

The Division of Fish and Wildlife (DFW) has heard concerns from local foresters, private land owners, and forest conservation groups regarding the potential impact of deer browse on forest regeneration. The DFW is acting to determine the effects of deer on the regeneration of managed forests and exploring possible management actions.

The DFW implemented a pilot study in spring 2018 to determine the level of browsing pressure in recently managed forest sites. If the results of the study indicate high levels of browsing pressure, we aim to identify the driving factors (deer density, hunting pressure and timber harvest methods) contributing to this. Additionally, we would like to determine what vegetation is regenerating naturally (with deer) vs in a deer exclosure plot (without deer).

The DFW has chosen four sites to measure vegetative regeneration across Rhode Island. The sites chosen must have recently undergone a type of timber harvest (clear-cut, burning, thinning, etc.) and have nearby forest of the same type that remained unmanaged.

Four pilot sites were selected in 2018 to determine the feasibility of this study at a larger scale. The four sites are located on three wildlife management areas and one private property site. Each site consists of four 5' x 5' plots, which includes two open plots (no fencing) and two enclosed plots (6' fencing). At each site, two plots (one open plot and one enclosed plot) were placed in the managed area and the remaining two plots (another open and fenced plot) were placed in the nearby unmanaged forested habitat. DFW staff will visit each site periodically to inventory all plant species and quantify the amount of browse in each plot by looking at the proportion of browsed twigs/stem.

After this pilot year we hope to expand our study by adding sites in other management areas and private properties that both permit and prohibit deer hunting to study the potential impacts (positive or negative) of deer hunters on forest regeneration. The DFW suspects an increase in hunting pressure has the potential to reduce the intensity of deer browse.

The objective of this study is to provide DFW staff the data necessary to determine if there is an over-browsing issue leading to poor forest regeneration. If over-browsing is present we aim to determine what is causing it, and what are the available management options. If you have any further questions, comments, concerns, or have a recent timber harvest and would like to participate in this study next year please contact the DFW Deer Biologist Dylan Ferreira at Dylan.ferreira@dem.ri.gov.