



Alamosa's Urban Deer Problem

by Marilyn Loser

2012 September 12

Yes, there is a deer problem in Alamosa. And we're not alone—many American cities are struggling with this problem. However, our city government seems to hope it will just go away. As far as I can tell, they've done nothing since the failed bow hunt five years ago.

A Valley Courier articleⁱ (Oct 19th, 2007) reports, “Alamosa Mayor Farris Bervig brought up the deer problem during the council’s October 17 meeting and said he believed the city needed to do something about it. “I am concerned we are closing our eyes to a problem that is not going to go away,” he said.”

As reported in the Valley Courierⁱⁱ, Rick Basagoitia, Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) District Manager, discussed various options with Alamosa’s City Council in July, 2010. Essentially, it was the same information presented at the public meeting held at the recreation center in August.

It’s time to act. I see two viable options. Either choose to allow the deer population to increase (do nothing) or hire sharpshooters to regularly cull the herd. I do believe educating citizens on learning to live with deer can help, but it’s not a solution for the many frustrated Alamosans who attended the recent meeting at the recreation center. Less viable options might include re-introducing natural deer predators that people have removed or displaced from their habitat.

Doing nothing will yield an increase in the deer population, a decrease in herd health (at the August meeting, Basagoitia said fawns in town are not as healthy as those in the surrounding hills), an increase in damage to trees and other plants, a decrease in species diversity (with an increase in undesirable plants such as white top), and an increase in deer-vehicle collisions. It’s apparent that the herd is increasing and wandering around Alamosa more frequently.

Bloomington, Indiana, created a deer task force two years ago. It will present its suggestions to the city council this fall. As task force member Dave Rollo said, “What people miss in this discussion is we have already intervened in the deer ecology by removing predators. It’s our responsibility to maintain the population. The evidence is overwhelming. You can’t ignore the problem, and we have to take responsibility for it.”ⁱⁱⁱ

I agree with Rollo. We need to coexist with deer, but we need a balance. We’ve aided the imbalance; now we need to take corrective action.

What do Alamosa citizens want to do about our deer situation? Of course it’s controversial, but that doesn’t mean you ignore it. Our city councilors should represent the citizens of Alamosa, even if, perhaps, they are not personally troubled by deer.

A well-designed questionnaire could be included with municipal water bills as a first step. However, simply asking whether people want to kill deer to reduce the population is too simplistic. Perhaps, a group of concerned citizens needs to band together to address this problem that City Council can't seem to solve.

If enough Alamosans want to reduce the herd size, there are many decisions to make and steps to follow. What should the deer density be? "There is no biologically correct number," according to the Wisconsin Urban and Community Forests newsletter (see the online version of this column at AlamosaTrees.net under the News tab for full references). "The biological carrying capacity of many of our urban areas can be over 100 deer per square mile. What the community needs to determine is the social carrying capacity -- how many deer the citizens are willing to tolerate."^{iv}

The City of Alamosa is approximately 4 square miles according to Internet data. I haven't been able to find out how many deer are currently in the area, but I've heard that there are more than 200. If so, our deer density is 50 per square mile.

Desired deer densities range widely, according to DeerFriendly.com. Wilton, Connecticut, states the town's ideal number is 10 per square mile, while Radnor, Pennsylvania, suggests a maximum of 30 per square mile.^v

Gleaning information from various meetings and web sites, it seems the only viable way to reduce the herd size would be through the services of sharpshooters. The CPW doesn't relocate deer^{vi} and contraception is too expensive.^{vii}

Rapid City, South Dakota, has been harvesting deer since 1996. 200 deer were harvested in 2011-2012 season with a total cost of \$115 per head.^{viii} Most cities donate the meat to local food banks. And how would we fund the culling? Perhaps we could establish a Deer District similar to the Alamosa Mosquito Control District.

Any plan needs the approval of the CPW.^{ix}

A future column will discuss the consequences of not harvesting deer in Alamosa.

"Trees are sanctuaries. Whoever knows how to listen to them, can learn the truth." Herman Hesse

ⁱ Alamosa deer population still a problem in the city. Valley Courier, October 19, 2007.

ⁱⁱ Alamosa tussles with ongoing deer problem. Valley Courier, July 22, 2010.

http://www.alamosanews.com/fe_view_article_window.php?story_id=17433&page_id=72&heading=0

ⁱⁱⁱ Urban deer pose long-term problem in Bloomington. Daily Herald Times, September 1, 2012.

<https://www.dailyherald.com/article/20120901/news/709019932/>

^{iv} Deer Friendly website. Downloaded September 10, 2012. <http://www.deerfriendly.com/urban-deer-management>

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Comment by Rick Basagoitia at Alamosa Public Meeting, August 30, 2012.

^{vii} \$1,000 per deer. Deer Management Options. Downloaded September 8, 2012.

www.ct.gov/dph/lib/dph/.../DeerManagementOptions_FNL.pdf

^{viii} Deer Friendly website: South Dakota news. Downloaded September 12, 2012.

<http://www.deerfriendly.com/deer/south-dakota/urban-deer-management-south-dakota/examine-city-s-deer-kill-program-august-23-2012-south-dakota>

^{ix} Comment by Rick Basagoitia at Alamosa Public Meeting, August 30, 2012