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TOP STORY

Tough winter ahead for deer

By MIKE JOHNSTON senior writer

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1 of 4



A pair of mule deer make their way along a hillside off Ellensburg Ranches Road near Hwy 10, Friday, Oct. 5, 2012. (Brian Myrick)

Every winter is hard for Kittitas County's dwindling mule deer population, but habitat damage from summer wildfires could make this winter even deadlier.

Deer have begun migrating into the blackened, 37-square-mile footprint of the Taylor Bridge Fire between Cle Elum and Ellensburg, their customary winter grounds. They are in search of shrub-steppe grasses to get them through the winter before new grass growth in the spring.

Much of the bitter brush, bunch grass and cheat grass favored by the deer likely was burned by the Taylor Bridge wildfire that began Aug. 13 near Taylor Road.

Wildlife officials, looking at a worst case scenario, are beginning to explore how a winter feeding program could help deer through the winter. The hope is it won't be necessary if rain brings autumn growth that the deer can eat through the winter.

"But if we get early cold spells and early snow cover, and it's dry right up until then, the deer could be in real trouble," said Ted Clausing, the Fish and Wildlife Department's wildlife program manager for Region 3 that takes in Kittitas, Yakima, Benton and Franklin counties. "We hope that doesn't happen. We're hoping for some rain."

There's no rain predicted in the next seven days and the long-term National Weather Service forecast is leaning toward below-normal precipitation through October and likely into November.

The last significant precipitation anywhere in the state was in July, there was no measurable precipitation in August. Statewide, September was the third driest on record, according to the state Department of Natural Resources.

Winter mortality

It's natural for a number of deer to die every winter, depending on habitat, weather and physical challenges during the winter and early spring, said William Moore, an assistant district wildlife biologist with the state Fish and Wildlife Department.

Some don't have enough built-up reserves in fat and muscle to get through the winter, even with the minimal help from grasses they can find sticking up through the snow, Moore said.

If the Taylor Bridge Fire totally took out the grasses and shrubs, and no significant fall greening up takes place, "the potential is there for a higher than usual winter kill, but we can't say it will absolutely happen," said Moore. "How they survive this winter in the burn area is going to depend on if we get some fall rain, mild temperatures and some fall green up of some of those grasses."

There's evidence that some areas burned didn't have plants destroyed down to their roots, and some areas have shown new growth since the fire, Moore said.

An on-the-ground survey of the 23,500 acres burned by the fire is under way to determine how much wildlife habitat has been seriously damaged and what areas may have been singed over quickly by fast-moving flames and could spring back if rains come, said Clausing.

Through the spring, summer and fall, deer eat grasses in nearby higher-elevation and more sparsely populated rural areas where they grow their fat and build resiliency for the coming winter.

They're now beginning to migrate down lower, into the burn area, and are usually in place by early or late December, Clausing said.

"And they'll be looking for those grasses when they get there," he said.

There's indications that some of the deer that usually winter there, estimated to total 1,000 to 1,100, may already be experiencing a nutritional deficiency from more physical exertion and movement in response to the Taylor Bridge Fire and the nearby Table Mountain Fire, Moore said.

It's possible they'll reach the wintering area in a weaker condition than most years, he said, making them even more vulnerable to winter conditions or a lack of winter forage.

Getting help

A feeding program would require an emergency department appropriation of state funds well ahead of time. Specially formulated deer pellets that are somewhat compatible with sensitive mule deer digestive systems would be used, Clausing said.

That also means extra efforts to educate residents not to feed deer things like hay, apples and vegetables. Those types of foods can kill deer because they don't have the levels of bacteria in their stomachs in late winter to break it down.

"It may make people feel good to feed that to them, but it won't help if they're starving," Clausing said.

Moore said the depletion of bacteria in the deer's stomachs through the winter requires a slow transition to eating and digesting the more nutritious, new spring growth. The amount of bacteria that breaks down wild grasses and brush needs to build slowly.

Clausing said a feeding program through the winter requires getting permission from rural landowners to install deer feeding stations on their property, and rounding up volunteers to keep them full.

The Kittitas County Field and Stream Club and local representatives of Safari Club International, both nonprofit groups, have told state wildlife officials they are available to help in any way they can.

"It's good to have that kind of community help," Clausing said. "And they contacted us even while the fire was still burning. They wanted to know how they could help."

A feeding program has to be well coordinated, he said, and noted similar programs were implemented in Chelan County after large wildfires in past years.

Looking for the best

State wildlife and natural resource officials, at a 7:30 p.m. Monday meeting of the Kittitas County Field and Stream Club in Ellensburg, will discuss how the local wildfires have harmed wildlife habitat. The meeting is open to the public at the Hal Holmes Community Center.

"There are options out there, and we have to somehow find the state resources and manpower to carry them out," Clausen said. "We want to try for the best option, not just throw anything at the problem."

Meeting Monday

The impact of fire on wildlife will be discussed at Monday's Kittitas County Field and Stream Club meeting. The general public is invited to the 7:30 p.m. meeting at the Hal Holmes Community Center in Ellensburg.

After the burn

A free workshop entitled After the Burn is set for 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Oct. 13 near Cle Elum to help rural landowners restore their forest and rangeland property burned by recent wildfires.

The session, planned for Unionville Ranch at 1750 Emerick Road, Cle Elum, is sponsored by Washington State University Extension services.

For more information and to register for the workshop, call 509-962-7507 or go online to <http://www.uvranch.com/>.