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WSI is 119

JOURNAL STAFF REPORT

The winter severity index for the International Falls area was 119 on Wednesday, according to Larry Petersen, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources area wildlife manager in International Falls.

The WSI was 78 last year at this date, and 25 two years ago, he reports.

The average WSI for this date is about 75. During the harshest winter in the mid 1990s, International Falls had an index of 135 on this date.

The snow depth is around 24-28 inches in the International Falls vicinity. The deeper snow can be found south and east of here.

The winter severity index is a standardized number the DNR uses when considering impacts of the winter on deer. It is calculated using temperature and snow depth in the period from Nov. 1 through April 30 or whenever winter ends. Every day the daily low temperature is zero or below is one point, and every day the snow depth is 15 inches or deeper in an open aspen woods is one point. The points are added each week until winter ends.

Deer feeding program initiated

DNR, Trails End Chapter coordinate local effort

BY LAUREL BEAGER
Editor

Borderland deer will get a little help from their friends this winter through Minnesota's emergency deer feeding program.

The program has been triggered by the persistent cold and deep snow, according to Larry Petersen, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources area wildlife manager in International Falls.

Petersen met Tuesday with members of the local Trails End Chapter of the Minnesota Deer Hunters Association to discuss how to carry out the program in Borderland.

Part of the state policy on emergency deer feeding calls for a group to request the program begin. MDHA has done that and now will collaborate with the DNR.

The program's guidelines were developed by the DNR after two severe winters in the 1990s when feed was provided to deer.

"That guideline said if the winter severity index was projected at 100 or more in mid-February, it could trigger an emergency deer feeding situation."



STAFF PHOTO BY EMILY GEDDE

Deer along the roadside may have been licking salt from the road. While some Borderland residents offer deer food during the winter, a wider effort is now being organized because of the severe winter.

Petersen reported the WSI recorded Wednesday was 119.

After the mid-1990 deer feeding, a 50-cent charge was added to each deer license to create a fund for emergency deer feeding, he said. Before that, the Legislature had to make a special appropriation for the effort and that had to be paid back to the state. The fund has been expanded to address wild cervid diseases, such as chronic wasting disease and tuberculosis.

THE WINTER

The question of whether

to use the emergency feeding program came up as the severe winter continued to impact an already depressed population of white tailed deer.

Petersen said the DNR selected 11 permit areas for emergency feeding that are below or well-below the established population goals. For Borderland, that means Permit Areas 108 and 119, which cover about the eastern half of Koochiching County and northwestern corner of St. Louis County.

Details of how the program will be carried out are still being determined,

said Petersen, adding that the Trails End Chapter will organize volunteers and the DNR identify feeding sites.

In addition, he said the feed must be purchased by seeking bids and that will take some time.

"Early March is my guess before anything starts to happen," he said. "It takes a while to get things in motion."

Trails End Chapter member David Stavseth is helping with Bobbi Bernath, chapter president, to organize the local feeding effort.

Stavseth, chapter secretary and a deer hunter, said when the WSI reached 100 MDHA members wanted to try to help.

"If we can do anything to help the deer herd out, I am all for that," he said.

The deer feeding will take place on state and county land for now, he said.

"This winter has been hard on all the animals out there," he said. "With this much snow and that long cold stretch, it's been horrible; hard on everyone."

Petersen said deer feed that will provide the most benefit will be selected for the program. A mix of higher protein food that has enough ingredients that won't cause long-term diarrhea is needed.

"Now they are feeding on browse," or twigs and branches, he said. "If you dump straight corn (or alfalfa) out there it will be hard on their digestive system."

BENEFIT?

Petersen said the DNR is sympathetic to the desire to try to help deer survive through the tough winters. But, he said, the DNR has learned "it just doesn't pay. They don't get the benefit."

While individual deer may benefit from the feeding program, the population as a whole generally does not, he said. "Access is difficult and you don't get to too many animals to make a difference," he said.

An added concern, he said, is drawing together animals to eat, which is not natural behavior and puts them at risk for CWD and TB.

"It's like people in a room — it's much easier for disease to spread," he said. "The argument is: Why increase the risk even a little bit when so much is at stake?"

Petersen said the DNR understands that people are frustrated that some members of a depressed population of deer are now dying. "And they want to do something," he said. "That's our nature. It seems apparent that if they are starving, give them something to eat. It seems a logical solution. In reality, the solution isn't real. We can try all we want, but we

can only get to a few deer — access is problematic. It's a lot of work and maybe the deer we do feed would have survived anyway. It's not an efficient way to manage the population."

Deer are a hardy species, he said. The population has been down in the past and it comes back through milder winters and sometimes the adjustment of harvest targets.

"The population can recover," he said. "We saw that after the two severe winters in the mid-90s. It didn't take long with mild winters till the population was robust."

Of the last six winters, including this one, four have been much worse than average, said Peterson. He contrasted that with the preceding six winters, of which only one was worse than average.

"If we had fed deer in one of the earlier bad winters, it wouldn't have mattered because another bad winter or two followed and the population would have crashed," he said.

Conditions in far northern Minnesota are not ideal for deer, he said, adding that Borderland is on the edge of the range, which adds to the population fluctuation.

"They are only so big and can only wade through so much snow," he said. "Moose are bigger; two feet of snow is nothing to them."

Now, deer are restricted because of the snow depth. Petersen said they cluster together to help create and maintain trail networks, which is the advantage of gathering in what's known as deer yards, usually in conifer stands.

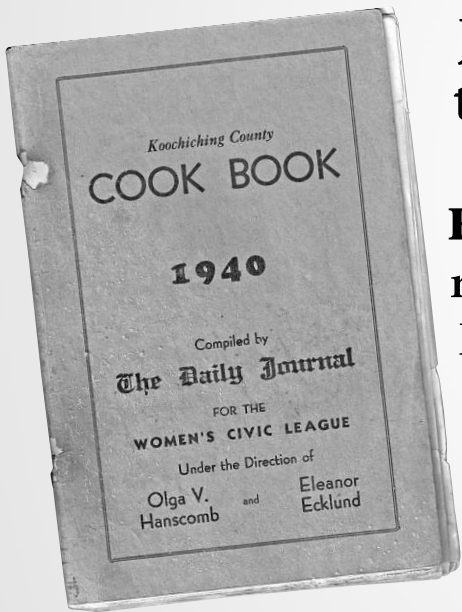
Meanwhile, this winter will have an impact on the deer hunting season, he said. "Certainly, we will be very conservative," said Petersen. "We haven't had those discussions yet. That's usually in the spring when we make decisions — if we ever get to spring, that will be a part of it. What are the options in the far north?"

But how the rest of the winter plays out may also guide the DNR's decisions. "It depends on where we are with the population compared to the goal population — that directs us with the upcoming season."

Petersen said last April the area experienced its highest WSI since the mid-1960s. The fawn and adult population suffered because of the delayed "green-up" which usually occurs when deer really need the more nutritious food, he said.

"Frankly, if we don't snap out of the bad winters, we won't have a significant recovery regardless of what we do," he said.

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