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Local deer numbers down significantly since 2004

By MIKE JOHNSTON senior writer
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A young mule deer buck eats bitterbrush. There's evidence that some areas burned by the Taylor Bridge Fire didn't have (Essman)

Contributed

Since 2004, the number of mule deer in Kittitas and Yakima counties has dropped by at least 50 percent, according to state Fish and Wildlife Department Wildlife Manager Ted Clausing.

Others believe it's worse. Former state wildlife enforcement officer Bill Essman of the Kittitas Valley, also an outdoorsman, hunter and officer in the Kittitas County Field and Stream Club, says the reduction in the numbers is more like 70 percent since 2004.

The cause has been narrowed down to inability of the deer to maintain warmth in the winter because of hair loss.

The deer have been infested with a type of parasitic lice believed to have been brought into the state by those who are domestically raising fallow deer, a European stock.

Clausing said mule deer have trouble putting up with the lice and aggressively scratch themselves against trees and heavy brush in the winter.

They scratch so hard their hair comes off large areas on their sides.

"It's pretty noticeable," Clausing said. "A lot of them look like they have a mohawk; there's not much hair on their sides, but there's long tufts along their backbones."

They die of exposure, Clausing said, not able to keep warm in the open with their fat reserves being used up faster.

"It's like us staying outside all the time wearing a wet T-shirt instead of a warm, winter jacket in sub-freezing temperatures," he said.

The lice infestation and loss of winter forage from the Taylor Bridge Fire will have an impact on the mule deer population going into winter 2012-13, Clausing said.