

Deer Regulation Changes

Frequently Asked Questions

Why did the Department make all of these changes at one time?

Vermont's previous deer hunting seasons and regulations were the result of many small changes instituted over time which were easy for hunters to adjust to. However, because all deer hunting regulations and seasons are intertwined, everything effects everything else. Large, substantive changes simply cannot be made piece-by-piece. These regulation changes were designed to work together as a package to achieve management goals.

What are the goals of these changes?

These changes are intended to provide hunters with additional opportunities to hunt antlerless deer to maintain a stable and healthy herd. They are also designed to more effectively manage for larger-bodied, bigger-antlered bucks throughout Vermont without being unnecessarily restrictive. Additionally, they are intended to give Vermonters additional opportunities to become hunters and to remain hunters.

What input did the Department consider when making these changes?

These changes are largely the result of the Department's Comprehensive Deer Management Evaluation. That process began in 2013 and involved substantial input from hunters as well as collection and analysis of additional biological data on Vermont's deer herd.

Why go to a one buck annual limit?

The one buck annual limit will reduce the buck harvest rate and promote more older bucks. In addition to the bucks that are directly saved because hunters can't shoot two anymore, a one buck limit will encourage many hunters to pass on opportunities to harvest young bucks early in the season because they don't want to be done buck hunting. In some WMUs this reduced buck harvest will eliminate the need for an antler restriction, and in other areas it will allow for further increases in the number of older bucks.

The one buck annual limit also encourages hunters to harvest antlerless deer instead of bucks. Vermont hunters are much more focused on bucks than hunters from most other states, which creates some challenges for deer management. While there are many valid reasons for the focus on bucks, shifting some of it to antlerless deer is a necessary part of deer management in a future with fewer hunters.

A one buck limit means if I shoot a buck in archery season, I can't hunt during the rifle season. Did the Department consider this when deciding to go to a one buck limit?

Yes. The Department considered that this change will have an impact on hunters who currently hunt during multiple seasons and, therefore, were previously allowed to harvest multiple bucks. Archery hunters will be particularly impacted, as they will be giving up their opportunity to hunt during the rifle season if they choose to harvest a buck during the archery season, but it will also affect muzzleloader hunters. In fact, the Department expects to lose license sale revenue (primarily muzzleloader license sales) as a result of the one buck limit. Even

so, the Department feels this is the best approach at this time to manage for larger-bodied, bigger-antlered bucks. Any type of restriction on the buck harvest will have consequences for someone. Without these consequences, many hunters wouldn't be selective, and the results that hunters voiced support for through the recent Comprehensive Deer Management Evaluation wouldn't be achieved.

How many hunters shoot two bucks in a year?

About 600. Over the past 3 years it was 510 in 2017, 749 in 2018, and 663 in 2019.

So, you did this to keep 600 bucks from being harvested? Is saving 600 bucks worth it?

600 bucks is almost equal to the entire muzzleloader season buck kill. It's more than the total 2019 buck harvest in 16 of Vermont's 21 WMUs. It's more than 2 bucks in every single town in the state. Although this seems like a small number, it's significant in terms of Vermont's buck population. More importantly, because some hunters will be more selective because of the one buck limit, the buck harvest will actually be reduced by more than 600 deer. The Department anticipate a reduction of 10% or more (about 1,000 bucks). In some WMUs, this reduced buck harvest will eliminate the need for an antler restriction, and in other areas it will allow for further increases in the number of older bucks.

Why did the Department remove the antler point restriction in some areas?

The regional antler point restriction (APR) reflects regional differences in deer density, hunting pressure, habitat, winter severity, and a variety of other factors. In areas of the state with many deer and higher hunting pressure, an APR ensures more bucks survive to older ages. In regions with fewer deer, lower hunting pressure, and large blocks of forest, many bucks escape hunters regardless and an APR is unnecessary. Having no APR in these areas allows hunters the opportunity to take what may be the only buck they see, and the one buck limit ensures that bucks still have some protection.

Why not remove the antler point restriction everywhere?

Some parts of Vermont have high hunting pressure. Without some protection for bucks in those areas, very few would survive beyond 1.5 years old. Even with the antler restriction, very few deer survive beyond 2.5 years old in these areas. The combination of the antler restriction and a one buck limit will allow more bucks to survive to older age classes.

Why not keep the antler restriction everywhere?

The antler restriction has had little or no effect on buck age structure in many areas. These areas have large blocks of forest, low deer numbers, and relatively few hunters. Bucks grow older in these areas because they rarely cross paths with a hunter, not because they are protected by antler restrictions. Additionally, the Department has significant concerns about potential negative effects on the deer population from the antler restriction. The new regulations will effectively manage for older bucks, but with fewer restrictions on hunters and less risk to the deer population.

I see more pictures of nice bucks now. Doesn't that mean the antler restriction worked?

Consider this: prior to the antler restriction, which began in 2005, everyone didn't have a camera (cell phone) with them at all times, social media did not exist, and trail cameras were still a novelty. If someone shot a nice buck in another part of Vermont, you rarely knew about it.

Hunters are shooting more older bucks with the antler restriction in place, but a lot of that is simply because they are forced to wait for a legal buck. The change in the buck population (what's actually out there on the landscape) has been much less than most hunters believe.

Why make the archery season longer?

A longer archery season provides hunters additional opportunity to harvest antlerless deer. More antlerless deer simply need to be harvested in some areas to keep deer numbers in balance with their habitat. Archery hunters are also impacted by the one buck annual limit, as they will be giving up their opportunity to rifle hunt if they harvest a buck during archery season.

Can I archery hunt during the rifle season?

Yes. Archery season is closed, but, as has always been the case, you can attempt to fill your rifle buck tag using archery equipment.

Why allow crossbows for all ages?

Many hunters are physically unable to use a compound bow. Allowing broad access to crossbows may increase recruitment of new archery hunters and encourage participation among existing hunters who would like to switch to a crossbow.

What is the new Antlerless Muzzleloader Season?

The new antlerless muzzleloader season will be four days long, run Thursday through Sunday, and take place 2 weeks before rifle season (Oct 29-Nov 1, 2020). It is limited to muzzleloader hunters with a lottery antlerless permit, and only antlerless deer may be harvested. Antlerless permits may be filled during this season or during the December muzzleloader season.

Why is the antlerless season needed?

This season is needed to help the Department achieve antlerless harvest objectives. Antlerless permit fill rates during the December muzzleloader season have been averaging about 15 percent in recent years. This low fill rate means the Department needs to recommend high numbers of permits to harvest relatively few antlerless deer. In some areas, the number of permits required to achieve harvest objectives often exceeds the number of muzzleloader hunters.

The weather in late October is more favorable to many hunters, and holding this season prior to the rifle season means that deer will have been less pressured, won't have adjusted their behavior to avoid hunters, and will be less concentrated in areas hunters don't have access to. These factors will result in higher antlerless permit fill rates, meaning antlerless harvest objectives can be achieved with, in most cases, fewer permits. Additionally,

many firearm hunters will be able to harvest an antlerless deer for meat before the buck-only rifle season, which might make it a little easier for them to let that 4-pointer walk on opening weekend.

What is the new Novice Season?

The Novice Season will essentially allow new adult hunters to hunt during youth season for one year. It is expected to attract 200 to 300 new hunters each year and to have no impact on the deer harvest. To qualify as a Novice, a hunter must be too old to hunt during the youth season and have purchased their first hunting license in the past 12 months. In the short term, participation in this season may counteract declining youth season participation (youth season tag sales have declined by about 200 tags per year over the past 10 years) and stabilize the harvest, but it is not expected to result in increased hunting activity or an increased harvest during this weekend.

Why do new adult hunters need this special opportunity?

This new opportunity will help recruit new hunters from non-hunting families, which is important for slowing the overall decline in hunter numbers. One of the biggest barriers to recruiting new hunters is opportunities to be mentored by an experienced hunter

Why is the Youth Season earlier?

By moving youth season two weeks earlier, before the new antlerless season, it will continue to provide youths the first opportunity to hunt deer with a firearm. The earlier timing also provides more favorable weather conditions and, being before the shift to Eastern Standard Time, more evening hours for youths to hunt.

Will increasing the bag limit from 3 deer to 4 deer have a major impact on the deer herd?

No. The only way a hunter would be able to reach the 4 deer annual limit would be to harvest at least 2 antlerless deer during archery season, or to hunt in a WMU with unallocated antlerless permits. In either case, these deer would be harvested from areas where it is most needed, not from areas with lower deer densities.

Importantly, very few hunters currently harvest three deer in a year, and even fewer harvest three antlerless deer. In most years, 300-400 hunters have the right combination of luck and skill to harvest three deer, and less than 10 percent of those (30-40 hunters) harvest three antlerless deer. Since a hunter has to harvest three antlerless deer before they can harvest a fourth one, the increased bag limit will have little or no impact on the overall deer harvest. It does, however, allow a few effective hunters to harvest additional antlerless deer in the areas where it is most needed.

This change is also intended to work with the new Expanded Archery Zones in developed areas around major cities and towns. While none of these zones have been established yet, they will be soon, and the increased bag limit will encourage additional archery antlerless harvest in these areas.

Why does the Department want to harvest more antlerless deer?

Some parts of Vermont currently have more deer than the habitat can support. This is causing damage to forests and the physical condition of deer (body size, antler size, birth rates) is declining in these areas as a result. The

regulation changes are designed to harvest more antlerless deer in these areas, when it's necessary, to reduce or stabilize the deer population. The Department will still control the total antlerless harvest in each wildlife management unit by limiting the number of lottery antlerless permits available each year. In many areas, the total antlerless harvest will remain similar to current levels. However, in areas with too many deer, the proposed changes will allow for more antlerless deer to be harvested.