

Dr. David O'Brien
Calle Dormitalleria 7, 2°
31001 Pamplona
Navarra, Spain

+34688653929

To whom it may concern,

With respect to the request by the Inter-agency Deer Policy Group for submissions regarding the 2011 Draft Public Consultation Document, I would like to herein make a contribution to the effort to reach a viable and eventually successful management situation for the deer in Ireland.

As an introduction, I would like to briefly outline my position regarding deer in Ireland and in what capacity I consider myself a stakeholder in their management.

I became involved directly with deer management in Wicklow while a member of the Wicklow Deer Management Group during my PhD research on the sika deer herd in Wicklow and the information that the legal harvest by deer stalkers could provide for their management, after many years of indirect involvement in management in accompanying family and friends stalking. I became a deerstalker myself during completion of my doctoral thesis, but soon after I left Ireland and now I am only able to go stalking a few weeks a year while home on holiday. However, I am very much in touch with my stalking companions, I stalk vicariously in conversations about the deer they have stalked in the parts of Wicklow we hunt, and when home, and via the internet, keep in contact with others involved in deer biology and management.

In the past decade I have seen the deer population continue to increase at the high rates I saw while studying the sika deer of Wicklow, and have felt a lot of frustration at the lack of any action to deal with this growing problem. In conversations with, among others, Dr. Eugene Hendrick of COFORD, I have discussed the urgent need for concerted and government centred action to tackle the deer management problem that was obvious to those of us dealing with deer, but unfortunately off the radar of Government and the public at large. We talked how the deer management issue could be resolved, and discussed deer management studies that could be developed in order to focus the needed attention on the problem, in a similar way to the COFORD-sponsored research helped to focus attention on the grey squirrel issue.

I am, therefore, pleased that the interagency deer group has reached this stage of development. I hope that there will be many submissions (for that reason I wrote a letter to the Irish Times recently bringing attention to the policy) I also welcome the opportunity to provide advice on how best to proceed with deer policy. I hope that the group can continue to focus attention on deer and their management with the result of the creation of an appropriate deer policy and eventually a centralised deer management agency for the country.

I would be happy to lead such an agency, or, in the case that it would not be viable due to my living in Spain at the moment, take on an advisory role. In putting my name forward, I would like to make clear that it is my firm belief that anyone who is to bring such a vital goal as the proper management of deer in this country has to have a number of qualities: be well-educated in deer management, be independent of any entity that has an economic interest in deer, and be seen by all stakeholders as truly objective in dealing with the many opinions and vested interests that abound, save for one - the health, well-being and animal rights of our deer herd. If this is not the case, there exists the very real potential for some stakeholders to do their best to derail the entire policy effort.

My own policy position as a stakeholder in the deer of Ireland is a desire for the following: to be able to continue to enjoy the sport of stalking; to actively help in managing the deer populations on the lands I stalk; to see the deer population reduced to and maintained at densities that improve rather than impede the biological diversity of their habitat; to see landowners really involved in the correct management of the deer on their lands; to have the public become more aware of and accepting of the realities of deer and their management, and view deer in a positive light rather than a cause of motor accidents and crop damage; to see all stakeholders truly advocate for deer and not for their own vested interests regarding deer, be it in wanting to have many deer to stalk or make money directly or indirectly from their management in a way that negatively affects the future of deer in this country. In proceeding with this issue, I sincerely hope that we can avoid its subversion by such vested interests,

I have been thinking about the best way to tackle our deer management problem, and a significant motivation in making this submission is in wishing that now that it there seems to be some positive action, that it is not done badly, to the detriment of all, especially deer. I was considering tendering for the deer management project recently proposed by COFORD, but because I am not currently associated with a university, I was unable to. Also, in my opinion, the research was not focused in the most useful direction: namely solely investigating deer densities to determine if deer are overpopulated, where we already know a problem exists and is ever worsening.

The Inter-agency Deer Group policy statement indicates that "A national census of deer population distribution and densities must be carried out as a matter of urgency, as an essential prerequisite to any deer management measures in the field, and to provide an indication of the required scale, extent and likely costs of such measures." This is the one point I am in disagreement with the Inter-agency Deer Group. Carrying out this research as a prerequisite would only delay the urgent action on the subject of how we are to reduce the population densities where we already know deer are overpopulated (in terms of damage to crops, forests, biodiversity and causing a large number of road traffic accidents).

It is true that "a national deer census programme will provide the baseline against which the expansion of current populations can be observed, and by which policy performance can be evaluated over time," but we must prioritise resources, and this census research is best conducted on the fringes of the current known range, which was quite recently updated by Carden *et al.* in Mammal Review (2010), where monitoring the dispersal rates of deer from the known areas will be very beneficial.

I think the best thing I can do is to detail how I would focus a deer management agency and the research I believe is most appropriate to our current situation.

To this end, the following is taken from a project proposal I had been working on. Its focus is not directed solely at deer managers such as the members of the interagency deer group, but at farmers, landowners, deer stalkers and the general public as well.

Objectives and Targets

The primary objectives of this project are:

- To establish a methodology for quick and uncomplicated deer presence verification, population and damage estimation, and to develop a protocol and set of standardised operating procedures for the protection of the forest estate through coordinated and appropriate response to deer presence and/or damage by the use of deer species as a valuable resource.
- To encourage and help the formation of regional deer management groups across the country, which would consist of local stakeholders, and to liaise with each of these with the aim of communicating methods and practices of deer population reduction that have been successful elsewhere, as well as gathering information on local problems and issues and how these are addressed.
- To create and maintain a centralised entity to collect and collate information on road traffic accidents and other deer incidents, including incidences of TB found in harvested deer, with the aim of getting a real estimate of how common these are, identify problem areas and coordinate responses. Additionally, a country-wide list of volunteer stalkers could be kept by this body to contact locally to help humanely kill injured and wounded deer after accidents.
- To give a focus for and to help with the creation, of government-run/statutory-backed body with responsibility for management of all deer populations in the country or on the island. This body would link all the government bodies that currently have separate responsibilities for deer management: NPWS, Coillte, Forest Service and various deer management groups and coordinate their efforts in controlling deer numbers. Some of these separate government and semi-state entities have already begun to collaborate in planning deer management by forming an Inter-agency Deer Group, and COFORD initiated a Deer Management Plan and set up a Wild Deer Management Alliance in 2005. The need for and the willingness to work towards state-wide deer management is palpable in all who work with deer and the environment; what remains is public perception of this need and political will to implement steps to fulfill it.

These aims will be achieved through the pursuance of a number of key targets:

- Developing the standard operating procedures to assess presence of deer, population number, ecological impact and appropriate harvest target.
- Develop tools for achieving target harvests by identifying and engaging available stalkers, either amateur or professional, in necessary numbers to reduce deer numbers over an agreed timeframe.
- Monitoring specific pilot areas to assess impacts of set harvest targets on population levels and impacts of deer.
- Developing and implementing communication and educational programmes for schools and other stakeholders to raise awareness of the impact of deer and the necessity of scientific and statutory management of their numbers.

Improving Control Measures and Reducing the Deer Herd.

Altering and improving upon current control measures so as to achieve a large reduction in the numbers of deer nationwide and to maintain low densities of deer going forward is vital. While the aim of this project will be to introduce such changes and assess their impacts and cost effectiveness, there are factors that will affect any changes, and these may also vary from region to region. Thus, it is imperative that management be nuanced, flexible and appropriate to the locality.

While historically deer management has been left to the recreational deer hunter and that has shown itself to be insufficient in keeping deer populations low, it does not mean that recreational hunting has no place in improved control measures. Deer numbers were low for much of the previous century, and hunting was possibly sufficient in much of deer range to control their increase. In fact, at least in the case of red deer in Wicklow, over-hunting/poaching led to their almost complete eradication during the 1980s. However, an increase in forest cover across the country and the spread of deer into areas without many hunters have added to the rate of increase in deer numbers, such that simple deer hunting has not kept pace with deer numbers. In many cases, deer management has not really been management at all, but mere recreation.

There are today many recreational hunters who have no interest in managing the herds they hunt. There are those who are only interested in trophies and even refuse to shoot hinds, some hunters who are delighted with the current high densities of deer, as it makes hunting easier, and they are unwilling to do the strenuous work that deer stalking often takes, those who put little effort into hunting sufficient numbers of deer, or who have only leased hunting rights to get

a licence for their rifle. That almost one third of stalkers harvested no deer at all is proof of this at some level.

83% of hunters shoot 10 or less deer annually. Though this could be evidence of the ineffectiveness of recreational hunters, and show extending hunting seasons or increasing the number of licences issued will have a negligible effect on deer populations, it might also be an indication of deer densities: that is, not all areas have extremely high populations. Hunters who harvest the most deer hunt the areas which have the highest densities – that is, many hunters in Wicklow shoot more than 5 or 10 deer and upwards, while hunters in the midlands shoot a few. Many stalkers would shoot more deer if they had the opportunity, and many stalkers are very proactive, harvest many hinds and put significant man hours into their activities. While the proportion of females in the bag returns is still much too low to indicate appropriate deer control, the fact that the trend has changed in recent years indicates that recreational hunters can be educated and utilised to conduct true deer management. This is especially true in regions where the deer are only now spreading and numbers are as yet low and relatively easy to control.

In terms of numbers of stalkers it is obvious that hunters, though they might only hunt once a week, contribute a significant number of man-hours to the harvesting effort. A group of three hunters on a Sunday is equivalent to one professional working three days. It would be extremely expensive to pay professionals to hunt the 25000 deer harvested annually. Hunting in groups can also often offer a synergy that a lone professional does not have – one hunter might move deer towards another hunter, giving extra harvesting opportunities.

One first step in improving deer management is to outreach to recreational stalkers and engage with them, encouraging them to increase their efforts.

Any state-wide deer management effort will need the support and aid of recreational hunters and would seek to improve their standing in the public eye as vital cogs in the management machine, increase their opportunities to harvest, and to find a market for their venison.

It is obvious, however, that in many regions, the deer populations are such that recreational hunting is not and will not be sufficient. In such cases compulsory control powers of the landowner can be used to increase harvesting, either by the use of paid professionals, or voluntary stalkers, over the long or short term. Short-term (one or two days) intensive harvests where as many deer as possible are removed from a given area by a group of ten or twenty hunters in a well-organised harvest with carcass removal have been used in several instances in Britain to reduce deer numbers in problem hotspots and the system can be used just as well in Ireland. Local hunters, appropriately trained, can help enormously with this. A database of such hunters could be easily collated for use when such needs arise as they will in future efforts to reduce deer populations. These hunters could also be used as a resource by the Gardaí when road traffic accidents occur that involve deer. Contacting the nearest local deer stalker to the place of the accident to come and dispatch a wounded deer would shorten the time that these deer are left in pain on the side of the road.

In addition to the recreational stalkers who can be called upon to help increase harvest numbers, there are a number of professional or at least very productive deer hunters in Ireland shoot more than 100 deer/annum who can be a resource in the development and implementation of deer management policies on the ground, especially in terms of carcass procession and sales during and after intensive harvests.

The historic leaving of deer management, or lack of it, to the recreational hunter has to end. Elsewhere, also, deer have been harvested according to historical precedent more than any scientific rationale. In Scotland, an effort to base harvest targets on evidence-based impact assessment to ascertain what effect deer populations are having on habitats, has been launched in some estates, using enclosures to determine natural regeneration levels and manipulating harvest targets to achieve a level of grazing compatible with these (Deer mag, spring 07,).

Ultimately, the responsibility for population control to minimise economic and ecological impacts from deer falls upon the landowner. Deer management must be introduced as an integral part of the grant process for forest planting. Whether the landowner has a recreational hunter manage the deer for him/her or sets harvest targets him/herself and then requires that hunters achieve them, or employs professionals to manage all aspects of deer control is a matter of individual taste and desire. Harvests should be verified, and the most useful way to do this is by requiring all stalkers to return the lower mandibles of each deer they shoot. These can then be used as a source of information to collate baseline data on the deer – something that is vital for the future planning of deer management. Where individual deer stalkers are not achieving harvest targets, supplemental hunters can be attracted or tenure can be discontinued.

Deer stalking is a difficult and laborious business, and in the case of forests, planting and maintenance should aid rather than hinder harvesting. Sufficient space around the property boundary, along roads and in the form of deer lawns and rides must be left to allow efficient and safe shooting and carcass retrieval. The economies of crop production and protection must be balanced, as must the primary and secondary objectives of forestry – taking the short term revenue for leasing hunting rights over the long term revenue of timber sales.

There are landowners who may decide that high densities of deer are acceptable in order to increase hunting revenue. The responsibility to neighbouring landowners requires that populations be kept in check irrespective of each individual landowner's objectives regarding the deer population on his property, such that high deer numbers on one property should not negatively impact neighbouring lands. Appropriate fencing to separate such properties must be erected by the party allowing deer numbers to increase or remain high. Non-compliance with the requirements of regional deer management may necessitate negative economic impacts on such landowners, either through planting grant

schemes or other means, including legal rights of a statutory government deer management body to enter lands and carry out needed deer control.

Some landowners may not actually own the hunting or shooting rights on their land. Instead, these rights may be held by a previous owner of the land or by another party. In these cases difficulties arise with deer management, particularly when the land owner suffers economic loss due to a lack of deer management by the owner of the hunting rights. This is a particular issue for Coillte on many properties. There is some confusion regarding what rights the landowner has in protecting their assets in these situations. If a right exists, there are still practical difficulties with regard to who has priority on the ground. Statutory provision is required for both landowners who do not own shooting rights on their land and the holders of those rights as to how the landowner can protect the economic value of their asset and their neighbours' from damage by deer (and other wildlife). Included in such provisions might be the ability of a government deer management agency to investigate and intervene in individual cases where problems arise due to confusion over ownership and hunting rights and arrive at a decision on who is responsible for deer control.

Methods

The project will focus on 6 woodland areas: 3 in the Midlands (Border?) known to have populations of fallow deer and 3 areas in the Wicklow area having populations of sika-type deer. (There may be changes to the site selection before the project commences). The forests/woodlands will be selected based on their size and connection to other woodlands, as well as level of damage and/or known or considered deer density. The forest design will also be an important factor in woodland selection, such that increased harvesting of deer will/would be feasible visa vie sufficient open space (open hill within property boundaries, roads with trees cut back on either side, open river valleys, deer lawns etc.) to enable stalkers to encounter deer in a safe and efficient manner while hunting, and remove carcasses without unreasonable effort.

Sites will be chosen both in midland areas and in the portion of the country centered around Wicklow. This will enable comparisons of density and damage levels as well as harvesting impacts on the two most abundant deer species: fallow, which is the most widespread, and sika, which is the most rapidly spreading.

If possible, three sites will be selected in each region, consisting of small and medium sized (size in hectares 12-40, most common size now. Recent National

Forestry Demonstration had 400 attendees, lots of whom have farm forests of small size (64/130 that is what squirrels had..) forestry plantations of mixed coniferous and deciduous tree species. The midlands tends to have more smaller plantations, separated by pasture and cropland, with hedgerows providing connecting habitat for small mammals but with little movement of deer between plantations in the short term (daily or weekly basis).

Such sites will provide non-porous boundaries and allow experimental manipulation of the deer harvest level to be conducted in relative isolation without continuous immigration of deer from without the study forest.

Of three designated forests, the deer density and damage levels will be assessed continually while harvesting levels will be left at their current/recent/historic levels in one site, increased by 100% after the first year in one site and increased an order of magnitude in the third site, to the maximum level possible, using the regular stalkers and a group of volunteers, with the aim of bringing density down to its lowest level without removing the deer completely (in practice unlikely to happen even if attempted). This will enable assessment of whether the deer density is currently increasing in forests where harvesting regimes are steady/equal to their recent levels. In addition, it could shed light on whether deer maintain their density at a particular level due to emigration to other forests. Such emigration might increase as densities increase, and have an impact on lowering density or keeping it below the levels it would otherwise reach. The density will likewise either go down in the areas under increased harvesting or not. Finally, it will show whether these high levels of harvesting are possible or feasible on a wider basis and the effects of this regime on deer density and damage levels.

In the eastern range of sika deer, a similarly sized forest will be selected where a minimum harvest will be attempted to compare effects between species. Factors such as normal harvest levels, density, damage and flow between forests will be investigated. This will also indicate whether either fallow or sika, or both, are capable of, or regularly move relatively long distances between forests. Such information will be useful to deer management groups in determining how much in tandem control must be between neighbouring landowners.

In that region, where larger forests are more common, and forests are often connected to others by contiguous tracts separated by a narrow boundary such as a road or river, it would be easier and useful to select medium sized woodlands and implement two different harvesting regimes on either side of a porous boundary. This would give information on the movement of deer between contiguous areas of woodland and indicate whether reduction of densities is possible without equal harvesting intensities in all connected woodlands. Two medium-sized forests will be selected and current harvesting levels maintained on one half, while the harvest levels are doubled on the other half of one forest and maximized in the other half of the second. This will allow investigation into how successful reduction in deer numbers might be if all deer managers are not

harvesting at an increased rate, to determine the necessary levels of communication and agreement of purpose between neighbours. This will also show whether deer density will decrease in the areas not being harvested at a higher level due to immigration into the adjoining areas left vacant or less dense.

The study will run for at least four years, with the first year aimed at getting baseline rates of density and damage, and harvesting levels. Participating stalkers will not be informed during this first year which harvesting regime will subsequently be applied to their hunting area. The following years will be used to assess the effects of changing harvesting regimes on density, movement and damage levels. They will also be used to investigate the difficulties in maintaining deer numbers at the lowest possible levels, the manpower and hours needed, whether stalkers can maintain requested increased harvests themselves or will need extra help. Further, the study will look at how effective large organised harvests are, how easy they are to organise, how costly, whether game dealers can be made interested in the venison and the effects of such intense harvests on deer density and movement afterwards.

Stalkers (or intense harvest organisers) will examine all deer and assess the health and condition of each deer and check for the presence of parasites and signs of disease, such as TB. Any deer with indications of infection will be tested immunologically. Stalkers will assess fecundity in females, although after the first year only female yearling and calf sika deer might be assessed, as these are the first to indicate an increase or decrease and in a previous study of this deer herd, fecundity of mature females was close to 100%. Information regarding deer will be filled out on standardized forms supplied by the project team. Stalkers will remove the lower jaw to be used to generate the age profile of the deer herds. Data will be transferred to digital media, stored and collated using MS Excel and related software to facilitate data processing.

Description of the Work

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- A period of four weeks will be allocated to read in/familiarisation with the issues and in particular to establishing contact with key stakeholders. These are:
- - Woodland owners, including Coillte, whose woods will be central to the project
 - NPWS
 - Irish Farmer's Association and other farming groups
 - The Irish Deer Society
 - NARGC and Regional Game Councils
 - Other Deer Societies, such as the Wicklow and Wexford Deer Society and stalkers groups
 - Relevant Academic Institutions

- Forest Service Forestry Inspectors,
- Teagasc Forestry Advisors
- The Northern Ireland Forest Service
- Greencore and other forestry service groups
- Other key stakeholders including NGO's and groups such as the Woodlands of Ireland

In addition, early in the project contacts will be developed with the community in the regions covered by the project, with a view to putting in place an information programme over the following years on the issues surrounding deer, farming, sustainable forest management and broadleaf woodlands. This will be capable of being expanded to a national level and efforts to do so will take place during the second half of the project.

Envisioned timetable:

- Summer 2010. Engagement with stakeholders and call for volunteers to participate in project (land owners and stalkers on their lands)
- Autumn 2010. Inventory and characterisation of each of the 6 woodlands in respect of tree species, age and size composition.
- ??? 2010 Establishment of transects for dung counts and ongoing damage assessment.
- ??? 2010 Survey of level of damage due to deer in the 6 woodlands.
- ?????? dung count and removal
- Winter 2010. Establishment of population levels of deer in 6 selected woodlands. Recounts of dung.
- Autumn 2010 and Winter 2010. Collection of regular harvest data and deer numbers from stalkers in selected woodlands.
- Autumn 2010 and winter 2010 Initiate communication programme with relevant stakeholders including schools in the catchments of the pilot woodlands and refinement of the control strategies for the 10 woodlands.
- Spring 2011. Discussion of harvest data with study area landowners and stalkers.
- Spring 2011. Assessment of damage over winter.
- Spring 2011. Investigation of samples, assessment of fecundity and other population parameters.
- Summer 2011. Randomised allocation of various harvest regimes to each of the study woodlands. (forest names out of a hat)
- Autumn 2011. Organisation of intensive hunts in selected areas, to take place in Oct/Nov, when both sexes are in season.
- Autumn and winter 2011. Collection of harvest data, assessment of target harvest achievability and manpower expenditure.
- Spring 2011. Liaise with stakeholders to inform of project progression.
- Spring 2011. Post-harvest population estimate.

- Summer 2011. Comparison of population estimates with harvest data and assess levels of immigration/emigration.
- Autumn 2014. Complete findings and write up in the form of a set of operational procedures aimed at a national management plan for all deer species.
- Winter 2014 hold workshop with key policy makers, Forest Service and NPWS, to outline results and recommendations, including running of new National Deer Management Agency.

One of the potential limitations to the effectiveness of the project centres on the way it could be perceived by the public, given that the ultimate aim is to control the population of all three deer species on the island. While one of these species is a recent and invasive introduction, it is neither feasible nor useful to attempt eradication. The red deer, though it is a native species, has only one population that are not introduced stock, and also has to be controlled to prevent destruction of its habitat. Thus, the focus will need to be identical for all three species, with the differences between them ignored. Public perception will thus need to be dealt with by continuing education of the benefits that deer bring as a natural, economic and aesthetic resource, coupled with the potential problems they can create, for humans, other species and themselves, in situations where their population is uncontrolled, given the absence of large predators on the island and the need to continue the reforestation of the island, especially with native and broadleaf woodlands.

Woodland Owners/Foresters and Stalkers

One of the keys to a successful outcome of the project centres on the need for the woodland owners/foresters and the stalkers who hunt the study woodlands to be fully involved in the project from the start. Woodland owners can more efficiently encourage stalkers to harvest the requested numbers of deer and agree to the potential influx of other stalkers to their hunting grounds if necessary. Foresters and landowners are the ones who will benefit most from a successful outcome and will be best situated to encourage other stalkers to improve deer population control and enable the findings to be used nation wide. Foresters will be asked to assess deer presence and numbers using the methodologies described above, and stalkers will be asked to take note of all deer spotted during hunting, as well as record data on deer harvested and collect

samples. All foresters and stalkers will be trained in the methodologies and will be provided with standardised forms for recording the information.

Key milestones in the project are set out in detail in Section 4 above and include:

- Interim Report December 2005.
- Assessment of level of damage present in the woodland in summer 2005.
- Development of control strategies in winter 2005 and in-depth review and possible refinement of these in winter 2006.
- Second interim Report December 2006.
- Implementation of control strategies in spring 2006 and 2007.
- Ongoing educational and public relations issues related to the need to conserve the red squirrel.
- Development of practical operating procedures for control programmes for woodland owners.
- Final Report December 2007.
- Communication of results to Forest Service and NPWS December 2005.
- Interim Report December 2005.
- Assessment of level of damage present in the woodland in summer 2005. The 10 woods will be ranked in this regard.
- Development of control strategies in winter 2005 and refinement of these in winter 2006.
- Second interim Report December 2006.
- Implementation of control strategies in spring 2006 and 2007.
- Ongoing educational and public relations issues related to the need to conserve the red squirrel.
- Development of practical operating procedures for control programmes for woodland owners.
- Final Report December 2007.

Types of Results Expected, Reliability and Benefits

The key to success of the project centres on need to engage all stakeholders in the need to develop better management of the Irish deer herd and to actively do their best to aid the implementation of such management. This will centre on increased control, and the project will provide tested methodologies for the assessment of deer presence and densities, the setting of appropriate harvest targets to keep damage and other negative impacts of high deer numbers to a minimum, and reduction of deer numbers to achieve these. This will enable the increasing problems of high deer numbers to be curtailed and the growing negative views of deer to be shifted towards viewing deer as an important part of the habitat and a national resource.

All of this will be achieved by ensuring the continual involvement of all stakeholders in the project and its findings, and the extension of these nationwide across deer management groups and other entities responsible for deer.

Deliverables

The project will generate a series of deliverables.

- The key deliverable will comprise a report for the Forest Service setting out best practice for the reduction in the population levels of all species of deer across their distribution in order to achieve and maintain densities which reduce damage to commercial forestry and crops, promote environmental diversity and growth of wildflowers and minimizes the possibility of other potentially detrimental effects of high deer densities, such as disease transmission and road traffic accidents.
- This report will be based on the findings from the pilot project, and will describe how such practices could be extended to the national level. The timeframe for this report will be 2014, enabling any necessary changes to be incorporated before signing off on the project, and communicating its findings in 2015.

Other deliverables will include:

- Thrice- yearly reports by the Project Managers to the Project Advisory Group against a series of agreed targets and objectives.
- Organisation of meetings for the woodland owners and stalkers at the start of the project and each six months thereafter by the Project Managers.
- Structured bi-weekly meetings between the Project Managers and the study woodland owners and stalkers during the hunting season, including collection of data and samples).
- Meetings with selected schools and other stakeholders in the catchments area for the pilot project and beyond.
- Development of a web site and other social media sites with the purpose of informing stakeholders on project purpose and progress, as a forum for discussion of management issues, a means of answering questions about deer presence and impact with a view to increasing data on deer distribution, encouraging new forest farmers to assess their lands for deer presence and set up management strategies, and of fomenting public support for more effective deer management.
- Presentations by the Project Managers to groups and events including the Annual Forestry Inspector's conference, Irish Farmers' Association meetings, Farm Forestry Association meetings, Private Foresters Association meetings, National Biodiversity Research Platform, NPWS Annual Research Conference, Teagasc forestry staff meetings, Coillte Meetings, Deer Society meetings, NARGC meetings.

The following is unedited ideas of how to approach the issue of Public Opinion on, and Education about, Deer.

There is a vital need as we go forward with deer management for education of the public to increase the awareness of deer so that knowledge and appreciation of these species is expanded, from mostly just the deer stalkers to the school children and hill walkers of Ireland. There are several facets to this:

The very presence of deer in an area.

The majority of the public are unaware that deer might be present in places they visit, much less that they are present in high enough numbers that present a management issue. Lack of experience means that many fail to notice the animals even on open hill. Education in the form of field outings to point out individual deer and signs of their presence and explain the ecology of the deer would be of enormous benefit in increasing public awareness and enjoyment of the environment. For example, a simple guided walk along Djouce woods or other much frequented area of Wicklow would help walkers appreciate how common deer actually are.

Surveying of public opinion regarding deer control.

Any steps to change the current management (or begin management where none has yet taken place) of deer may be viewed negatively by certain members or sections of the public. Reducing populations of deer necessitate lethal means of removing individual animals, an often distasteful notion to people in modern times. In order to proceed with management, it is necessary to assess public opinion and if necessary communicate the reasons and rationale behind management decisions. While no such survey of public opinion has been yet taken of the Irish populace, some idea of the views on deer control can be gauged from similar surveys in Britain.

From a survey of public perceptions of deer management reported by Mark Malins (Deer magazine, Vol 14, No 6, Winter 07/08) some important findings are useful to note:

The most important point is that education is paramount to raise awareness of the very need to manage populations. Many people just do not know that deer need to be managed.

Car-deer collisions are one of the main factors that people agree should be reduced, and while 28% of those surveyed believe that speed reduction is the best way to prevent these accidents, 26% believe more deer should be harvested, and 69% believe that deer numbers need to be controlled in some way. People also tend to agree that the state should have the power to control deer if landowners do not.

Hunting with hounds and biological control (reintroduction of predators or deliberate spread of disease) were the least popular forms of control.

73% say training should be mandatory for stalkers and 63% believe hunting can coexist with other forms of rural recreation such as walking.

81% believe that hunters should be able to sell the venison.

Increasing favourable public opinion to lethal deer management.

Non-lethal methods had the support of many of those surveyed. However, as an alternative to lethal control, both contraception and translocation would be impracticable. The latter would be counter productive in the extreme, exacerbating the problem of spreading deer populations or merely increasing density, and thus impact, in other areas. Both methods are extremely time consuming and prohibitively costly. Even after successful administration of contraception, a technical problem which is far from solved in wild or free-ranging deer (Green, 2008), there would be a lag time during which deer populations and impact would remain high.

Thus, public perception of deer control may have to be changed in order to gain and maintain support for management. This is simply a matter of education and clear explanation of the negative impacts of high numbers of deer. In the case of muntjac, a case can be made that this is an invasive species that does not belong on this island and is potentially devastating to important native species of wildflowers and other flora and fauna. Much like the grey squirrel, complete eradication would be a benefit to other much-loved animals. However, apart from eradication of muntjac, the ultimate aim is to control the population of the three deer other species on the island. While one of these species is also a relatively recent and invasive introduction, it is neither feasible nor useful to attempt eradication. The red deer, though it is a native species, has only one population that are not introduced stock, and also has to be controlled to prevent destruction of its habitat. Thus, the focus will need to be identical for all three established species, with the differences between them ignored. Education should be focused on explaining the benefits that deer bring coupled with the potential problems they can create, for humans, other species and themselves, in situations where their populations uncontrolled, given the absence of large predators on the island and the need to continue the reforestation of the island, especially with native and broadleaf woodlands.

Focus on destruction of the natural environment, serious impact on farmers' and foresters' livelihoods, suffering and starvation in winter where forage has been overgrazed, and increased dangers of road traffic accidents should help convince the public that responsible control is best for all concerned, including the deer.

Venison marketing.

It will be vital to develop the national market for venison. The increased number of deer harvested will mean a huge amount of venison will be available for the domestic market, which must expand to accommodate it. An increased market will mean more revenue for stalkers and landowners, helping offset their control efforts. It will also make

hunters less likely to discard of carcasses on the hill, a practice that is reprehensible if not actually illegal. Though this is not widespread, it has the potential to turn public opinion against all deer harvesting.

Venison is a delicious and healthy food, [healthy ratio of omega 3 and 6 fatty acids, can lower cholesterol, fewer calories than other red meats, highest iron content of all red meats, better than broccoli or spinach!] and should be marketed as such, sold in Irish supermarkets alongside farmed venison, much like wild and farmed salmon are sold together. That could be a marketing angle – favourably comparing the health benefits of eating native venison with that of the already widely popular native salmon – probably even better? Viewing venison as a meat much like lamb and beef will also help the public to understand deer as a valuable resource that should be taken advantage of, rather than a cuddly animal that should be left alone to die of old age.

Recent changes to the European Game Handling Food Hygiene Regulations permit small quantities of venison to be moved locally to the final consumer or retail outlet supplying the final consumer. This should make it easier to foment a wild venison market. (Deer, spring 07)

Tourism and commercial hunting.

As is known from experience in Scotland, on the continent, and beyond, many hunters are willing to pay to travel to other countries to hunt animals not available in their own locales. While many seek large trophies to take home as a memento of the experience, many also are content with the experience of hunting new game in different conditions. These don't always pay as much for the hunting experience, but they spend the same in other things – tours, accommodation, dining out, shopping, etc.

There is enormous potential to develop the commercial deer hunting in Ireland into an important source of tourism, much like the excellent angling opportunities here have made Ireland the destination of choice for many foreign anglers.

While we may not have the large trophy animals of other places, (and given the unknown genetics of sika deer in Wicklow, even though some males produce large antlers there, their CIC trophy status is doubtful) we have an abundance of game (currently), a beautiful landscape and great opportunities for enjoyable stalking. More proactive control of the deer population will also have the effect of helping increase the size of male trophies, by giving them access to more and better forage as populations decline.

Internal hunting tourism is quite common – renting rooms and holiday cottages to hunters from other parts of Ireland who have hunting grounds too far from home to make it easy to visit in one day. Some of these are on the same land the hunter leases (farmers renting houses to hunters who pay them to hunt deer on the farm), while there are B&Bs

and pubs in small towns and villages also benefiting from their location near hunting grounds. This is extra-beneficial because hunting generally takes place outside the high season for tourism.

Commercial hunting, in the sense of attracting in paying tourists from outside Ireland who pay to be brought out on land they do not lease for the entire season, usually with a guide, and hunt a small number of animals, usually trophy males, may be taking place at the moment on a small scale, but it needs more publicity, including by Bórd Fáilte, and possibly regulation.

The licensing system in Ireland would appear to currently make it difficult for tourist hunters to take their own firearm for use in Ireland. The laws concerning gun carriers (do we even have any of this at all? In Britain I know they do, and this kind of thing goes on all the time but I don't know if it is actually on the books here!) mean that hunters may accompany guides who have deer hunting and rifle licenses and take the gun from them at the time of firing. It is possible that temporary hunting licenses could be made available for the specific dates a tourist hunter is in the country. In conjunction with the European Firearms Pass added to the hunters own domestic rifle license, this could enable him/her to hunt alone, though this may not be something that would be encouraged – hiring a paid guide is both more beneficial and safer for all concerned. Commercial tourist stalkers would need, of course, to be fully insured for accidents and injuries.

Commercial tourist hunting is a potential source of income for landowners with deer on their property, and would benefit the wider community enormously, just as angling does today. Revenue from paying customers can be used to offset the salary of professional stalkers who manage the deer population. Where a landowner does not have a professional to manage the deer, some commercial tourist hunting is still possible in addition to the regular control by recreational hunters, whether they do so for free or even pay some fee for permission to hunt. Perhaps a short season at the end of October, beginning of November around the time of the rut could be set aside by a landowner for paying tourists, if there are difficulties with coordination between the tourist/guide and other hunters to ensure two sets of hunters are not hunting the same area unaware of the other's presence.

(not sure about this setting aside thing, really. If the landowner has two sets of hunters, he can just put in the agreement when he allows each to hunt, or gets them to sort it out themselves. A fixed set of dates is not really necessary, and only implies that hunters regularly get confused about who is hunting where. Best to just keep the tourists with a local guide – who will be a hunter, probably, and might even be the local bloke who regularly hunts the place (and gets a few quid, or something off his lease in return.) We want to keep it flexible for landowners to decide what they want from the land/deer, within reason and with good deer management included. Which reminds me....

While deer may be considered an economic resource to landowners, they must not become viewed so favourably that they become more important to landowners than the trees they live in, such that landowners are willing to sacrifice plantings to maintain high

deer populations and allow destruction of trees that have been planted with the aid of government grants. These grants should be contingent on responsible deer management and population control and any neglect of that should result in withdrawal of premiums.

The “Carrot” Talk:
Making the Public Positive about Deer and their Management

Benefits of Deer Control For farmers

Maintaining low populations has obvious benefits for grazing impacts. Other things to take into account are possibility of TB transmission – this is much less likely in low populations of deer. Simple numbers of interactions are reduced, between deer themselves and between deer and cattle. Low density populations also tend to be healthier, with better forage available and less stress.

In terms of forestry, managing deer populations keeps damage to low and acceptable levels, while also aiding with biodiversity grants. Deer can be a source of income in some cases, though timber production should always come before deer production, and landowners have a responsibility to their neighbours to not allow populations to increase to an extent that they become a source of deer migrating to other properties.

The pros and cons of professionals

Recreational stalking – can it do the job?

In defense of stalkers...

Stalkers will want to keep deer controlled and not have them turned (returned) to vermin status... so they will, and must, do their utmost to help the management effort.

Stalkers **can** control deer populations

They have done so in other situations in other countries and on small scales within Ireland.

For example, in Charleville estate in Enniskerry, numbers fell from 60 to between 15 and 25 over the course of three years of harvesting. The population was also controlled from Powerscourt estate, however.

Ideas from interview with deer initiative in Deer Spring 07:

A state-wide deer management body, much like the Deer Initiative in England and Wales, would not be interested in taking the harvesting of deer away from recreational stalkers. It would be charged with organizing stalkers, not necessarily employing them, and opening up area to more stalking in order to improve deer population control. It would be difficult for a management body to move forward without the help and assistance of recreational stalkers. Its main focus should be on liaising with landowners and deer management groups to explain what they can do and who to talk to for help. It would also be charged with explaining to the public, the place deer have in the landscape and ensuring that deer are not seen as merely pests that should be wiped out, as seen in parts of Scotland.

We need more, perhaps professional, management, not necessarily professional stalkers. We can use the recreational stalker in a more professional way.

Stalkers have a responsibility to manage deer herds.

There is a great difference between renting hunting rights and managing the herd.

The country needs stalkers to help with the latter.

There will be a resulting difference in the money that is exchanged between stalker and landowner. This can be negotiated with the landowner.

Recreational stalkers are a cheaper way to control population than professional stalkers. However, there is a need to act professionally.

Also a responsibility to deer welfare to become proficient and if necessary, trained in management. Do we need to repeat the invention of the wheel by insisting those with deer management qualifications from the BDS/DMQ do an HCAP

What the stalker needs:

More incentive (carrot and stick)

Carrot – landowners put control before hunting revenue,

Stick – landowners hold hunters to account, require verification of harvest, will replace hunter if not controlling numbers.

Better forest design: for too long has difficult to hunt due to lack of open areas, especially along roads, rivers, and boundaries.

More time (section 42s will be needed to get population levels down).

In England, the season for females has been extended to mid March and the end of March in some areas (advocated by BDS).

Nighttime hunting – was common pre 76, is used in Kerry N.P. has been reused in Wicklow under sect. 42 (Lamping licenses) with much success. No reason not to widen its use.

Market for venison

Help from professionals and for state bodies to do their part – including PR, so that public see their sport as vital for the public good as well as personal enjoyable.

Management is not something to apologise for.

Honesty and transparency from all stakeholders

Bark stripping can be caused by forestry practices and conditions.
Helped by multi-level forest with natural regeneration, and variety of tree species and open canopy.

In Norway, where moose numbers have increased under highly organized management to maximize populations and sustainable harvest, conflicts with foresters over damage and concerns about automobile collisions have likewise increased. Currently the management groups are faced with trying to balance the economics of moose harvesting – an important source of income for many – with the economics of timber production.

Internal communication of some ideas....

A facebook page could be set up to get feedback and inform about the project. This could eventually be a base from which to lobby government to proactively tackle the deer management problem by creating a deer management agency. (Who to lobby could be discussed with the help of the Inter-agency Deer Group).

The government body would need two or three full time positions with the ability to take on temporary workers. The personnel chosen for this body would initially be proposed/interviewed by members of the advisory panel from the pilot project.

The budget of such a body might be around 1m euros/pa, with an office in the dept of Ag, and would fall under its control, most appropriately, with wild venison becoming a bigger part of the red meat market, with the help of Bord Bia.

A point we could focus on is the predictive effects of global warming on deer. There was an article (Deer and Global Warming, RJ Irvine, M Broadmeadow, RMA Gill and SD Albon, 2007, Deer Vol. 14, No. 5, pages 34-39) saying that there is expected to be drier summers and wetter winters with more extremes, and that there will tend to be better forage after this mild wet winters, though wet autumns can be an energetic burden. Plant growing seasons extend, with flowers up earlier, and nut masts expected to be better.

More deer might thus be expected, affecting their habitats etc.

It suggested acting now to manage deer so as to keep the environment resilient to the impacts of climate change, and will need more deer control to protect floras.

Will need collaboration between managers and public agencies, working at larger regional scales.

I trust that much of what I have explained above will be of little novelty to those involved in deer management, and that those ideas that are my own invention will be accredited to me, if and when they are further disseminated. I put forward these ideas in public for the public good, believing that maintaining the deer species of Ireland as a valued resource treated with the legal rights afforded them is best for the public and the country at large. In advancing the public good there is always a danger that some will try to seek more good for themselves than others, but I hope that in the case of creating deer management policy and structures, enough concerned deer enthusiasts and enthusiastic citizens will get involved to ensure that right is done by the deer and by all those that have a stake in them.

Yours sincerely

David O'Brien BSc (Env.Biol.), PhD.