

Deadline fast approaching

Deer hunters have until Jan. 31 to complete deer tag reporting

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Deer hunters have until January 31 to report the tag and their hunting results – successful or not -- to the Department of Fish and Wildlife. If hunters do not report by that date, they will be penalized when applying for a 20-21 deer tag later this year. The fine for not reporting is \$21.60 on top of the cost of the deer tag for this coming fall's seasons.

The first year the mandatory reporting was instituted was 2016. That was the first year there was a penalty applied when applying the following year. Because the DFW did repeated mailings and public relations efforts, a total of 85 percent of deer hunters reported their tags. Since then deer tags sales have remained consistent, but the number of hunters reporting has dropped to just 75 percent. This means that 25 percent of deer hunters are paying the penalty instead of taking a few minutes to mail in the tag or do the on-line reporting (which takes all of about three minutes, start to finish).

The DFW staff is a little baffled why about 25 percent of hunters don't bother to report their hunting results. Most within the agency thought the reporting number would increase a little each year as hunters found out how simple it was and how important the information was to the deer management program.

"We don't know the motivation of people for not reporting," said Russ Landers, a data analyst with the DFW in Sacramento. "We don't know if it is on purpose or if they just forget and decide the fine is not that big a deal."

Nathan Graveline, the DFW's deer and elk program manager in Sacramento, said that a lot of hunters are indeed just paying the fine, and that it has been a substantial amount of new money coming into the agency. While the funding is always welcome, Graveline said the agency would rather have 100 percent reporting on deer tags.

"We have to justify [with data] for deer hunting to take place, and this data helps us show that hunting is not having a significant impact on the deer population," said Graveline. He explained that less hunter harvest data lessens the accuracy of their population estimates, hunter effort data, and age structure of herds, all which could impact the number of tags issued and even whether

or not a season will be held.

While Graveline didn't say it, better data gives the agency a solid leg to stand on should hunting seasons be challenged in court, which is increasingly more likely each year.

The bottom line is that they would like to see 100 percent reporting.

Graveline did say the DFW was initiating a much larger

deer monitoring program statewide with expanded data collection on all herds in the state. The goal is to have baseline data from all populations so the agency can even better track trends in herds and make better management decisions. Many herds have been managed for years with minimal or old data. The new data collection is going to be done in traditional ways (aerial surveys, ground counts, etc.) but the state is developing new methods that include DNA sampling (from dropping collection, hair traps and other methods), game cameras, and double counting from air and ground. The new data will give the agency far more accurate population data and information on trends.

But to make all of the data come together, one of the biggest components still needed is harvest data from hunters. It is important for all deer tag holders to report, even if they did not hunt or harvest a deer. The physical deer tags may be returned to the DFW at the address on the tag, or a hunter may simply go to the DFW's website (wildlife.ca.gov). The automated licensing and tag reporting page is linked right off the front page of the website.

The data hunters provide (especially if they were unsuccessful this year) could be the final piece of information the DFW needs to increase a tag quota or add a new deer hunting opportunity.

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