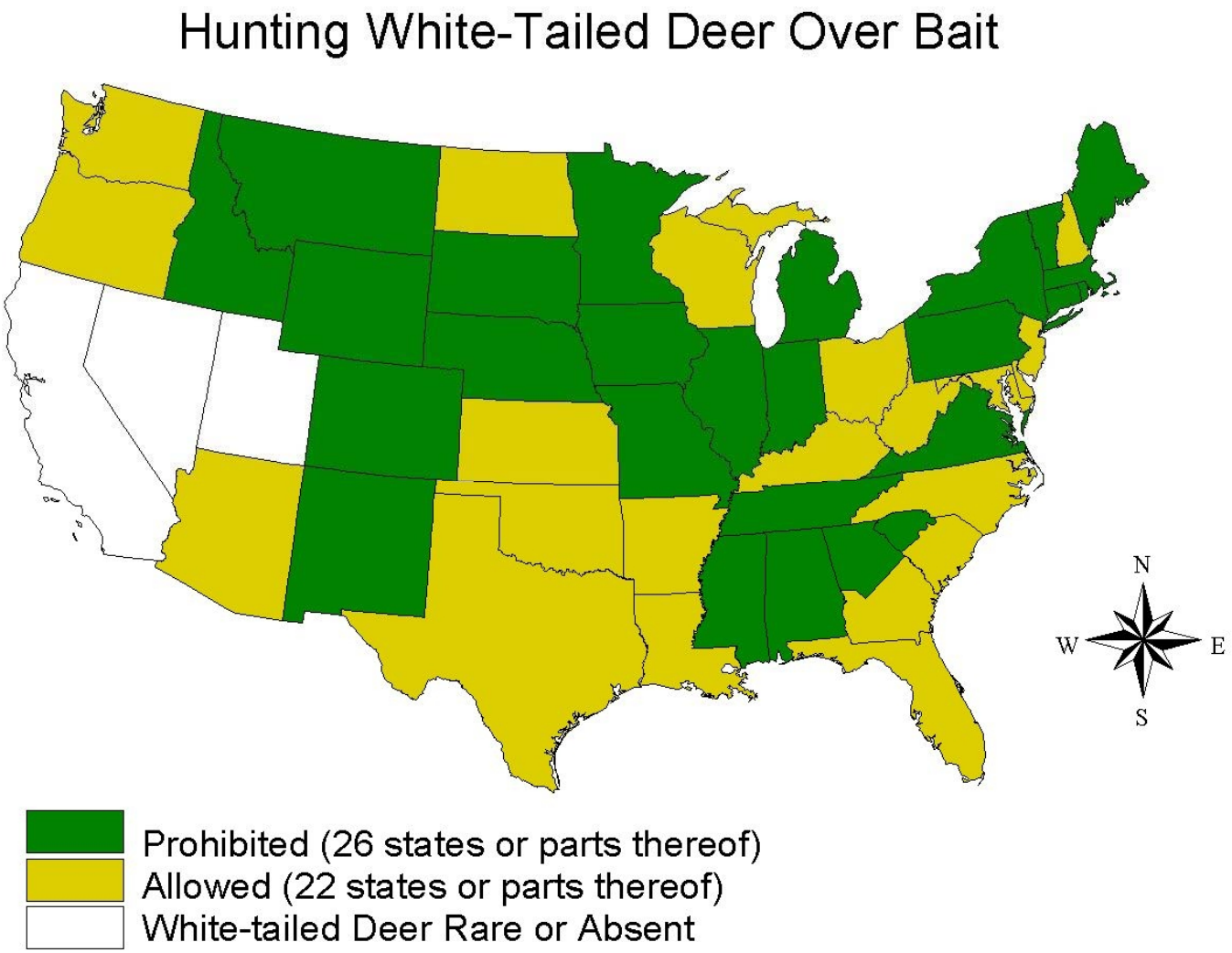

Baiting Nationwide & Regionally

- Nationally, hunting white-tailed deer over bait is prohibited in 26 states or parts thereof; some form of hunting deer over bait is allowed in 22 states or parts thereof (see map).

- In the last ten years, several states have prohibited or strictly regulated the hunting of deer over bait. In fact, Connecticut, Illinois, Michigan, New Hampshire, Vermont, Wisconsin, and Wyoming have all moved in this direction (see map)

- In the southeast, baiting is prohibited in Alabama, Georgia's northern deer zone, Mississippi, the Upstate of South Carolina, Virginia, and Tennessee.

THE CONS OF BAITING

The following information concerning the cons of baiting were gleaned from an extensive list of research publications. Some of this literature is available on the Internet, in downloadable PDF documents, or may be obtained upon request.

Disease & Health Risks – Baiting alters the risk factors associated with disease transmission by increasing frequency of direct contact between deer.

- In Michigan, where bovine TB exists in wild deer, scientists believe that the maintenance of bovine TB in white-tailed deer is directly related to supplemental feeding/baiting and the increased focal densities these practices create. Inhalation of bacteria or consumption of feed contaminated with the bacteria is much more likely to occur than would otherwise occur naturally.

- Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) has been diagnosed in deer and/or elk in 18 states, including the states of Virginia, West Virginia, and most recently Missouri. It remains a significant disease risk to deer across the nation. Evidence suggests infected deer probably transmit the disease through animal-to-animal contact and/or contamination of food or water sources with saliva, urine, and/or feces. This situation can be exacerbated due to the movements and distributions that deer exhibit around bait.

- The quality of deer feed, particularly corn, is also a concern since it is being consumed by many species of wildlife including deer. One biological toxin that can pose a deadly threat to wildlife is aflatoxin. Corn sold for deer/wildlife feed is not required to meet the minimum acceptable standards established by the USDA for consumption by humans, and cattle. Studies in Texas and North and South Carolina showed 44 to 50% of bait/feed tested for aflatoxins failed to meet USDA standards for consumption by humans or cattle.

- Some disease problems occur more commonly in areas of high density such as would occur around baited areas. Animals are attracted to artificial feed in higher densities than would otherwise occur naturally, resulting in more-frequent contact among deer and thereby facilitating the opportunity for disease transmission among deer.

- The Southeastern Cooperative Wildlife Disease Study (SCWDS), in a 2005 paper entitled *Disease Risks Associated with Baiting of White-tailed Deer*, stated: "Prevention is the only truly effective method to manage diseases in wildlife populations. Baiting increases risk for multiple diseases in white-tailed deer and other wildlife. As a highly experienced, professional, wildlife health organization, SCWDS strongly opposes legalization of deer baiting."

- A hair loss syndrome has been detected in artificially fed deer in West Virginia and other southeastern states. Bacterial infection of the muzzle has been detected among artificially fed deer populations in Alabama, Louisiana, and North Carolina. Neither of these deer health issues has been found in nearby unfed populations.

Baiting & Hunter Success - Despite the perception that deer baiting increases the hunting success rate, evidence to support this is deficient. Baiting provides a concentrated source of food, thus altering natural deer activity patterns. This may cause deer to be less vulnerable to harvest, which may lower the hunter success rate.

- Alabama's deer hunters enjoy a higher deer kill per hunter than hunters in Florida, North Carolina, and South Carolina where baiting is not prohibited.

- In a South Carolina study, hunters in the low country, where baiting is legal, are less successful than hunters in the upstate, where baiting is illegal. Despite the fact that hunters in the low country average 30% more time afield hunters in the upstate harvested 15.4 deer per square mile whereas hunters in the low country harvested 11.0 deer per square mile. Studies in Michigan and Wisconsin revealed similar results of hunter success without use of bait.

- In multiple studies (Michigan and Texas), 90% of bucks' use of bait stations was during non-legal shooting hours. More than 84% of total use occurred during the hours of darkness; deer use of baited stands became more nocturnal as the hunting season progressed; and most feeding at bait stations occurred at night and daytime feeding activity was minimal.

Social, Ethics, Perception Issues - An overriding issue may be the opinions of non-hunters, not those of hunters or biologists. A majority of Alabamians are opposed to hunting deer over bait. The practice of baiting lends ammunition and credibility to anti-hunting groups. Anti-hunting proponents claim that hunters are only interested in the kill, and baiting provides credibility to that statement.

- A 2008 scientific national survey of the general public revealed 85% approval of hunting for meat, 83% approval of hunting for animal population control, and 81% approval of hunting for wildlife management purposes. In this same survey, only 27% of the general public approved of hunting over bait.

- A 2004 Republican primary poll survey in Alabama revealed that 89% of Alabamians supported hunting "as is" while only 19% supported hunting over bait.

- Non-hunters' perceptions of baiting can create a poor image of those who participate in or allow the practices, and thus may erode the credibility of the wildlife agency and its hunting constituents.

- In areas dominated by small land ownerships, baiting impacts surrounding landowners and hunt clubs by altering deer activity patterns. Baiting could become an issue of "self-defense" across much of the deer range, with adjoining clubs attempting to "hold deer on our property."

  Use of bait facilitates illegal activities such as shooting deer at night or shooting turkeys. The nocturnal movements associated with baiting enhance the opportunities of late shooting or even the establishment of lighted bait sites. In fact, warden reports from Michigan and Wisconsin and Alabama indicate frequent violations of hunting at night over lighted bait stations and in backyards or close proximity to hunting cabins.

Public Safety

- In South Carolina, deer vehicle collisions are 9% greater in the low country, where baiting occurs, than in the upstate, where baiting is illegal. This is despite the fact that human population densities in the low country are 31% less than human population densities in the upstate.

Habitat and Ecological Impacts - Deer feeding/baiting may affect surrounding habitats and may cause ecological damage that affects a wide variety of wildlife that also depends on those habitats.

- In multiple studies, changes in tree species composition, retarded forest regeneration, and delayed development of regenerating forest stands have resulted from the increased density of deer near bait stations because the deer continue to feed on natural browse.

- A study investigated the effects on the structure of an eastern deciduous forest from 27 years of artificial feeding of ungulates, including deer. In the areas where feeding occurred, understory vegetation was decreased, little ground cover existed, and forest regeneration was hampered. Ground-nesting birds, including wild turkeys, were less abundant in the feeding areas.

- Providing supplemental feed or bait may negatively impact populations of wild turkeys and other ground-nesting birds by concentrating predators, such as coyotes, raccoons, and opossums, near feeders.

- Concentrating deer near bait sites causes over-browsing of beneficial native plant species and increases the presence of less-desirable plant species within the vicinity ($\leq$ 1 mile radius) of bait sites.

- Fawn mortality may be increased around bait sites due to both poor habitat conditions common around bait sites and increased predator densities around bait sites.

Economics – Positive and negative economic impacts are derived from feeding/baiting deer. However, to our knowledge, no scientific economic analyses have been conducted on a local or regional scale to determine whether the costs of feeding/baiting are offset by commensurate benefits.

- On average, the cost of providing corn to feed/bait deer is $400-500 per ton. There is no incentive to improving wildlife habitat associated with this practice.

- Establishing warm and cool season forage crops in wildlife openings is a proven habitat management technique and is much more cost-efficient ranging from $34.00 to $108.00 per ton for production of various grains, clovers and legumes.

- Some deer hunters and landowners in Alabama currently dedicate available resources to habitat management activities such as planting and managing wildlife openings. In addition to seed, fertilizer, and lime costs, other expenses associated with this practice have a positive impact on many local economies such as diesel fuel, herbicides, tractor and implement repair.

- Resources expended for baiting would likely be in lieu of traditional expenditures, not in addition to traditional expenditures.

- Some corn sold for baiting will likely come from outside Alabama and therefore will not benefit local farmers.

- A 2006 survey of private landowners in coastal South Carolina, where baiting is legal, indicated that an average of 1,200 lbs. of bait was distributed for each deer harvested. Given current corn prices of approximately $8.00 per bushel, this equates to about $170.00 per deer harvested.

Law Enforcement – baiting consumes a tremendous amount of time for Conservation Law Enforcement personnel. Much time is spent attempting to mediate baiting-related conflicts.

- Baiting further privatizes a public resource beyond common practices such as planting food plots because it concentrates deer on the property of those who can put out the most bait. This removes opportunity from hunters of ordinary means who cannot afford to own land or afford to bait at the intensity of more affluent individuals.

- Baiting often creates conflict between adjacent landowners and hunters on public lands. This can, in turn, spawn unethical conduct and potentially dangerous emotional conflict between armed people.

- Baiting creates vulnerability for opportunistic poaching of deer at night with lights at feeding stations associated with hunting camps and residences. Trophy bucks are often the target of these activities.

THE PROS OF BAITING

The following information concerning the pros of baiting was gleaned from various sources, including Internet articles and discussions with hunters. These statements generally characterize the widely held beliefs as to why baiting should be allowed.

Baiting vs. Supplemental Feeding:

- In Alabama, there is no law against supplemental feeding. Supplemental feeding is encouraged by some hunting organizations and biologists as beneficial for the deer herd. Supplemental feeding is the use of artificially placed foods to wildlife to supplement their diet. Baiting, on the other hand, is the use of artificially placed foods to lure game within the range of the hunter for the purpose of harvesting that animal. Supplemental feeding in Alabama is legal, whereas hunting by the aid of artificially placed foods is not. Relative to hunting laws and regulations, the presence of the hunter is the determinant factor in distinguishing between supplemental feeding and bait.

Baiting in the Southeast:

- Wildlife management techniques vary considerably among states that have significant differences in their respective habitats and climates. Therefore, many feel that comparisons of baiting should be limited to other southern states with similar habitats and weather patterns. Currently, baiting is allowed in LA, AR, FL, TX, OK, KY, NC, lower half of SC and southern GA.

- Many deer hunters in Alabama and the southeast lease industrial forest lands and are limited in their ability to plant green fields and make habitat improvements that may enhance their hunting success. Baiting may allow these hunters to improve hunting success on large portions of their lease that are presently considered “unhuntable.”

Wildlife Health and Disease Concerns:

- No documented cases of Tuberculosis (TB) or Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) have been reported in these states (LA, AR, FL, TX, OK, KY, NC, lower half of SC and southern GA); these are diseases generally known to be spread with more intensity around feed and bait sites, yet these states have not reported an issue with these diseases in the Southeast to date.

- States where baiting is legal have suspended the practice in areas where there were outbreaks of wildlife diseases in efforts to curtail the spread. Similar measures could be taken in Alabama if baiting was legalized and disease issues arose.

Management and Hunting Implications of Baiting:

- Supplemental feeding and baiting is supported by some wildlife authorities for a variety of purposes related to deer management practices and hunting interests.

- The purpose of baiting is to attract wildlife for harvest. This is the same basic principle as green fields, deer calls, deer decoys, scents, salt blocks, and standing crops, all of which are currently legal in Alabama.

- Wildlife activity is generally higher around bait/feed sites. Allowing hunting in these areas may appeal to youth, women, and new hunters, possibly aiding in hunter recruitment.

- Hunting for some is not always about harvesting an animal. Boredom is seldom a friend when hunting. Hunting around feed may also provide great opportunities for those hunters who also enjoy shooting with a camera or video recorder.

- Hunter access to large tracts of land is becoming increasingly uncommon. On small tracts and parcels and in many habitat types, baiting may allow for increased harvest rates. Baiting may facilitate delineating safe shooting corridors by attempting to lure deer to specific zones or areas.

- Baiting may allow for improved predictability of deer movements. Increased awareness of deer movements creates greater flexibility in deer management decisions such as establishing the age, sex, and condition of the animal. It also provides better opportunities for proper shot placement. With the current restriction on the number of bucks that may be legally harvested in Alabama, baiting may provide an opportunity for the hunter to be selective in harvesting bucks and may further allow greater opportunity to harvest an overabundance of does.

- Baiting may enhance the experience of time spent hunting. In today's fast-paced world, time is limited and hunting with the aid of bait may allow hunters to take full advantage of their time in the field.

- Where baiting is legal, the opportunity to bait is still a personal choice. Landowners, by virtue of lease agreements or permits, still maintain ultimate control as to whether hunters can use bait on their property.

Economic Impacts of Baiting:

- If baiting were legalized in Alabama, it is highly probable that corn and other feed product sales would dramatically increase. How much this would offset demands for green-field preparation is unknown, but many baiting proponents expect the overall economic impact resulting from product sales to be positive. Baiting proponents expect immediate economic benefits to local farmers, farm supply businesses and increases in local and state tax revenues from the sale of feed and feed products.

Law Enforcement and Baiting:

- If baiting were legalized in Alabama, proponents of baiting believe that Conservation Enforcement Officers could re-direct much of the time they expend working baiting cases to other wildlife violations often more serious in nature..

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