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Feeding Deer- Supplementing or Baiting?

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SAN ANGELO -- Wildlife biologists are often asked, "What and when should I feed the deer"? "Nothing - ever" may well be the answer according to Ken Cearley, Texas Cooperative Extension wildlife associate at San Angelo.

"Usually, the best way to feed deer is to let them find their own groceries on the range," said Cearley. "We can ensure deer are getting adequate nutrients for optimal growth, reproduction and antler development through good land stewardship. This means sound grazing practices and well-planned brush management. Few things are more rewarding to a land manager-- and all wildlife managers are land managers--- than knowing his or her efforts have improved the health of the rangeland and the wildlife that live there. The first step then in feeding deer is to have the range in top shape through proper use and proper stocking of livestock and wildlife."

Cearley said land managers with properly stocked range and high quality pasture who still insist on feeding should consider three important factors before proceeding. First, assuming that feeding deer will produce more fawns, the manager must have some means to thin the herd to avoid overstocking. "Too many deer on the rangeland will cause overuse and degradation of the habitat, in other words, they'll literally eat themselves out of house and home," said Cearley. "Second, unless 'money is no object', plans must be made to somehow recoup the feeding expense which will be considerable, especially if done year-round. And third, consider the effect of abruptly halting a feeding program if it becomes necessary. Will the deer have become dependent on the supplement for their existence? If so, they will suffer because an artificially

high number of deer are present compared to what the habitat alone can support. Simply put, once started, you may become locked-in to a feeding program forever.”

Cearley said specific goals must be set before becoming married to a deer feeding program. Bucks with larger and more massive antlers are often a major factor. Sometimes a greater number of fawns are sought. Or the objective might be to help carry the animals through a particularly stressful dry time or extremely cold period. Maybe the need is simply to attract deer for observation or hunting.

“Managers serious about accomplishing their goals should decide whether they want to feed a dietary supplement or just use feed as an attractant or bait,” said Cearley. “The two feeding methods are not the same, and require considerably different feedstuffs.

“True supplementation involves feeding nutrients that are lacking in the diet. These feeds commonly contain sources of energy and/or minerals, and protein. Protein is usually the primary nutrient of concern. A level of 16-20 percent crude protein in the deer diet supplement is generally considered best. There are scores of high quality deer feeds made today that will meet this protein level.”

Baiting is what is practiced by many, if not most, Texas deer hunters and many wildlife observers to draw deer within range. Cearley said since shelled corn is highly palatable to deer and is thus a strong attractant, millions of pounds of “deer corn” are sold every year in Texas for these purposes. Over 300 million pounds were reported sold in Texas during 2000 alone. That’s six million 50-pound bags.

“If you want to just attract deer and not necessarily increase their nutritional plane, shelled corn will probably fill the bill,” said Cearley.

“Avoid using corn to fill a large portion of the deer’s diet because it’s basically a source of starch, or energy, and it’s woefully short on protein and mineral content.

“White-tailed deer are ruminants, meaning they have a four-chambered stomach like a cow. They eat, until the rumen (the first chamber) is full, then bed down and ruminate, or chew the cud-- regurgitated rumen contents—and swallow again.

“Their digestive system requires at least an 8 percent protein level to enable the rumen’s digestive bacteria to break down the plant material for further digestion. Corn’s protein content isn’t high enough to maintain rumen function. Corn is a high energy feed. It’s good for boosting deer through extraordinarily stressful periods, such as extreme cold.”

All things considered, Cearley feels balancing a well-managed habitat with a proper stocking rate is the most gratifying and cost-effective way to provide for a deer herd's dietary needs. He warns managers who remain convinced that supplemental deer feeding is advantageous to carefully weigh all the options and consequences they'll face before ordering that first truckload of feed.