



Policy

Increasing commercial opportunities to harvest Hog Deer on private land outside the prescribed hunting season

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Purpose

This paper outlines a framework to allow the commercial harvesting of Hog Deer from private land outside the prescribed hunting season, without compromising the conservation status of the species and ensuring equitable hunting opportunities on surrounding lands are not significantly impacted.

bag limits and approved methods for hunting Hog Deer. The open season for Hog Deer is restricted to the month of April, with licensed hunters allowed to take a maximum of one male and one female per season. Hunters must apply for and be in possession of tags when hunting Hog Deer and are required to fix a tag to the animal immediately upon harvesting a Hog Deer. All recreationally hunted Hog Deer must be presented to a gazetted Checking Station within 24 hours of

Policy

Approved landowners wishing to offer commercial hunting opportunities on their land will be granted a permit to harvest Hog Deer during the months of February, March and May as additional periods either side of the prescribed April hunting season, subject to meeting specific requirements. The number of animals permitted to be taken during the additional period will be determined by the Game Management Authority to ensure sustainability of the resource and no major negative impact on hunting opportunities on public land.

In order to be eligible, landowners will be required to operate a commercial venture to an approved game management plan that sets out how the land is to be managed for the benefit of Hog Deer and wildlife generally, harvest objectives and how the Hog Deer population will be monitored.

A harvest report must be submitted by the landowner at the conclusion of each hunting season detailing the number, sex and other biological information on harvested animals.

Any landowner permitted to take more than five Hog Deer in a season under this permit must provide one additional hunting opportunity for no less than three days to a member of the public, free of charge. This public hunting opportunity will be made available through a ballot draw.

Permits will be provided for a maximum of three years to allow for some security and planning, and landowners will have to report annually on harvest results. The permit may be cancelled at any time for non-compliance and offenders may be prosecuted.

Context

Hog Deer *Axis p. porcinus* were introduced into Victoria in the 1860's. Its natural range extends from Pakistan through northern India to mainland southeast Asia. Under the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, they are endangered and red listed within their natural range.

Hog Deer are protected wildlife for the purposes of the *Wildlife Act 1975* and are listed as game. The Wildlife (Game) Regulations 2012 prescribe the open season,

being harvested. Checking Stations record the age and sex of the deer and may collect further biological information.

The current population of Hog Deer within Victoria is restricted to Gippsland's coastal areas, offering the only sustainable free-range hunting opportunities in the world. Given this, Hog Deer are a highly prized game animal, often attracting international hunters. Some private landowners take advantage of the local and international demand and sell access rights to hunt Hog Deer on their land. Anecdotal evidence suggests some

landowners are charging up to \$15,000 for such opportunities.

In addition to the one month hunting season in April, government agencies (GMA, Parks Victoria and Department of Environment, Land Water and Planning) facilitate balloted hunting opportunities with the support of hunting organisations on two tracts of public land, Blond Bay State Game Reserve and the Boole Poole Peninsula. The balloted hunting period extends from February until May with approximately 30 hunting opportunities made available annually. This ballot provides excellent opportunities to harvest Hog Deer as the areas are not normally available to deer hunting and the low hunter density and hunting pressure results in less disturbance to Hog Deer.

In an average year, approximately 800 hunters apply for Hog Deer Tags with around 110 animals harvested in Victoria. Sixty-five percent of animals are taken from private land. Given the high hunter pressure on public land and the limited opportunity for success, demand for hunting opportunities on private land is growing. Here, hunter density is controlled by the land owner, hunting pressure is often minimal and the chance of success is greater.

Issue

Good hunting opportunities for Hog Deer exist on private property. More than half of all harvested animals are taken on private property. Some landowners already charge an access fee for hunting on their property as a supplemental income source. However, the one month hunting season limits the number of hunters that can be accommodated, given the need to limit disturbance, maximise the quality of the hunting experience and increase the chance of success. Typically, individuals or small groups of hunters will hunt for a short period with a non-hunting rest period provided between hunt periods. As a result, the number of hunters that can be accommodated by a landowner is significantly restricted by the current one month season.

In order to capitalise on the current growth in the game hunting market, landowners have requested the ability to harvest animals outside the prescribed hunting season.

Any harvesting arrangements must be carried out in a manner that doesn't impact on the sustainability of the Victorian populations or equitable hunting opportunities.

Game Management Authority responsibilities

Under the *Wildlife Act 1975* and the *Game Management Authority Act 2014*, the Game Management Authority (GMA) has an obligation to manage Hog Deer sustainably. Hog Deer are the property of the Crown and any regime which provides a benefit for private landowners will be implemented in a manner that also benefits the broader hunting community without impacting on the conservation status of the species in Victoria or reducing public hunting opportunities.

The GMA supports the expansion of hunting opportunities that provide benefits for the wider community and are implemented in a sustainable, safe, humane and equitable manner.

Legislative authority

Section 28A of the *Wildlife Act 1975* allows the GMA to issue a permit, with conditions, to an individual to hunt and take Hog Deer outside of the prescribed season. This is the same instrument used to facilitate the balloted Hog Deer hunting program.

Hog Deer are the property of the Crown and cannot be sold by landowners, however, landowners can charge an access fee to their property.

Management framework

The GMA will permit the harvesting of Hog Deer from private land outside of the prescribed hunting season for commercial businesses. Hunting will be permitted during February, March and May in addition to the current April season.

Approved landholders will be provided with a permit under the *Wildlife Act 1975* that will enable nominated hunters to harvest Hog Deer outside of the season.

The number of deer allowed to be harvested under the permit will be determined by the GMA after reviewing a property management plan, harvest objectives and conducting a site inspection to assess the property suitability and ensure that the conservation status of the animal and equitable hunting opportunities on surrounding lands are not significantly impacted.

Landowners will be required to demonstrate how game management practices will be applied to their property. Each landowner will be required to submit a detailed management plan outlining what actions need to take place to achieve the harvest goal, sustain healthy populations of Hog Deer and enhance broader biodiversity. A template of the plan with working examples is available to download from www.gma.vic.gov.au and will need to include the following information:

- **ABN and business name**

This policy is designed to facilitate the commercial game hunting industry. Only businesses that are registered to legitimately cater for Hog Deer hunting on private property will be considered under this policy.

The GMA may audit the commercial nature of a permit holder. Permit holders may be required to show evidence of commercial transactions to substantiate that a commercial venture is being conducted.

- **Property details**

In order for the GMA to accurately assess the potential impacts that out-of-season Hog Deer harvesting may have on surrounding properties and whether a property can accommodate safe and sustainable hunting, applicants must be able to provide property details. This also provides the GMA with the location of where out-of-season harvesting is occurring and allows it to target compliance efforts on properties that don't have a permit and may be acting illegally.

- **Harvest goals**

Harvest goals guide landowners on how to manage Hog Deer to provide quality hunting opportunities. These goals inform what information and monitoring needs to take place as well as any potential habitat property management works. Some may choose to manage for quality trophy stags, while others may seek to provide for maximum hunting opportunities. The different goals require different management approaches.

- **Wildlife management and pest control programs**

It is a legal requirement under the *Wildlife Act 1975* that a wildlife management plan is developed to support any permit being provided to harvest Hog Deer outside of the regulated season. Some property owners may want to remove problem wildlife, like kangaroos, to assist in browsing pressure management and habitat enhancement. Landowners must also demonstrate their approach to integrated pest management programs to reduce predation on Hog Deer and other wildlife (e.g. fox control) and control grazing pressure (e.g. rabbits).

- **Proposed hunting arrangements**

After assessing the population of Hog Deer on each property and how many animals can sustainably be harvested, landowners will need to decide what hunting arrangements they are proposing to implement that suits their circumstance. Factors that may be applicable include potential over harvesting, conflicts with other land uses and adequate rest periods to maximise harvest success. If applicable, the landowner will also need to document how they will manage the public hunting opportunity.

- **Habitat management**

The majority of private land environments contain significant tracts of modified landscapes. As a general rule, healthy habitats provide healthy game populations. The landowner is required to demonstrate how they will enhance populations of Hog Deer on their property through habitat

management. This could include developing good matrices of grassland and native cover throughout a property or investing in permanent watering points. Through proactive habitat management, quality hunting opportunities for Hog Deer will be sustained and broader native vegetation and wildlife will benefit.

- **Population monitoring**

It is essential that the landowner understands the population of Hog Deer on their property, including sex ratio, productivity and body weight. This information is critical for the GMA in determining the appropriate number of animals that can be harvested. And to inform the landowner of habitat management requirements and harvest strategies.

GMA Officers can inspect a property at any time to ensure that permit conditions are being adhered to and to work with landholders should they require modifications to their management plan.

Consistent with current arrangements for recreationally harvested Hog Deer, landowners will be required to provide the GMA with the age and sex of all harvested deer and any further biological information that may be required. To collect the required information, the bottom jawbones of harvested deer, amongst other measurements and biological samples, will need to be acquired.

This monitoring and collection of all biological data, including any associated costs, is the responsibility of the landowner. The GMA can provide training to landowners on how to collect the required information.

Alternatively, landowners may wish to outsource this work or privately engage current Checking Station Operators. Three Checking Station Operators are contracted by the GMA for the month of April.

Any contractual arrangements between landowners and Checking Station Operators would be independent from the GMA.

All hunters must hold a current Game Licence, be in possession of Hog Deer Tags and have their details listed on the *Wildlife Act 1975* permit. In addition, landowners harvesting more than five deer in a season under the permit will be required to make available one hunting opportunity, via a ballot, to a member of the public free of charge.

Benefits

This policy supports an emerging sector and increases the potential economic benefits to regional areas. It provides an incentive for landowners to better manage both Hog Deer populations and habitat to provide quality hunting opportunities.

Landowners with marginal pastoral farmland will have an incentive to create and manage native habitat that will favour Hog Deer. Through correct management, local Hog Deer herds will be healthier, browsing pressure of Hog Deer could be reduced and broader biodiversity will benefit.

The hunting community receives increased commercial hunting opportunities on private land, healthier Hog Deer populations and the allocation of one ballot opportunity per property (where applicable).

Services

To assist landowners, the GMA will provide a management plan template. It will also assist with further extension material.

On-site inspections will allow the GMA to work with landowners to assist them in setting and achieving their harvest goals.

