



Discussion Topic

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Hunting leases: A major Catch-22

A young reporter came onto a local farm to do an interview about deer damage to crops. Damage was obviously severe, so the farmer was asked why he didn't take advantage of so many requests from hunters to help him reduce the deer population. The farmer took the reporter to the edge of the corn field where they could see the farmhouse and barns. There, posted about six feet off the ground, was a "no hunting" sign riddled with bullet holes.

For farmers who resist continual pressure to allow hunters access, nothing more needs to be said. However, a few bad actors shouldn't dissuade farmers from seeking help reducing deer populations. And with lease agreements, there's the chance to make a little extra cash on the side, said Michigan Farm Bureau state lobbyist Rebecca Park. "If hunting lease agreements are done the right way, they can be a win-win for farmers and hunters," she said. "Farm Bureau policy encourages farmers to allow access to their farms, and the fact is that in many parts of the state where deer are severely overpopulated, farmers could probably use additional help in controlling deer damage."

But how can a farmer trust people who just show up on their doorstep with a shotgun? That's where carefully crafted lease agreements come in, Park said. "The lease must spell out very specifically the expectations of the agreement," she said. "A lot of it is common sense, like leave gates as you found them and don't park your truck in the corn. But all those things should be spelled out, because farmers are putting themselves out there, and the wrong people can cause damage and leave a big mess." Lease agreements can earn a farmer anywhere from \$200 to \$2,000, depending on location, Park said, so it's not a major windfall. But in time, developing good relationships with responsible hunters – and there are plenty of them out there – can yield more than just a little pocket change.

"When a farmer and a hunter develop a good rapport, the hunter may be able and willing to spend some time harvesting deer out-of season under the various crop and disease damage control permits the DNR issues," she said. "But there's a Catch-22. If the farmer exclusively leases his land to a hunter, that limits access to other hunters. Complaints may continue that farmers don't allow enough access." Part of the problem, Park said, is that hunters don't want to share good hunting grounds. But remember, she said, there are several hunting seasons available, and each could yield a different hunter and additional income from lease agreements.

"There are early antlerless, bow, firearm and muzzle-loader," she said. "But some hunters want to tie up the land for themselves for all the hunting seasons, and that could be a cause of concern for the farmer and the DNR. It concerns the DNR because hunter access is restricted, and it concerns the farmer because without hunters taking deer, there still is crop damage." Although Farm Bureau encourages lease agreements, Park said they aren't easy.

For help, find a sample lease agreement at the Michigan Farm Bureau Web site at www.michfb.com. Click the ecology section on the left side and the hunting lease information will appear.

QUESTIONS

1. How can farmers and hunters develop more trust to benefit both?
2. What can your county Farm Bureau do to encourage hunting lease agreements that cover farm liability without becoming too burdensome?
3. What other means can be used to control deer damage?