

# WHY IS DMAP NOT WORKING FOR ME?

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This is a question asked with increasing frequency by many DMAP cooperators across the state. There are a number of reasons why a DMAP cooperator's goals are not being met after several



years of participation in the program, and this article will address those reasons.

The Deer Management Assistance Program (DMAP) was implemented in 1992 in response to an increasing number of landowners and ranch or hunting lease managers who wanted to manage the deer herd on their property more effectively. At that time, and with the restricted number of days on which antlerless harvest was legal, many managers were not able to achieve the level of antlerless harvest needed to meet their deer management goals. By enrolling in the DMAP program (1000 acre minimum required), participants are given technical assistance and additional antlerless deer harvest options to help achieve their deer management goals for the enrolled property.

Participants are first asked to describe their deer herd management goals from one of the following:

1. Balance herd and range conditions at the highest herd level the land can support.
2. Increase the number of quality bucks, although total buck harvest will be reduced.
3. Compromise with some quality bucks and less than the maximum number of deer.

An ODWC biologist will then meet with the participant to assess current deer herd characteristics including population density, herd health and quality, hunting success, and crop damage. Participants are asked to collect information that will help the biologist formulate harvest recommendations to help meet the participants goals. The first information collected comes from annual spotlight counts (10 repetitions

between 15 August and 15 September each year) to determine the sex and age ratio of the deer herd. Participants are also provided a check station book, scales, a measuring tape and equipment for removing a jawbone from each deer harvested, and asked to record detailed harvest information from every deer harvested on the

enrolled property. From this information, and spotlight count data, the biologist is able to make harvest recommendations that will help the landowner achieve their herd management goals. Cooperators who provide as accurate, complete, and detailed information as possible ensure that their biologist can make well informed management recommendations which will ensure that herd management goals are met.

Far too often, however, after a few years of participating in the program, a DMAP cooperator confronts the biologist with the question "Why isn't DMAP working for me?".

As stated above, there are a number of possible answers to this question, but the answer(s) usually places blame squarely on the shoulders of the participant. The following are the most likely reasons why the goals of DMAP participants are not being met.

## **1 Inadequate, inaccurate or incomplete information gathering by the participant.**

Let's face it....as anyone who has participated in a deer spotlight survey during August knows, it is not nearly as enjoyable as most people think it would be. This is especially true after the third or fourth night, when you have eaten about 10,000 bugs, been up until midnight or later and had to get up and go to your real job the next morning, and still haven't seen any of those Boone and Crockett bucks that you know are roaming across your ranch or lease. This is further compounded by a situation in which the people doing the spotlight counts (often hunters) live a couple of

hours away from their hunting lease, and thus spend four or more hours just driving to and from the DMAP property, making a spotlight count a 6-8 hour ordeal. Far too often, participants do not complete the recommended 10 repetitions of the spotlight count each year, and thus begins an attempt at managing a deer herd with inadequate information.

Problems also arise when incomplete information is recorded in the check station book. Quite often, hunters do not pull the jawbone from harvested deer, especially bucks. Without a jawbone, there is no way of telling the age of a deer. Another piece of information that is often missing is the antler beam circumference of bucks. Without this information, a biologist is trying to put together a puzzle with pieces missing, and, as expected, the results are less than perfect.

## **2 Failure to achieve recommended level of doe harvest, and/or over harvest of (young) bucks (including button bucks).**

One of the most common problems that plagues DMAP participants is the inability or unwillingness to harvest the recommended number of adult does. Typically, hunters tend to let does walk by during the early part of the season, thinking that a Boone and Crockett buck must surely be following the doe, and they want to harvest the big boy. Later in the season, when they have decided to harvest a doe, they don't see any does. Another scenario is they let the does walk, and also let a number of smaller bucks walk, but finally end up shooting one of the small bucks and justify it by saying "I saw "X" number of bucks but never saw the big one so I finally just shot this one" or "I saw "XX" (usually a very high number) of does and this is the only buck I saw". When I hear this, my thought is "what is this guy thinking?". By letting does go and shooting young bucks, he is ensuring that he will never reach his management goals. Almost without exception, when a participant has failed to achieve adequate doe harvest, an honest assessment of all hunter's activities will reveal that every hunter had more than one opportunity to harvest a doe, but

chose not to. In this situation, it is impossible to lay the blame on the biologist. Also, a hunter who has killed three bucks usually has all the deer meat he can use in his freezer and doesn't want to "mess with" another deer, especially a doe. (Please remember the "Hunters Sharing the Harvest" program and donate a doe if you don't want it for yourself)

It is a fact that each time a hunter pulls the trigger he has made an irreversible management decision. He also, knowingly or not, makes a management decision each time he lets a deer go by, whether it is a buck or a doe. Another fact is this: there are not enough trophy bucks for every hunter to kill a trophy buck (let alone three) every season. Like it or not, in a true trophy management scenario, every year some hunters are going to go home without a buck (but hopefully not without one or more does). If a hunter kills a buck at any age before it reaches its prime, (usually at 5.5+ years of age), that buck will never reach its potential. Likewise, if not enough does are harvested to ensure that the herd is kept below carrying capacity, nutritional stress is going to prevent bucks from reaching their maximum potential.

Another common problem on DMAP properties is failing to completely shift to trophy harvest. Very often, participants will start letting small bucks walk, and within one or two years, they start seeing (and usually shooting) some very nice 2.5 and 3.5 year old bucks. On most properties, a 3.5 year old buck with adequate nutrition will have a rack that will make it into the Cy Curtis record book and, in fact, some Cy Curtis entries (usually at or just above the minimum score) are 2.5 year old deer. Most hunters find it very hard to let a buck of this size walk by. Studies show, however, that at 3.5 years of age, a buck has only reached about 65 - 75% of its antler development potential. This means that a 3.5 year old with a 125" rack could potentially have a 165"+ rack at age 5.5 or greater. There are very few hunters that wouldn't be elated to shoot a buck of this size. Unfortunately, these same hunters never make it to the point where they let the 3.5 year old buck walk by.

Another issue is the accidental shooting of "button bucks" by well meaning hunters who think they are doing the right thing by harvesting an antlerless deer. In this regard, two things must be said. First, in any scenario where antlerless harvest is emphasized (especially at the extended ranges possible during blackpowder and modern firearm season), there is inevitably going to be some degree of accidental button buck harvest. Second, every buck, including the state record, was at one time

a button buck. This being said, button bucks should be considered as part of the buck harvest and not the antlerless harvest, and every effort should be made to extensively educate everyone hunting on your DMAP property on identification of button bucks (look for the short nose and "flat-top" appearance when a deer is looking directly at you), and emphasize the desirability of harvesting mature (1.5+ year old) does.

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***Willingness to put in the necessary time and effort will ensure that the DMAP program works for you!***

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### **3 Trying to manage a deer herd on too small an area.**

Even though the minimum acreage requirement for enrollment in the DMAP program is 1000 acres, in reality it takes far more land area than this to truly manage a deer herd. Assuming a deer density of 20 deer per square mile and a sex ratio of 2 Does:1 Buck, the deer herd on 1000 acres comprises 31 deer, (~10 bucks and 20 does). Of these, the majority are younger deer...very few are older deer, and even fewer are older (trophy) bucks. Most of these deer will at some point (often daily) cross the property boundary onto one or more neighboring landowners. If these landowners (or the persons hunting on their land) do not share the same management goals as the DMAP participant, they will not adhere to the same harvest strategies. No matter how many times you let a 1.5 year old buck walk by you, he will never reach his potential if he is shot as soon as he crosses the property boundary. This should not, however, influence your decision to let him go by. If you let him walk, there is always a chance for him to survive and reach his full potential, but if you succumb to the thought "I might as well shoot him because if I don't my neighbor will", you are guaranteeing that he will never reach his potential. The most effective solution to this problem is to increase the size of the property enrolled in DMAP, often through deer management cooperatives comprising properties owned or leased by several entities. Informing and educating others of your trophy management goals will often cause them to shift their goals as well and thus complement your management efforts.

## **4**

### **Expecting immediate results.**

Often, a participant will enroll a property that has a long history of buck only or limited doe harvest, and expect to immediately begin shooting trophy bucks. This is an unrealistic expectation. Two of the classic symptoms of a buck only harvest system are a very unbalanced doe:buck ratio (often 7 or more does:buck) and almost all of the bucks being fawns or 1.5 year old bucks. In this scenario, and remembering that a buck reaches his prime at 5.5 years of age, it takes several years of intensive doe harvest to bring the sex ratio to the desired balance while allowing the young bucks to mature to their potential. If the hunters fail to shoot the recommended number of antlerless deer and/or start harvesting bucks before they reach their prime, then the time period to reach the desired goal is extended even further. Often, a participant will enroll a property that has a long history of buck only or limited doe harvest, and expect to immediately begin shooting trophy bucks. This is an unrealistic expectation. Two of the classic symptoms of a buck only harvest system are a very unbalanced doe:buck ratio (often 7 or more does:buck) and almost all of the bucks being fawns or 1.5 year old bucks. In this scenario, and remembering that a buck reaches his prime at 5.5 years of age, it takes several years of intensive doe harvest to bring the sex ratio to the desired balance while allowing the young bucks to mature to their potential. If the hunters fail to shoot the recommended number of antlerless deer and/or start harvesting bucks before they reach their prime, then the time period to reach the desired goal is extended even further.

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In summary, to take full advantage of the additional management opportunities offered through the DMAP program, participants must also be willing to take full responsibility for ensuring that the data they gather is complete and accurate. Shoddy record keeping and data collection will guarantee less than desired results. Conversely, accurate, precise and detailed record-keeping, along with meeting annual harvest goals will ensure that management goals are met in a timely manner. As with any worthwhile endeavor, deer management is not easy.

Willingness to put in the necessary time and effort will ensure that the DMAP program works for you.