

2014-2015 Deer Season Report



Fort Benning, Georgia

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Abstract

The 2014-2015 Deer Season on Fort Benning included a significant change in management philosophy with the entire Installation transitioning to Quality Deer Management (QDM). Under this new policy, with the exception of youth hunters during certain specified days, hunters cannot harvest a buck that does not have at least four points, one inch or longer on one side of their antlers. The first year of Post-wide QDM successfully started the process of achieving the desired long term objective; balance population demographics and sex ratios to ensure a healthy and sustainable population of white-tailed deer remains available for all future generations of hunters. Total harvest (1,082) was down compared to the past two seasons and 10% below the 30 year average. However, the majority of that decline was directly tied to immature antlered buck harvest reductions (Figure 1) resulting from the establishment of Post-wide antler restrictions.

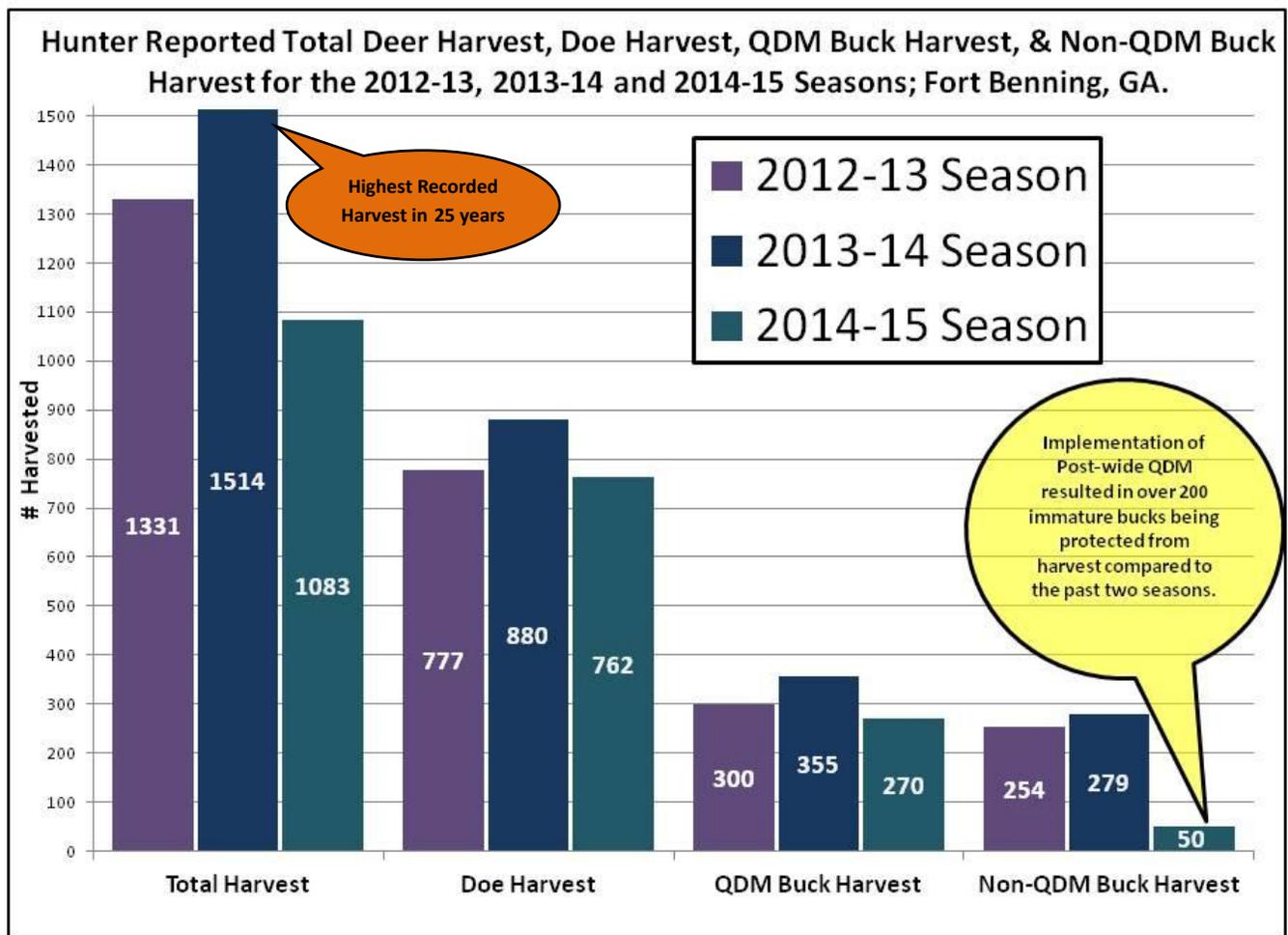


Figure 1: Hunter Reported Harvest for the 2012-13, 2013-14 and 2014-15 Seasons

Hunter reported doe harvest was 762, the fourth highest in the past 25 years. The total reported buck harvest was 320, just over half the long term average. This resulted in a 2.38:1 doe to buck harvest ratio, the highest on record and more than double the 30 year average (Figure 2).

Data collected at check stations indicates that bucks harvested which were 1.5 years old or younger (yearlings and fawns) accounted for 34% of total buck harvest (Figure 3). Percent harvest of yearling bucks dropped from a long term average of around 30% to just over 14%. Fawn harvest, both buck and doe,

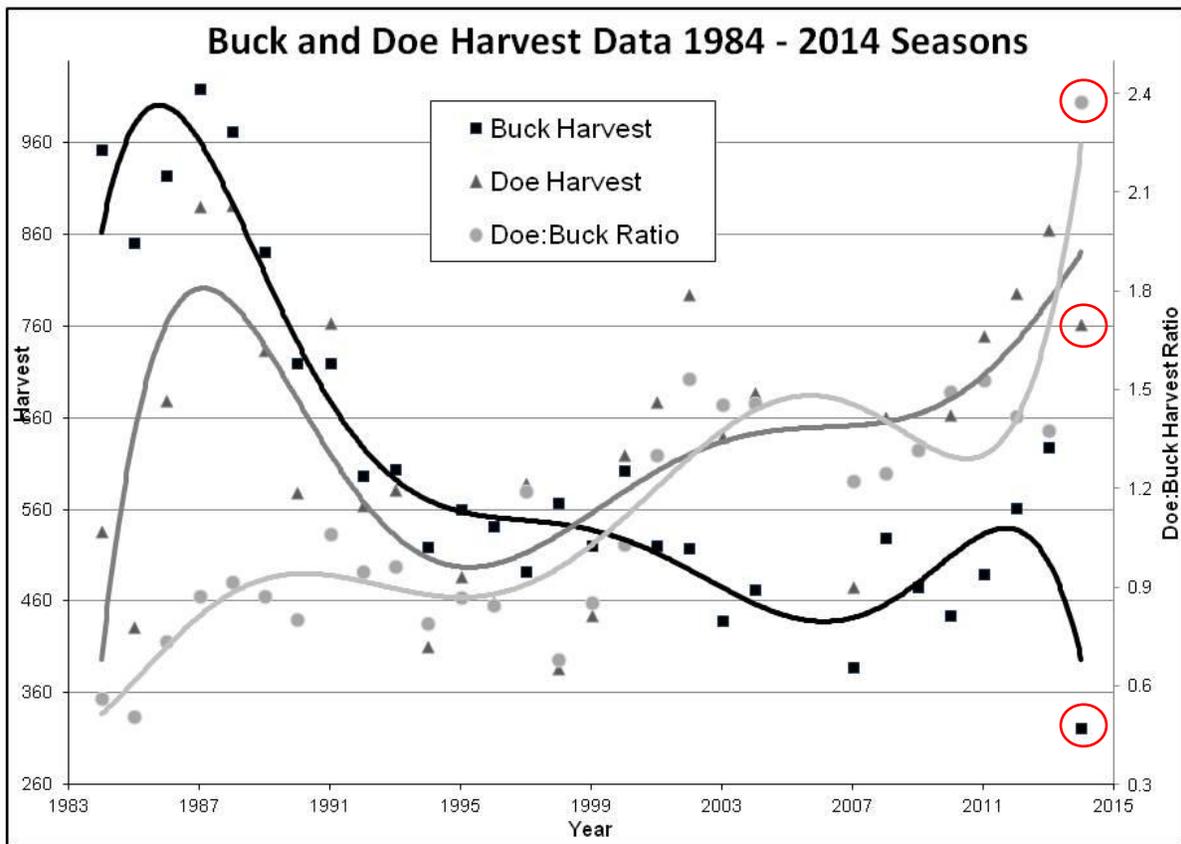


Figure 2: Hunter Reported Buck and Doe Harvest, 1984-2014 Seasons

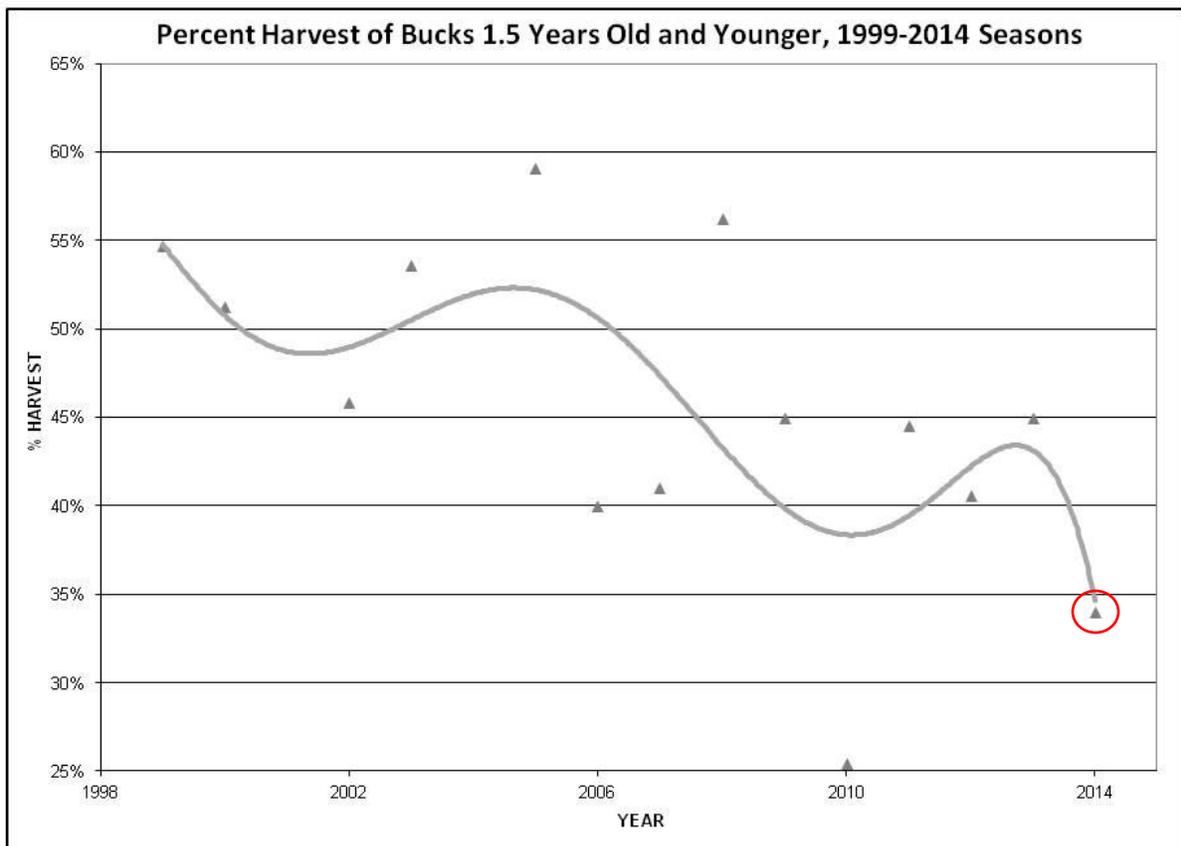


Figure 3: Percent Harvest of Bucks 1.5 Years Old and Younger, 1999-2014 Seasons.

accounted for 17% of total deer harvest which remains in line with long term averages. Lactation rates of reproductively mature does dropped slightly but remain relatively stable; leveling off just below 70%. Herd health as measured by average field dressed weights of 1.5 year olds continues to remain well below desired levels. This issue may simply be the new norm on Fort Benning though as white-tailed deer continue to compete for resources with the wild pig population.

With reduced buck harvest, the current doe harvest is adequate to begin the process of balancing sex ratios. However, total doe harvest remains below desired levels to reduce densities and maximize potential results of QDM. While down, immature buck harvest still exceeded acceptable levels. Both issues will limit the overall response of the population and the positive impacts of QDM implementation. In 2014, most hunters surveyed (66%) responded that they felt the number of deer on the Installation was “about right.” As a result, any significant reduction of densities to adjust for the herd health issue and increase potential results of QDM is likely not a viable option.

The initial positive results from implementation of Post-wide QDM were the highlight of the season. However, there are still issues of concern which will limit QDM success and the ability to monitor QDM efforts. Primary concerns relate to negative impacts of wild pigs, overharvest of buck fawns, TELETRAC reporting limitations which reduce the data quality, and insufficient data collection to fully monitor the herd. Most importantly, previous concerns related to unsustainable harvest have been addressed and implementing Post-wide QDM will ensure a quality herd and quality hunting experience for all; that path has been charted and is on course! It is important to continue the positive momentum and address issues of concern.

Hunter Reported Data

Total reported harvest for the 2014-15 season was 1,082 deer, the lowest recorded in a decade and 10% below the 30 year average. Total buck harvest declined significantly and doe harvest was consistent with trends of recent seasons. The ratio of does to bucks harvested increased to levels never before seen on Fort Benning. Total doe harvest was 762 while buck harvest was 320 which resulted in a 2.38:1 doe to buck harvest ratio. Not only was this shift intended, but it is one of the greatest positive results of QDM implementation.

Hunter reported data can provide some limited insight with respect to harvest demographics based on the reported antler characteristics of bucks harvested. Due to TELETRAC data recording limitations, The Conservation Branch is unable to capture how many harvested bucks definitely met QDM requirements. However, based on what is known, and few solid assumptions, some valid conclusions can be made. In an attempt to quantify where reduction of harvest occurred compared to prior seasons, bucks were stratified into two categories; bucks harvested with six points or less and bucks harvested with seven points or more. While there may be a few exceptions, nearly all of the bucks harvested with six points or less do not meet antler restriction requirements, those with seven or more do. Additionally, the vast majority of bucks with six or fewer points are generally immature on Benning. Bucks with seven or more points can be immature, but they all meet the antler requirements.

Compared to hunter reported harvest from the past two seasons, all indications are that the total reported harvest of immature bucks declined by approximately 200 animals (Figure 1). Harvest of bucks with seven or more points was down as well, 10% compared to 2012 and over 20% compared to 2013. Reduced harvest of bucks with seven points or greater is likely attributed to hunters letting bucks walk as a result of not being

able to confirm whether a buck was legal for harvest or a conscious effort to allow bucks to mature; both of those scenarios are considered desirable and positive results of implementing Post-wide QDM!

Total harvest on the Alabama side of the Installation was 86 deer (20 bucks and 66 does), 7.9% of Post wide harvest. This is significantly lower than prior years and directly related to increased training demand on the Alabama side of the Installation. As always, training takes precedent! It is important that hunters are understanding of, and patient with respect to, this issue.

Two-hundred and twenty-nine (72%) of the bucks harvested were 8 points or better while 43 (13%) were 4 points or smaller (Figure 4). Compared to the 2013-14 season this represents a 23% decrease in harvest of bucks 8 points or better and an 80% decrease in bucks harvested which were 4 points or smaller. Of note, 2013-14 harvest was the highest reported in 25 years.

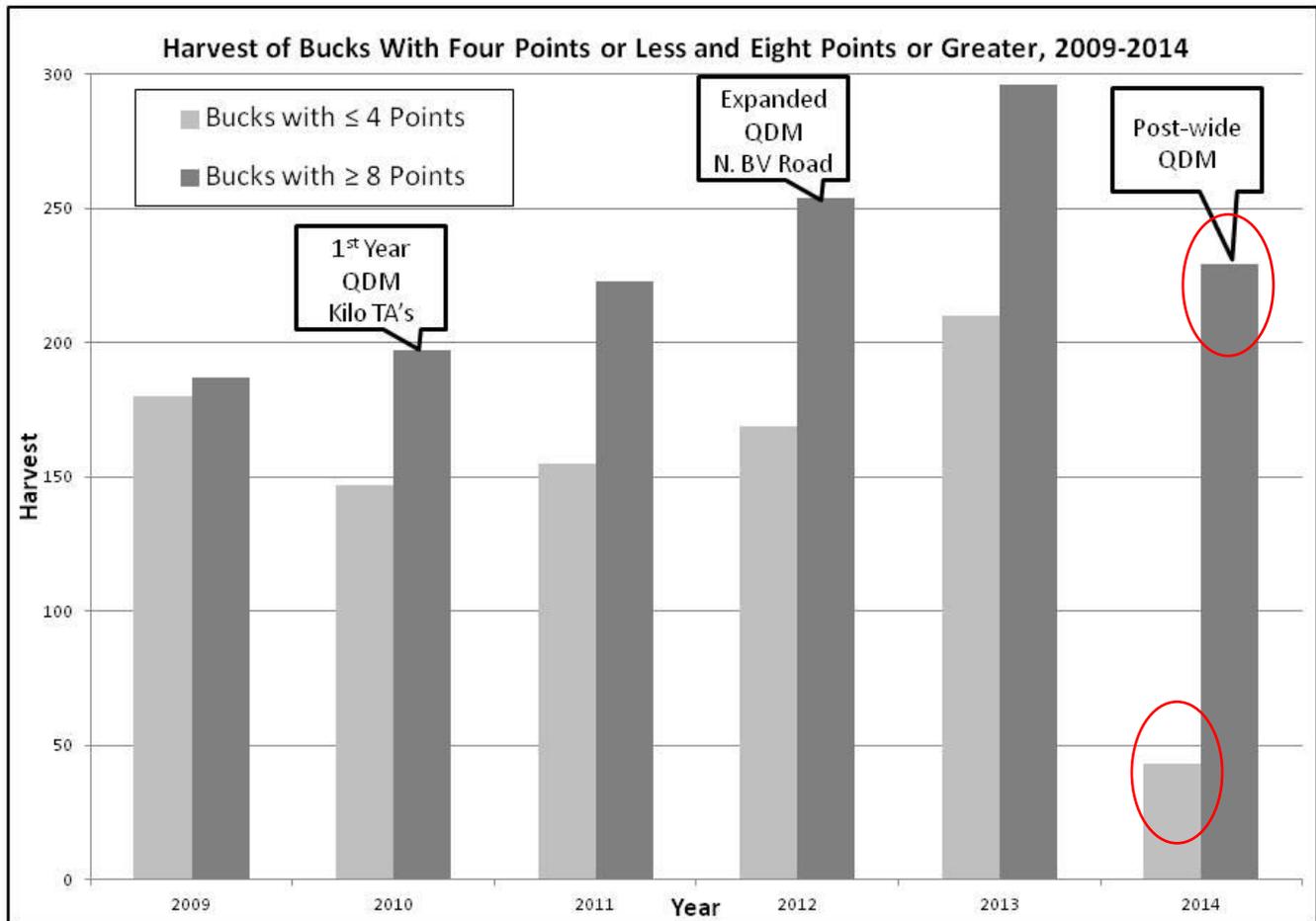


Figure 4: Total Bucks Harvested with Four Points or Less and Eight Points or Greater, 2009-2014 Seasons.

Compared to past seasons there was a significant change in buck harvest numbers and demographics. Those changes coupled with doe harvest being 20% above the long term average in recent seasons has laid the groundwork for altering overall herd demographics and bringing greater balance to the population. With time, and as those younger age classes of bucks are given a chance to mature, the reduced buck harvest numbers should return to levels similar to those seen prior to implementation of Post-wide QDM. Most importantly, those bucks will not only meet antler requirements but will be associated with more mature age classes.

Check Station Data

Biological data was collected from 253 deer on eight of the nine mandatory deer check station days. This represented 23% of total annual harvest and provided an adequate sample size for analysis. One of the Alabama deer check station days was cancelled because of severe weather.

Weights of 1.5 year old deer are the most sensitive indicator of overall herd health. The average body weights of 1.5 year old bucks and does remained well below desired levels (Figure 5). The dramatic decline in average field dressed weights for bucks is not an accurate representation of true average field dressed weights of 1.5 year old bucks on the Installation. If yearling doe field dressed weights had declined in a similar manner then there would be some confidence in the buck data and greater cause for concern. Regardless, average field dressed weights are still well below region averages and below the long term average on Benning.

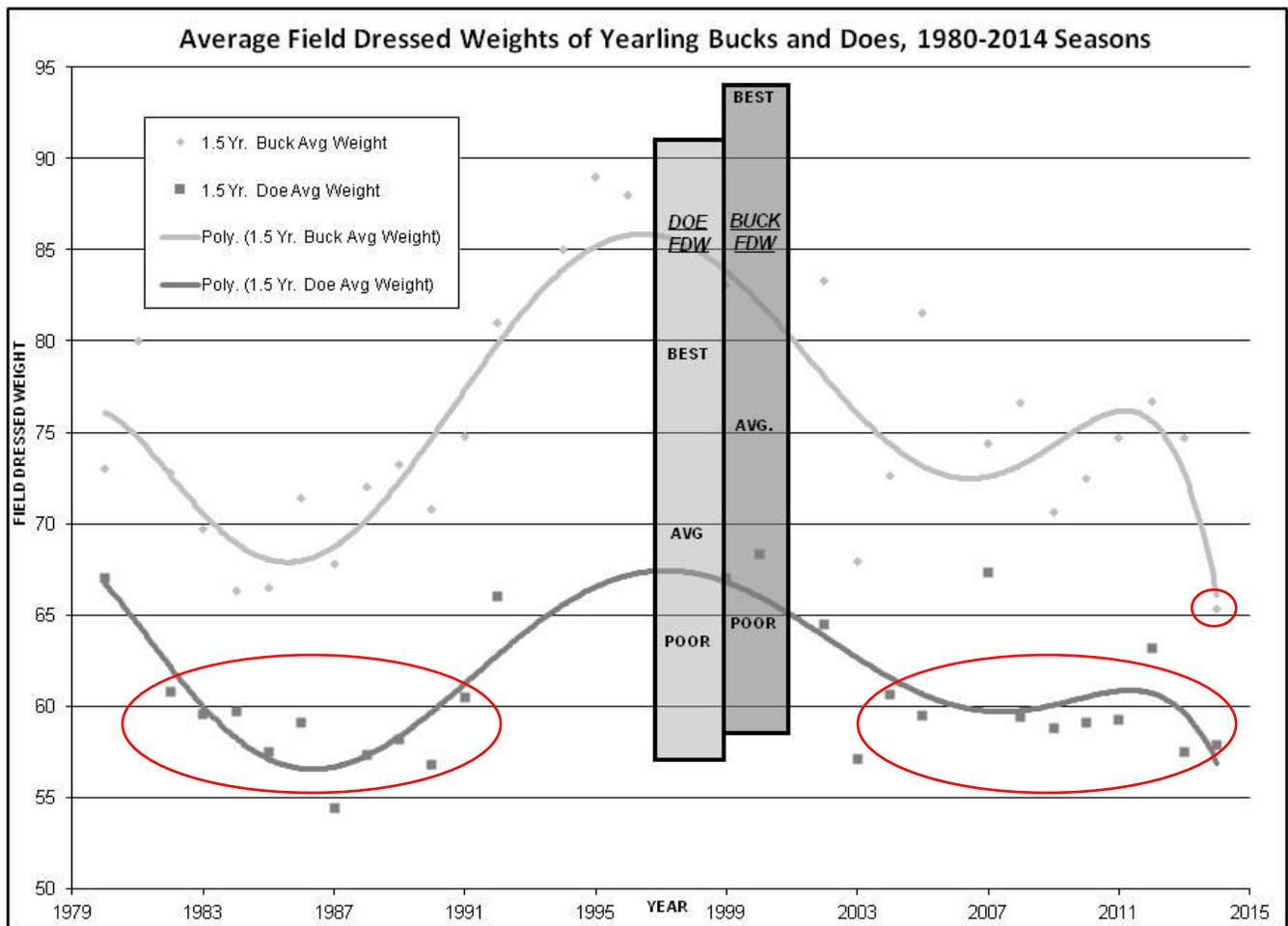


Figure 5: Average Field Dressed Weights of Yearling Bucks and Does, 1980-2014 Seasons.

Most yearling bucks brought to the check station had antlers two inches or less in length. Hunters who harvested those yearlings did so thinking they were does. As a result most were relatively small in comparison to average yearling bucks typically seen and harvested on Fort Benning; the end result, average weights were skewed lower in the sample. With implementation of QDM and a hunter's ability to generally recognize larger antlered yearlings as such, but frequently not the smaller ones, fewer yearlings that are representative of the average will be available for harvest and subsequent data collection. As a result, field dressed weights of does will be the primary metric for tracking herd health in the foreseeable future.

Yearling field dressed weights have been depressed now for more than a decade and that reduction seems to be tied to the permanent establishment of wild pigs on Fort Benning in the late 1990's. It is interesting to note that average field dressed weights of does for the past 10-12 years are quite similar to those seen in the 1980's (Figure 5) when deer densities were likely double what they are today. When Georgia established more liberal doe limits, and densities began to be reduced, Fort Benning saw higher harvest numbers and a subsequent increase in field dressed weights for both bucks and does. This timeframe also coincided with increased application of prescribed fire on the landscape which increased overall forage availability and habitat quality. It appears as though the established presence of pigs has an effect on deer herd health similar to that of considerable deer overpopulation and has also negated the positive habitat improvements resulting from prescribed burning. It is likely that the field dressed weights observed during the past decade are the new normal on Fort Benning. The reality of that conclusion is that it further indicates a lack of resources for the existing deer population! Unfortunately, Fort Benning does not have the resources necessary to adequately address this specific issue, or others, which could be utilized to dramatically improve overall herd health, without significantly reducing deer densities.

Lactation rates dropped slightly but they remain similar to previous years. The lactation rate for mature does, 2.5 years old and older, is holding steady just below 70% (Figure 6). The lactation rates of does 3.5 years old and older dropped back to just below 80% but still remains encouraging. However, for the second consecutive season, only 50% of 2.5 year old does were lactating which creates some concerns and will continue to be monitored in future seasons.

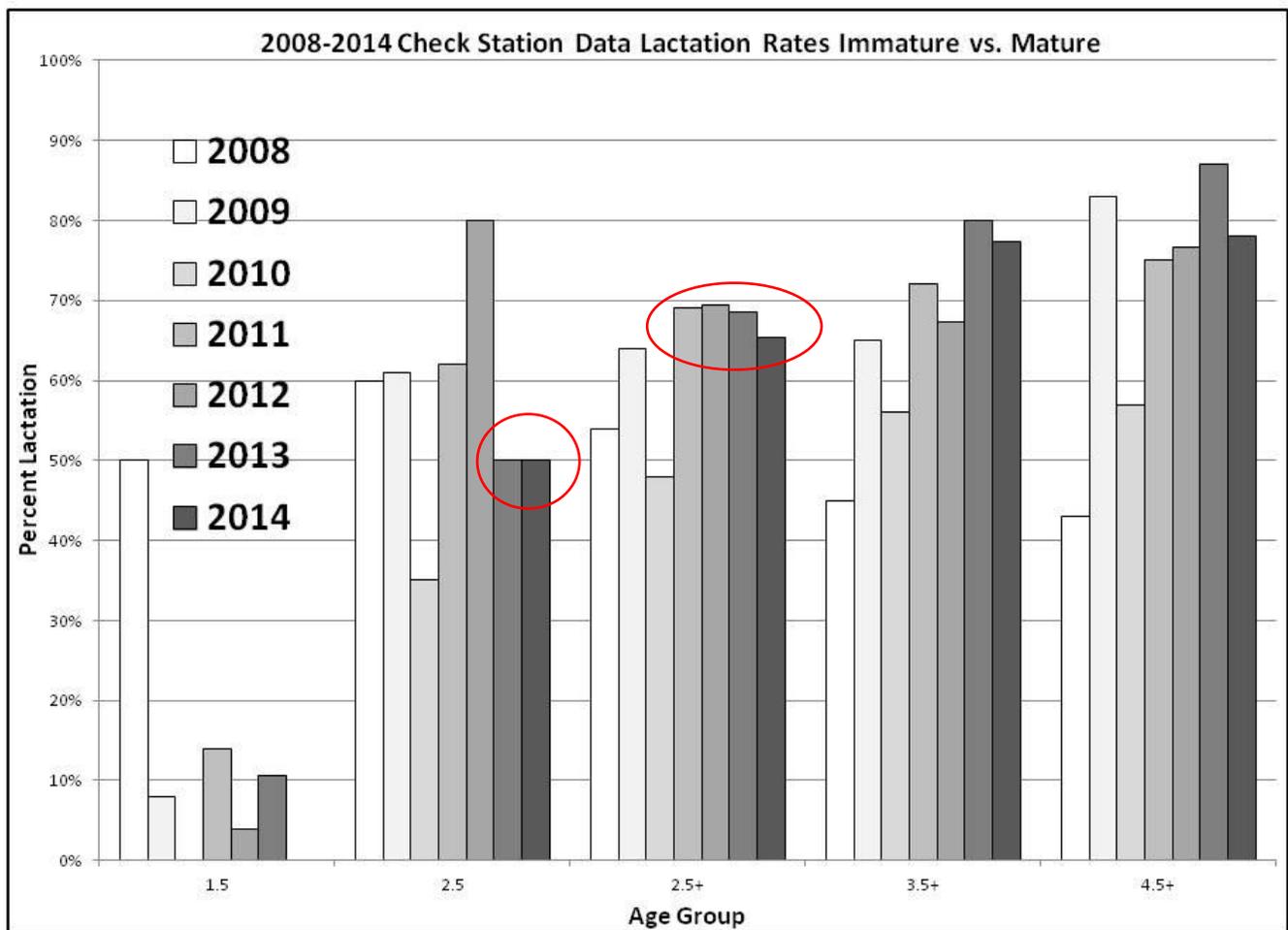


Figure 6: Lactation Rates Immature and Mature Age Class Groups, 2008-2014 Seasons.

Data collected at check stations, coupled with annual population surveys, continues to indicate the deer population on Fort Benning remains near carrying capacity with sex ratios skewed towards does. The issues related to sex ratios should begin improving with the significant reduction in immature buck harvest and the increased doe to buck harvest ratio of 2.38:1.

Percent harvest by age class is an important metric to track. However, with the change in management philosophy, comparison to prior years requires greater analysis to tease out and better understand differences which may or may not be clearly observable. Analysis of check station data indicated several shifts in buck harvest by age class while other age classes remained relatively unchanged (Figure 7). While some harvest percentage shifts may seem nominal for certain age classes, the appreciable reduction in total buck harvest resulted in actual harvest number differences for several age classes which were much more dramatic than they may appear at first glance. Others age classes are far less dramatic than they appear. Ultimately, the Post-wide antler restrictions achieved desired results by shifting harvest demographics towards more mature age classes.

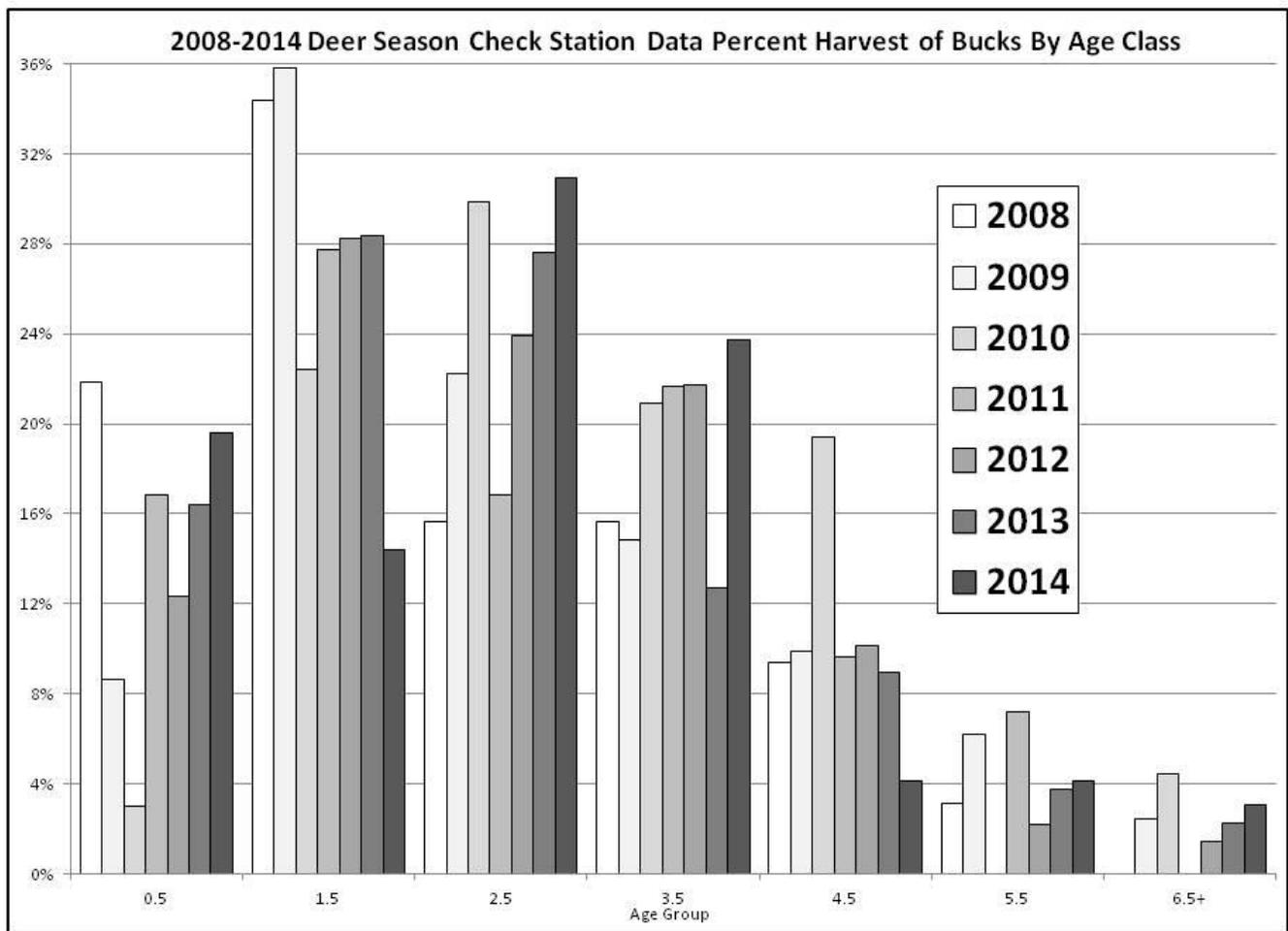


Figure 7: Percent Harvest of Bucks by Age Class, 2008-2014 Seasons.

Percent harvest of 1.5 year old bucks in 2014 was 14.4% compared to 28.4% in 2013. When expanded to estimate total harvest for each season, harvest of 1.5 year old bucks in 2014 was 46 compared to 178 in 2013. With respect to buck fawns, percent harvest was 19.6% in 2014, a slight increase over the 16.4% recorded in 2013. However, when expanded to estimate total harvest, an estimated 63 buck fawns were harvested in 2014 compared to 103 in 2013. This represents nearly a 40% reduction, not an increase as the percent harvest would suggest and further supports the conclusion that approximately 200 immature bucks were protected

from harvest as a result of implementing Post-wide QDM! Further reducing annual buck fawn harvest is important to achieve the best QDM results possible. Hunters should focus on harvesting mature deer, does and bucks. By doing so, fewer fawns and yearling bucks will be harvested by hunters who may have thought they were harvesting a doe.

Conversely to the above synopsis, percent harvest of 3.5 year old bucks represented 23.7% of harvest in 2014 compared to 12.7% in 2013. While that increase appears to be impressive, in actuality the total estimated harvest of 3.5 year old bucks was 79 in 2014 compared to 75 in 2013 which is obviously nearly identical.

While harvest of 2.5 year old bucks is higher than desired, when coupled with 3.5 year olds those two age groups represented 54.6% of total harvest. In prior seasons, bucks harvested that were 1.5 and 2.5 years old accounted for 50-55% of total harvest. To have shifted the majority of buck harvest into more a mature age class groups simply by implementing QDM is another example of the potential effectiveness of simply imposing antler restrictions to provide greater balance to the demographics of the buck population. As QDM efforts continue, the expectation is that this age class shift will move even further to the right, assuming the hunting population buys in and hunters continue to harvest fewer immature deer.

There was over a 50% decline in percent harvest of 4.5 year old bucks and an estimated 75% reduction in total harvest of bucks in that age class compared to prior seasons. This reduction was not unexpected. Lactation rates for does were well below the average for all age classes and recruitment was extremely poor in 2010 when those bucks would have been fawned. The fact that harvest of 4.5 year old bucks this season was down dramatically directly correlates to poor recruitment in 2010 and overharvest of immature age classes in subsequent seasons. That age class has been under represented each of the past five seasons. It is expected that there will be fewer 5.5 year old bucks harvested during the 2015-16 season as a result. This is yet another example of the importance of protecting younger age classes of deer, particularly buck and doe fawns and yearling bucks. In years of poor recruitment, the impact is felt for many years into the future and not only influences the number of deer available for harvest but can also affect reproduction and recruitment in subsequent years.

Prior Quality Deer Management Areas (QDM)

With expansion to Post-wide QDM, the separate analysis conducted in prior years of the original and expanded QDM Areas has less value except to provide insight into the potential outcomes and expectations for Post-wide QDM. Primary emphasis in future seasons will focus on analyzing harvest across the Installation. However, since data has been analyzed separately in past years and this is the first year of Post-wide QDM, a summary of results for both the original and expanded QDM Areas was completed for this season to see if there were any significant differences compared to the areas which were previously managed under traditional deer management guidelines, i.e. no additional antler restrictions above and beyond state law.

Total deer harvest in the original QDM Area decreased slightly (12%) this season to 120 deer compared to 136 in 2013. Doe harvest increased by a negligible amount, from 74 last season to 80 this season. Buck harvest declined from 62 in 2013 to 40 this year. A small amount of the reduced buck harvest can be attributed to the limited number of 4.5 year olds available for harvest due to poor recruitment in 2010. However, that cannot account for the entire decline. The decline in buck harvest was the first observed since the 2011 season in the original QDM Area.

In the expanded QDM Area a total of 187 deer were harvested, 63 bucks and 124 does. Total harvest decreased 9% with buck harvest being basically identical (-1) to last season and doe harvest declining 13% from the 143 does reported in 2013. Harvest declines were not expected this season for these areas. In fact, the predicted buck harvest was expected to be closer to 75 based on harvest trends observed from the original QDM Area. The reduction was likely the result of reduced access to several training areas in the expanded QDM Area.

As a whole, the training areas in the original and expanded QDM Areas saw a 10% decline in total harvest compared to last season. However, in the other areas which just transitioned to QDM, harvest declined by 33% which was expected based on historical results from establishment of original and expanded QDM Areas. Again, it is important to note that last season represented the highest recorded harvest in the past 25 years. Additionally, total harvest numbers in the original QDM Area continue to be consistent with harvest levels observed prior to implementing of QDM.

Figure 8 shows the change in percent harvest of 2.5 year old and older bucks compared to 1.5 year old and younger bucks for each of the past seven seasons. While this does not apply exclusively to the QDM Areas, it does show the measurable and progressive change in harvest structure since Fort Benning began transitioning to QDM in 2010.

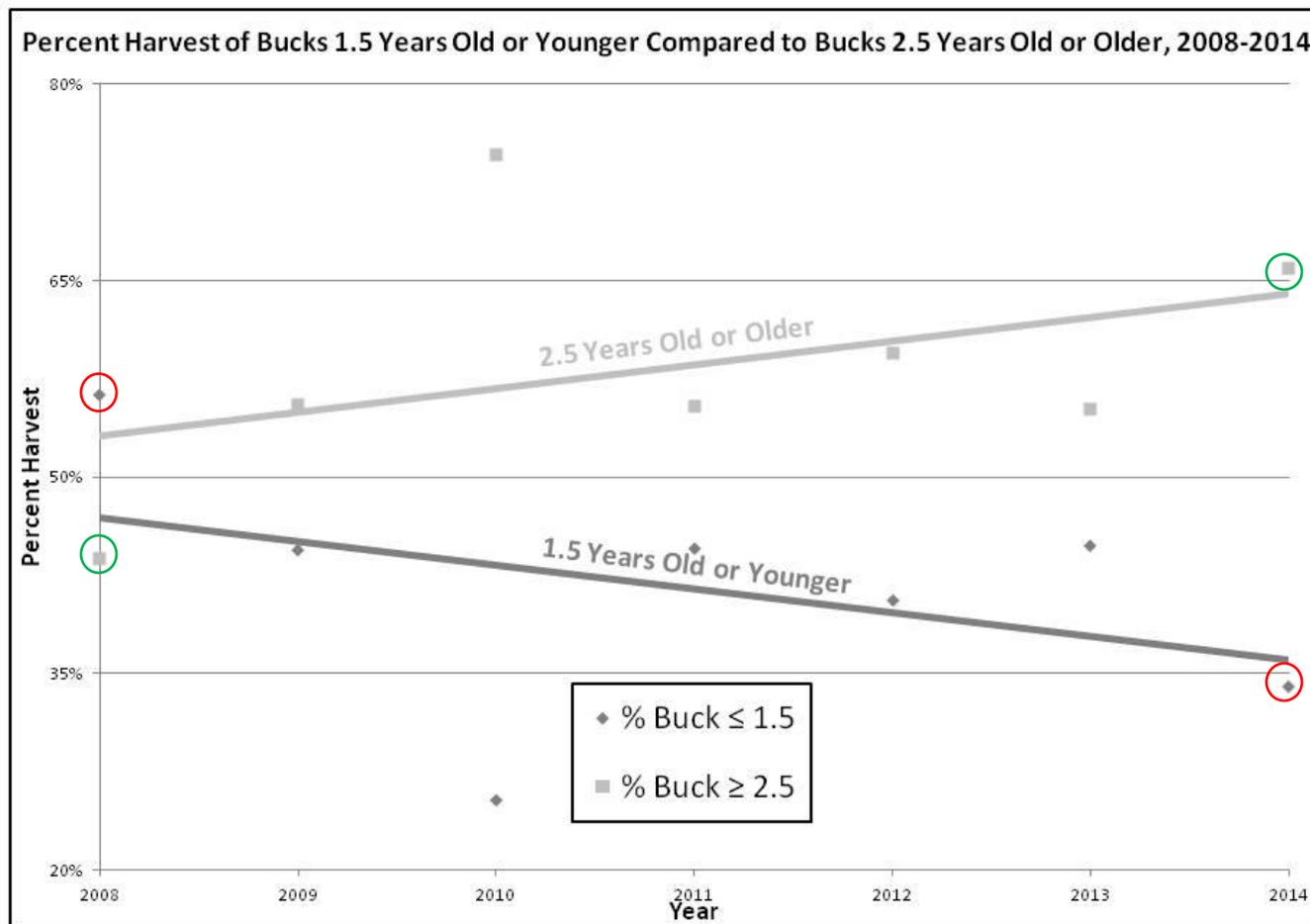


Figure 8: Percent Harvest of Bucks 1.5 Years Old or Younger and 2.5 Years Old or Older, 2008-2014 Seasons.

In 2008, two seasons prior to any QDM policies, 1.5 year old and younger bucks made up 55% of total harvest. In 2014, with implementation of Post-wide QDM, 2.5 year old and older bucks made up 66% of total harvest. This is quite possibly the most encouraging representation of how QDM has impacted white-tailed deer management on Fort Benning. This trend is fundamental to balancing buck population demographics and will provide some benefit with respect to bringing greater balance to sex ratios as younger bucks are allowed to mature. Continued improvement related to those two metrics will ultimately help ensure high quality and sustainable hunting opportunities are available in the future!

Two and half year old and older bucks represented 67% of total harvest in the previously established QDM Areas which was basically identical (66%) to the remainder of the Installation which was just placed under QDM requirements. In the original and expanded QDM Areas, 39% of the bucks harvested were 3.5 years old or older, slightly higher than the 33% for those age classes for all of Post. The doe to buck harvest ratio in these areas was 2:1 which was an increase over the 1.75:1 ratio reported last season, but lower than the 2.38:1 Post-wide average.

Generally, there are no significant differences in percent harvest of bucks by age class between previously existing and newly created QDM Areas. This indicates that regardless of how many deer may be available for harvest, the antler restrictions currently in place have a similar impact; the majority of buck harvest will be encompassed by 2.5 and 3.5 year olds. With additional education and buy in from hunters the hope is that more hunters will allow 2.5 year old bucks to walk so they can mature. If so, the majority of buck harvest in the future will be made up of 3.5 and 4.5 year old bucks.

Cantonment Area Archery Hunt

A total of 110 participants successfully qualified and harvested 37 deer (29 does and 8 bucks). Total harvest was nearly identical (-1) to the 2013-14 season. Doe harvest increased from 23 does last season to 29 this season while buck harvest decreased from 13 to 8. Success rates declined to 34% from a stable long term average of 45%. The reduction in buck harvest, again a result of Post-wide antler restrictions, accounts for nearly the entire decline in harvest success rates. It will be important to track Cantonment Area deer to vehicle collisions in subsequent years to attempt to determine if QDM is negatively impacting the successful reduction of deer density in those areas. If reduced densities are not sustained, deer to vehicle collisions are likely to increase again. If that appears to be occurring, the issue of applying QDM requirements to Cantonment Areas will have to be reconsidered and potentially lifted for some or all of the Cantonment Hunting Areas.

Discussion

The most glaringly obvious concern after the 2013-14 season was the increasing per capita harvest in Non-QDM Areas which had the potential to impact future sustainability of the deer herd. In 2009, before any QDM was implemented on the Installation, average harvest across the Installation was 0.78 deer per hundred acres (Figure 9) or 5 deer/square mile (red highlight circles in Figure 9) which equated to annual removal of approximately 15-25% of total density. With harvest in that range, reproduction in subsequent seasons will typically be more than sufficient to replace harvest removals pending some catastrophic event or disease.

As QDM was incrementally implemented, per capita harvest in QDM Areas declined initially but by the 2013-14 season had returned to nearly the same 5 deer/square mile levels seen prior to implementing QDM. However, in the Non-QDM Areas per capita harvest followed a dramatic upward trend (yellow highlight circles in Figure 9). By the 2013-14 season, average harvest in Non-QDM Areas peaked at 1.19 deer per

hundred acres (black highlight circle in Figure 9) or more than 7.6 deer/square mile, which equated to annual removal of approximately 25-40% of total density. Harvest levels near or above eight deer per square mile would not be sustainable! Those increased levels could not be allowed to continue without considering the potential negative ramifications for the deer population and the quality of hunting opportunities. With harvest levels in that range the threat of crossing a threshold at which point reproduction would not replace harvest becomes real and populations could begin to decline. With the emerging concerns related to coyote depredation of fawns throughout the range of the white-tail, a declining population can potentially be impacted to an even greater degree and managers must consider those potential impacts in all current and proposed management actions. Implementing Post-wide QDM stemmed that rising tide.

Total Buck and Doe Harvest and Buck and Doe Harvest per 100 Acres in QDM and Non-QDM Areas by Season - 2009-2014															
Areas	2009					2010					2011				
	Acres x100	♂	♀	♂/100 Acres	♀/100 Acres	Acres x100	♂	♀	♂/100 Acres	♀/100 Acres	Acres x100	♂	♀	♂/100 Acres	♀/100 Acres
QDM	-	-	-	-	-	170	33	52	0.19	0.31	170	25	42	0.15	0.25
Non-QDM	1,415	475	626	0.34	0.44	1,245	411	612	0.33	0.49	1,245	465	707	0.37	0.57
Areas	2012					2013					2014				
	Acres x100	♂	♀	♂/100 Acres	♀/100 Acres	Acres x100	♂	♀	♂/100 Acres	♀/100 Acres	Acres x100	♂	♀	♂/100 Acres	♀/100 Acres
QDM	448	110	182	0.25	0.41	448	125	217	0.28	0.48	1,415	320	762	0.23	0.54
Non-QDM	967	451	614	0.47	0.63	967	503	648	0.52	0.67	-	-	-	-	-

Figure 9: Total Harvest and Buck and Doe Harvest per 100 Acres in QDM and Non-QDM Areas, 2009-2014 Seasons.

While reduction of densities is appropriate to improve herd health, doing so may also become a slippery slope. Fort Benning Conservation Branch would have to collect and analyze more robust data on densities and sex ratios in specific areas of the Installation in order to make specific recommendations on how to do so. Additionally, reducing densities would impact the quality of the hunt for many hunters since the average number of deer they see would decline, though the overall quality of the animals they harvest would improve.

Considering that a majority of hunters believe the deer population is “about right” and the fact that specific density and demographic data are not currently sufficient, the focus for Fort Benning should be to maintain harvest levels around 5-6 deer per square mile unless additional data can be collected. Based on information gathered thus far on original, expanded, and Post-wide QDM, the current management philosophy should be

sufficient to ensure those levels are not exceeded. Finally, the philosophy will also help balance sex ratios, allow bucks to mature which will provide greater balance to the demographics of the population, and should stabilize densities. Sex ratios need to continue to be monitored to ensure sufficient does are available to facilitate recruitment. Based on current information, doe density does not appear to be an immediate concern as long as total harvest remains in the 5-6 deer per square mile range.

If sufficient data sets could be collected, it would be worthwhile to separate the Installation into management units based on soils and habitat types to identify differences in herd health and population demographics. It is clear that densities vary across the Installation and that sex ratios are different due to distinct differences in habitat types and varying management philosophies for different areas over the past six years. However, there is not a strong understanding of the specifics related to those differences. Additionally, due to manpower limitations, The Conservation Branch was not able to conduct pre-season estimates in 2014 and will likely continue to struggle just to meet the minimum necessary requirements to effectively manage the white-tailed deer population. Regardless, additional data collection is merited and would be necessary to develop any effective plans to reduce density without detrimentally impacting sustainability of the herd!

Primary emphasis on additional data collection, and subsequent understanding, would focus on increasing the quantity of population surveys to levels which far exceed current efforts, probably as much as 6-8 times the current level expended. Some additional check stations to collect biological data would also be beneficial. Doing so would provide necessary data to allow for more informed and effective management decisions which would further increase the quality of both the herd and hunting opportunities. Unfortunately, The Conservation Branch is not, and does not have any expectation to be sufficiently resourced to facilitate increased data collection. Therefore, a volunteer program would need to be developed in order to provide the necessary manpower to make such an initiative possible.

One other data collection issue which must be addressed is the reporting of buck fawn harvest. Due to current harvest reporting system limitations, and confusion among hunters, many buck fawns get reported as does. That shortfall in data collection results in increased reporting of doe harvest and under reporting of buck fawn harvest. While total doe and fawn harvest can be estimated, the actual harvest would provide greater value. Conservation Branch is working to procure a new hunter control system which will allow data to be collected in a more efficient and effective manner which would resolve this issue. If that system cannot be acquired, we must work with DFMWR to improve the capabilities of the existing system to address this issue.

Fort Benning has been through a multitude of management scenarios over the past 30+ years. Until 2010, management was primarily focused on "Traditional Deer Management" and generally followed bag limits and harvest restrictions as set by the states of Georgia and Alabama. That management philosophy initially restricted doe harvest, then transitioned to allow limited doe harvest, and eventually reached a point where doe harvest was generally unlimited. The results of that passive management had both positive and negative effects on the deer herd and the quality of the hunting experience.

While Fort Benning must still comply with state laws and seasons, it can, and has chosen to take a more active approach to management with implementation of Post-wide QDM. With that transition comes a necessary commitment to more adequately track consumption of the resource and adjust accordingly based on analysis of data collected. Conservation Branch staff will continue to work with Post leaders and the hunting community to ensure the white-tailed deer population remains sustainable and provides the opportunity for high quality recreational experiences.

Hunters should be prepared that this process has the potential to require modifications which may result in changes to harvest limits and will definitely include an increased commitment to educate and inform users about how the herd is being managed, and why. A dedication and commitment from the hunting population to help formulate goals and objectives to determine what success looks like must be a part of this process! Effective management of the deer population will also require a great deal of assistance from the hunting population in helping educate their fellow hunters in order to achieve success! The potential exists for Fort Benning to be a premier example of how ethical and responsible sportsman value and enjoy the consumptive use opportunities Mother Nature provides while ensuring natural resources, such as white-tailed deer, remain sustainable and available for all future generations to enjoy!

Summary

Antler restrictions significantly reduced buck harvest and the regulations in place were successful in protecting approximately 200 immature bucks from harvest. Unfortunately, the one exception to this success story is the continued over-harvest of buck fawns. Fawn harvest, and buck fawn harvest in particular, remains well above desired levels. In an ideal scenario few if any fawns would be harvested. Estimated buck fawns harvest likely resulted in removal of at least 10% of recruitment; those bucks are now gone and will never have an opportunity to mature. We must do a better job of educating hunters on how to identify fawns, regardless of sex, and discourage individuals from harvesting them in order to improve the success of QDM.

While total harvest was significantly lower, the distribution of that harvest was more heavily weighted towards mature deer, especially bucks. That fact, coupled with sustained higher than average doe harvest and increased doe to buck harvest ratios has started the process of balancing sex ratios and demographics of the population. It will take 3-5 years to begin to understand how this adjustment to management philosophy is impacting the population. Data collected over that time frame should be sufficient to better understand where QDM has been successful and any limitations which still may exist that reduce the overall potential of the herd.

The decline in body weights of 1.5 year olds in 2013-14 was evident again this season. The theory that increased forage availability, resulting from significant plantings of annual grain on BRAC/MCoE construction projects in previous years, increased herd health holds even greater merit now. Regardless of what deer density is on the Installation, biological data clearly shows the population remains at, or slightly above, carrying capacity. How other species like wild pigs may be impacting carrying capacity is not fully understood.

Competition with invasive, non-native wild pigs for forage resources is likely a significant contributing factor to overall deer herd health. Research on this topic is warranted, however funding and manpower are not available to conduct such an effort. All indications are that the pig population has a similar effect as deer overpopulation on the overall health of the deer herd.

The reduced lactation rate of 2.5 year old does leaves a great deal of room for improvement. Those 2.5 year olds are typically bred as yearlings for the first time the previous season. The combination of poor field dressed weights and skewed sex ratios are likely the primary contributing factors reducing lactation rates. It is also possible that predation of fawns birthed by these younger does could be impacting lactation rates. Lactation fades and is typically not observable on does harvested during the season if their fawns were depredated early after fawning. There is not much that could be done to address this potential issue.

However, the protection of immature bucks resulting from Post-wide QDM will increase the number of bucks in the population in the future. Those additional mature bucks should provide added breeding resources and aid in at least helping to address one of these potential contributing factors. Hopefully lactation rates and subsequent fawning by 2.5 year old does will improve in the coming years. Only time will tell.....

The preconceived concerns, related to MCoE transition, about significant reductions in land availability for recreational use continued to be unrealized. With the exception of the Alabama side of the Installation, limited weekend training provided sufficient acreage for recreational use during peak demand periods.

The 2014-15 deer season marked the climax for the future of white-tailed deer management on Fort Benning. That statement is not intended to suggest anything about being on a downhill slide since exactly the opposite is true. However, with respect to sorting out issues and garnering consensus to ensure the sustainability of the herd and facilitate quality recreational opportunities, there was a hill to climb. Reaching the summit involved a great deal of effort, analysis, and discussion to facilitate the process. As biology, policy, and hunter needs were balanced, considered, and adjusted with the initial, expanded, and Post-wide QDM implementation there were subsequent issues and concerns which had to be addressed. Many issues centered on improvements related to the program as a whole, facilitating the needs of the hunter, and the overall quality of the deer herd. Those issues are important considerations and improving any of those issues independent of each other wasn't likely to negatively impact the future sustainability of the deer population. However, collectively they created some concerns related to sustainability! Post-wide QDM has alleviated those concerns and will ensure the desired objective, "balancing population demographics and sex ratios to ensure a healthy and sustainable population of white-tailed deer remains available for all future generations of hunters," can be achieved. The 2014-15 season was the first chapter in a significant story of success!

