

LIBBY WILDLIFE COMMITTEE TO FOCUS ON NUISANCE DEER

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In the midst of the prime season for trapping deer, Bob McLaury stands ready to volunteer himself and some of his crew to set up, bait and monitor the traps.

The target: The pesky deer wandering the City of Libby.

The white-tailed deer prove a nuisance for many residents. They can be seen day and night, meandering snow-covered yards and loitering on city sidewalks. They are notorious jaywalkers.

And the density of the urban population increases the chances of spreading chronic wasting disease to other animals in the deer family.

McLaury said these urban deer have been “on the dole” long enough.

Alas, McLaury, a fourth generation beekeeper in the Libby area, heard during a Jan. 15 meeting at Libby City Hall that the wheels of government turn slowly.

McLaury and his son Drew were the sole area residents attending the meeting of the city’s recently formed Wildlife Management Plan Committee, a subcommittee of Libby City Council.

Councilors Rob Dufficy, Hugh Taylor and Gary Beach emphasized that even once the city develops a draft wildlife management plan, its path toward adoption would require legal review, public hearings and more. The wildlife committee made two decisions Jan. 15: They elected Taylor as chairman and opted to focus initially on deer within the city. Residents have complained also about wild turkeys that have become an annoyance.

“Let’s deal with the deer first,” Dufficy said. “The deer alone are tough enough.”

Two regional representatives from the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks also attended the meeting — Game Warden Sgt. Jon Obst and wildlife biologist Tonya Chilton-Radandt.

Obst said Fish, Wildlife and Parks will support the city’s efforts to develop and implement a wildlife management plan. He said the city has 12 traps it can use for deer and that he will train city personnel or volunteers on how to use them.

Shooting animals within the city is not considered an option for population control, though Chilton-Radandt said a few communities have used sharpshooters to cull deer.

Both Obst and Chilton-Radandt said the prime season for trapping deer is now through March. The animals are burning through fat reserves and are more likely to be attracted to food, such as apples, used to bait the traps, they said.

“A lot of it is timing,” Obst said.

Beach wondered who would do the trapping, whether animal control or law enforcement or volunteers.

The deer that would be trapped would be killed.

“What do we do then?” wondered Dufficy.

The deer could be donated to citizens or food banks but the complicating factor would be the prevalence of chronic wasting disease in the city's white-tailed deer population. CWD is an ultimately fatal neurodegenerative disease that affects deer, elk and moose.

During a Jan. 13 meeting held in the city by Fish, Wildlife and Parks, the agency reported that sampling suggests the prevalence of the disease in deer in Libby is about 13 percent.

No one has an accurate estimate of how many deer haunt city yards and streets.

Although there is no known transmission of CWD to humans from eating meat from an infected animal, the city could be potentially liable by donating the meat without testing it, Beach said. Given the added expense of testing and finding cold storage for the carcasses until results arrived, the logistics involved gave committee members pause.

McLaury, though, said there would be demand among residents for the venison, regardless of whether the animal had been infected with CWD.

"We all know people every day who could use the meat," he said.

McLaury suggested crafting a waiver that would release the city of liability if someone accepts deer meat knowing it might be from an infected animal.

Beach noted that waivers aren't always ironclad protection.

Although McLaury urged the city to expedite the review process, Beach and Dufficy noted council must follow the laws that define a public process.

"It takes time," Dufficy said.