

SENATE BILL REPORT

SB 5525

As Reported by Senate Committee On:
Agriculture, Water, Natural Resources & Parks, February 21, 2019

Title: An act relating to whitetail deer population estimates.

Brief Description: Concerning whitetail deer population estimates.

Sponsors: Senator Short.

Brief History:

Committee Activity: Agriculture, Water, Natural Resources & Parks: 2/14/19, 2/21/19 [DPS-WM].

Brief Summary of First Substitute Bill

- Directs the Department of Fish and Wildlife (DFW) to conduct specific whitetail deer population assessments in northeast Washington.
- Requires DFW to make hunter harvest data available prior to establishing hunting seasons.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, WATER, NATURAL RESOURCES & PARKS

Majority Report: That Substitute Senate Bill No. 5525 be substituted therefor, and the substitute bill do pass and be referred to Committee on Ways & Means.

Signed by Senators Van De Wege, Chair; Salomon, Vice Chair; Warnick, Ranking Member; Honeyford, McCoy, Rolfes and Short.

Staff: Jeff Olsen (786-7428)

Background: DFW is responsible for managing the state's fish and wildlife resources, and establishes basic rules and regulations governing the time, place, manner, and methods used to harvest or enjoy fish and wildlife. Game species are managed according to a multi-year game management plan. For whitetail deer, DFW has developed a management plan to:

- maintain and sustain white-tailed deer populations using sound, objective science to inform decision-making;
- provide stable, regulated recreational deer hunting opportunity to all citizens; and

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not a part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

- manage white-tailed deer populations within the limits of suitable habitat.

All individuals that hunt deer must report their hunting successes or failures to DFW during the calendar year in which their hunting license applied.

Summary of Bill (First Substitute): DFW must manage whitetail deer populations in northeast Washington with the goal of increasing the deer counted per mile in the late summer surveys to fall within the range of eight to nine deer counted per survey mile. Beginning with the 2019 population assessment, DFW must conduct a minimum of six traditional transect counts. The transect counts must track and report buck-to-doe ratios and fawn-to-doe ratios, and also demonstrate whitetail deer density and trends. DFW must conduct the first set of transect counts in August, and the second set in September.

DFW must make compliant hunter harvest data available to the public 14 days after the January 31st deadline for hunters to report their harvest to DFW. In addition, DFW must make noncompliant hunter harvest data available no later than 30 days prior to a commission meeting to establish hunting seasons. The data must include a description of the assumptions and methodology used for determining noncompliant hunter harvest data.

DFW must recalculate the estimate of noncompliant hunter harvest data for 2015 through 2019 using the methodology used in 2013 and 2014, and report the results to the Legislature and the Fish and Wildlife Commission by December 31, 2019.

DFW must convene two annual meetings with stakeholders to discuss transect counts and the findings and outcomes from those counts. In addition, DFW should seek opportunities to integrate local knowledge and expertise into its work on wildlife management and hunting seasons.

EFFECT OF CHANGES MADE BY AGRICULTURE, WATER, NATURAL RESOURCES & PARKS COMMITTEE (First Substitute):

- Modifies the deer population goal DFW must manage towards to fall within the range of eight to nine deer counted per survey mile.
- Removes definitions of specific transect counts, adds that DFW may use additional counting methods to determine deer populations in northeast Washington, and removes the requirement to conduct transect counts on public lands.
- Requires DFW to convene two annual meetings with stakeholders to discuss transect counts.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Creates Committee/Commission/Task Force that includes Legislative members: No.

Effective Date: Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony on Original Bill: *The committee recommended a different version of the bill than what was heard.* PRO: The hunting community in northeast Washington is frustrated with the consistency of the whitetail deer population data. Northeast Washington recently experienced its lowest hunter harvest ever, resulting in economic impacts to the region. For biological management data consistency and trends are an important management tool. DFW is not following their own policies in their wildlife management plans. Predators are increasing in northeast Washington, and we need better management to make corrections. Noncompliant hunter harvest data estimate methodology have changed. Data from hunter harvests used to be available online, and should be made available to the public. Fawn counts are a good estimator of the reproductive potential of the herd, and recently there were record low counts. DFW should take more conservative measures for managing the deer in northeast Washington. Harvest data and transect counts are needed to manage deer populations, and now is not the time to eliminate or change the tools. If populations are too low, DFW needs to adjust seasons and reduce predatory impacts.

OTHER: DFW does value deer population data and manages the population for sustainable harvest. The number of deer per mile is not the best metric for deer population, and DFW works with natural resource managers nationally to determine the best available science. Deer estimates in northeast Washington are difficult and surveys are not a cost effective management tool. DFW is exploring new ways to determine population size including cameras, DNA, and other methods. Placing specific management in statute may result in problems in the future.

Persons Testifying: PRO: Senator Shelly Short, Prime Sponsor; Al Martz, citizen; Gary Douvia, citizen; Dale Magart, citizen.

OTHER: Eric Gardner, DFW.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: No one.