



**2024 Annual Report on  
the Acquisition and Management of Deer Wintering Areas  
and the Deer Management Fund  
Presented to the 132<sup>nd</sup> Legislature Joint Standing Committee  
on Inland Fisheries and Wildlife**



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## History

12 M.R.S. §10109 requires the Commissioner of the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife to report annually to the joint standing committee of the Legislature having jurisdiction over inland fisheries and wildlife matters on the acquisition and management of deer wintering areas. In addition, 12 M.R.S. §10263 requires the Department to report annually on the status of the Deer Management Fund and its utilization.

## Executive Summary

Enacted by the 130<sup>th</sup> Legislature, Public Law 409, 'An Act to Preserve Deer Habitat', enhanced the ability of the Department to protect deer wintering areas. Over the past year, the Department purchased and preserved over 1,000 acres of deer habitat. This is funded through the deer management fund which receives approximately \$1.2 million a year, primarily through the sale of antlerless deer permits, with additional funding through deer registrations and donations.

## Key Points

- Since 2021, the Department's enhanced efforts to conserve and manage deer habitat have resulted in the fee acquisition of 9,629 acres and creation of 4 new Wildlife Management Areas across Aroostook and Franklin Counties. These properties are being managed with deer habitat as the highest priority.
- The Department has secured over \$7.7 million in state and federal grants to acquire deer habitat. Restructuring of the Antlerless Deer Permit system in 2022 resulted in an additional ~\$1.1 million/year in dedicated funding to acquire and manage deer habitat. The Department also receives funding from deer registrations, and donations. The total funding available last year was approximately \$1.2 million.
- The Department is currently reviewing multiple parcels for potential acquisition, has drafted management plans for all of the newly acquired properties, and has implemented several public access improvements.
- The Deer Management Fund currently has a balance of \$2,758,493 and receives approximately \$1.2 million in annual revenue. The fund is used to acquire and manage deer habitat, and to implement the Department's predator management program.

## Overview

Enacted by the 130<sup>th</sup> Legislature, Public Law 409, 'An Act to Preserve Deer Habitat', enhanced the ability of the Department to identify, acquire and manage land for deer habitat in northern, eastern, and western Maine by:

- Amending 5 M.R.S §6203, sub-§3 to allow the Land for Maine's Future Fund (LMF) to fund the development of management plans for Deer Wintering Areas acquired using LMF Funds;
- Amending 5 M.R.S §6207, sub-§2 to include Deer Wintering Areas as being of state significance in LMF's criteria, subject to those lands being determined by the Department to be important for conserving deer in northern, eastern, and western Maine;
- Amending 5 M.R.S §6207, sub-§3 to give preferential consideration for LMF funding for conserving deer habitat, with the requirement that the Department will hold fee or easement interest in the land, and that it be managed as a Wildlife Management Area with deer conservation as its highest priority;

- Amending 12 M.R.S §10105, sub-§14 to provide the ability of the Commissioner to prohibit or otherwise limit the feeding of deer, bear, moose, and wild turkey as part of a plan to promote the use of Deer Wintering Areas by deer;
- Enacting 12 M.R.S §10109, sub-§1-A which directs the Commissioner to identify areas important to the conservation of deer in northern, eastern, and western Maine, and that these lands may be acquired using LMF or other funding sources. Lands must be designated as Wildlife Management Areas and managed with deer conservation as the highest management priority; and
- Amending 12 M.R.S §10264 to allow the Deer Management Fund to be utilized for acquisition of deer habitat.

To achieve the goal of enhancing conservation and management of deer habitat, the 130th Legislature also created a deer habitat biologist position within the Department, funded 75% with Wildlife and Sportfish Restoration Funding (federal funds) and 25% from the Deer Management Fund.

Since 2023, the Deer Management Fund has received \$3,618,562 in revenue. During this same period, the Department has spent \$1,431,770 from the fund on deer management, including \$68,757 for staff salaries, \$979,913 for land acquisition, and \$58,095 for predator management. The fund currently has a balance of \$2,758,493.

### Background

The following outlines the Department's efforts regarding the acquisition and management of deer wintering areas under this legislation:

- The Deer Habitat Biologist position was created and filled within the Lands Management Program of the Department in December of 2021. The position works closely with acquisition staff to assess and pursue acquisition of deer habitat. This is being accomplished by MDIFW acquiring Lands in fee and managing these areas for wintering deer in important areas of the state. Areas assessed are surveyed for deer presence under restrictive snow and weather conditions, along with current habitat composition and condition.
- In 2022, restructuring of the Antlerless Deer Permit system created an additional source of income for deer wintering area acquisition and management. This generates ~\$1.1 million annually in state funds. These funds are being used to augment and match other funding sources to acquire properties. The funds are also earmarked for management planning, access improvements, and habitat enhancement upon successful acquisition of lands.
- The Department recently developed a community science project, The Northern Maine Wintering Deer Survey, to collect data on wintering deer locations from the public. These data may inform efforts to identify important areas for deer wintering habitat acquisition and management.
- The Department is in the process of revising a land conservation (acquisition plan) to articulate conservation priorities and assist in allocating funding and effort related to its' land conservation goals. The effort to conserve and manage deer habitat will continue to be one of the priorities identified.

- Ongoing collaborations with conservation partners including The Nature Conservancy, Trust for Public Land and the Conservation Fund to identify current willing landowners and coordinate conservation opportunities. Many of these groups have longstanding relationships with landowners and other funding sources which can benefit the efforts of the Department.
- The Department continues to cultivate additional acquisition projects across northern, eastern, and western Maine, working with partner organizations and willing landowners where high priority habitat conditions are confirmed.
- Identified additional priority areas in northern, eastern, and western Maine based on habitat assessment/use criteria, and initiated conversations about conservation with landowners in the highest priority areas. Initial prioritization by the Department had identified 112,000 acres as the highest priority.
- The Department now has 9,629 acres ownership in fee in 4 different locations across Aroostook and Franklin Counties. Two properties closed in Summer, 2024.
- Secured \$2,079,000 in grant awards from the Land for Maine's Future Program and \$5,684,198.50 in federal grant funding toward the acquisition of these parcels, with additional grant requests planned.
- Drafted management planning on the 9,629 acres, including an operational management plan focused on active management of deer habitat at the Rangeley Wildlife Management Area.
- Developed plans to improve public access on the Macwahoc Stream, Lexington, and Caribou Stream Wildlife Management Areas and secured \$65,160 in Access Improvement Grants for these projects from the Land for Maine's Future Program. Budgeted appropriately for these activities to be accomplished in the coming planning period.
- In addition to acquiring land under this legislation, the Department has continued to work with the broader conservation community and private landowners on the management of deer habitat. To that end, the Department has continued its close working relationship with the Bureau of Parks and Lands on cooperatively managed areas for deer and has also worked extensively with other conservation entities and private landowners to manage lands cooperatively or as required under LUPCs P-FW zoning.