

Proposed Changes to Indiana Code to Simplify Deer Hunting Regulations

The Division of Fish & Wildlife is requesting that the following items be added to the Natural Resources Advisory Council agenda items for the upcoming meeting on August 11th. These items are a set of proposed rule changes with a general purpose of simplifying the understanding of how many deer an individual can harvest annually, how our licenses are used to harvest deer, and to provide a clear, easy to understand mechanism by which deer harvest can be increased or reduced as necessary.

- **Add a statewide antlerless bag limit of six deer and remove the "bonus" designation from all rules regarding antlerless deer** – individual counties will continue to have bag limits which would specify how many deer can be harvested by a hunter in that county. The deer harvested in each county would count toward the total number a hunter could harvest statewide.
- **Change the archery and muzzleloader deer hunting license to be used to take a buck only** – there would still be a statewide bag limit of one buck per hunter during all of the regular deer seasons combined; the archery, muzzleloader, and firearms licenses would allow only one buck to be taken under that license.
- **Rename the “bonus antlerless license” to “antlerless license”**
- **Combine the crossbow license for deer hunting with the archery license to allow hunting with long bows, recurve bows, compound bows, and crossbows under one license type**
- **Change deer license bundle privilege to 1 Antlered and 2 Antlerless deer only**
- **Change the harvest reporting requirement for deer and turkey from 48 hours to 24 hours** – this proposed change would improve compliance with the requirement to check in deer.
- **Remove the caliber restriction from muzzleloader deer hunting rules** – this will correct inconsistencies in the use of muzzleloader equipment for deer hunting.

The current structure of Indiana deer licenses and the privileges they afford to license holders is very complex, much more complicated than other state’s deer season licenses. This causes a great deal of confusion among licensed hunters who are unsure how many deer they may legally harvest and among DNR staff who try to explain Indiana’s deer hunting regulations. Much of the confusion is a result of the structure of Indiana’s hunting seasons (archery, firearm, and muzzleloader). Each season has its own bag limit that may or may not include antlerless options. In the case of archery season, multiple licenses can be purchased, a different license is needed depending upon the type of equipment that is chosen, and the licenses can be used for both antlerless and antlered deer. These confusing season limits are convoluted further by the County Bonus Antlerless Quota (CBAQ) system that provides “additional” antlerless harvest limits for each county beyond what can be harvested with the various licenses. The current CBAQ system receives many complaints annually by those who feel the county bonus quotas allow too many does to be harvested. We are proposing a set of changes to deer hunting regulations with the intention of simplifying the structure of licenses and bag limits within the state while redesigning the ill perceived county bonus antlerless quota system.

In 2021, a licensed deer hunter can legally harvest 181 bonus antlerless deer if he/she filled the quota in each of Indiana’s 92 counties. Establishing a statewide bag limit will restrict the harvest of all Indiana hunters to six antlerless deer in addition to one antlered deer. State park, military, deer reduction zones, and other special opportunity hunts are not included and, therefore, will still allow the harvest of deer in addition to this statewide bag limit. The proposed statewide antlerless limit will improve the perception of DNR deer management among Hoosier hunters who are concerned with high doe harvest allocations under current regulations. Additionally, the county bonus antlerless quota system will be converted into

a county bag limit system. Using this approach Indiana DNR will produce a map annually with the bag limit of every county for the year, and the number of deer represented on the map will be the county's antlerless bag limit. These two changes will not only result in simplification, but also improve the precision that DNR can use to affect deer harvest in Indiana.

Changing each deer equipment license (archery, firearm, muzzleloader) to an antlered-only license will further simplify the privileges provided to each licensed hunter. Under this new framework, a hunter who desires to harvest an antlerless deer in any season will purchase an antlerless deer license or a deer license bundle. The deer license bundle privileges will also be changed to allow the harvest of one antlered and two antlerless deer and remove the option to harvest three antlerless deer. Standardizing these equipment specific license privileges will simplify both the explanation and understanding of the licenses required to hunt deer and provide a uniform set of harvest privileges to hunters holding any of the equipment specific deer licenses. Changing the privileges of each license to be antlered or antlerless specific is important for DNR to capture accurate hunter effort and success data, which is an important index for monitoring trends in deer populations.

Currently, DNR sells both a crossbow and archery license that are the same price and have equal privileges. Although all archery equipment is legal for hunting during the archery season, hunters using long bows, recurve bows, and compound bows must purchase an archery license, and crossbow hunters must purchase a crossbow license. While a firearms license is required to hunt during firearms season and a muzzleloader license is required during muzzleloader season, archery season is inconsistent in that archery and crossbow licenses are both legal for this season, depending on the equipment of choice. Since the legalization of crossbows in 2012, the percentage of resident and nonresident hunters on average who purchase both a crossbow and archery license is $0.26 \pm 0.02\%$ and $0.07 \pm 0.01\%$, respectively. This is similar to the percentage of deer management survey respondents who reported using both equipment types (0.67% in 2019, $n=23,684$). As for deer license bundle holders, there have been no more than 93 individuals check in a deer under both equipment types in a given year since 2016. Thus, combining these licenses should not contribute to a significant loss in revenue but rather combine two separate groups of hunters into one license.

As a result, the following deer hunting privileges would apply:

- Archery/Firearm/Muzzleloader = 1 antlered
- Antlerless license = 1 antlerless
- License bundle = 1 antlered and 2 antlerless
- Statewide bag limit – 1 antlered and 6 antlerless (excluding deer harvested during special hunts)

All harvested deer and turkey must be checked-in either by phone, online, or at a retail location within 48 hours of harvest. Internet and phone access are readily accessible to most Hoosiers, making the check-in process quick. An excessively long period of time before game must be checked-in provides opportunity for poachers to find others to check in their unwanted deer or dispose of the carcass before the 48-hour deadline. This provides ample opportunity for illegal activity. In our neighboring states, deer must be checked by noon the day after (Ohio), midnight the day of (Kentucky), and 10pm the day of harvest (Illinois). Shortening Indiana's check-in deadline to 24 hours will improve DNR Law Enforcement's ability to enforce harvest laws and still be an acceptable length of time for the majority of Hoosiers to check in their harvest.

Currently, regulations related to muzzleloaders are based on restriction on the calibers that are allowable for hunting. This was intended to prevent small caliber bullets, which were historically of a power that was too low to harvest a deer. However, over time, the technology of bullets, powder, and the firearm has progressed so that small caliber bullets can be used to successfully harvest a deer. However, current regulations do not allow these newer, very effective combination. In some cases, the newer calibers are more effective than even some legal high-powered rifles. This has led to a lot of confusion about why certain rifles can be used but a more powerful muzzleloader cannot, or that weaker-powered muzzleloaders are legal, but higher-powered muzzleloaders are illegal. To improve the understanding of which muzzleloaders can be used for deer hunting, we recommend that the caliber restriction on muzzleloader be lifted to allow the use of these newer rifles that are more than capable of harvesting a deer.