

Protecting and improving our woods and forests for the benefit of nature and the economy - Deer management and wild venison, a case study

The Deer Initiative is a broad partnership of statutory, voluntary and private interests dedicated to "ensuring the delivery of a sustainable, well-managed wild deer population in England and Wales". <http://www.thedeerinitiative.co.uk/> As a Partnership, one of our key objectives is to reduce the negative impacts of wild deer on our ancient and semi natural woodlands, particularly those of high conservation value such as Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). Across England and Wales the Partnership supported by the staff of Deer Initiative Limited are running a series of projects promoting collaborative management of wild deer at a landscape scale. Not only to reduce the negative impacts on woodlands, but also to reduce agricultural impacts, reduce the number of deer vehicle collisions and to improve surveillance for animal and zoonotic diseases.

In the East of England we have pioneered a novel approach to not only protect and improve our woodlands but also to make deer management more sustainable by promoting wild venison, a healthy natural by-product of the management process.

The Wild Venison Project was a partnership project between; the Deer Initiative, Forestry Commission and the Regional Development Agency in the East of England (now RDPE Team at Defra). The project has delivered grant funding of £400K over 3 years which at the end of 2013; the funding came from Axis 1 Rural Development Programme (RDPE) under Measure 123 'adding value to agricultural and forestry products'.

There were 5 objectives for this project:

- To improve woodland SSSI status in the East of England.
- To improve wild deer management and in particular to promote collaboration at a landscape scale.
- To reduce the number of deer-related road traffic accidents.
- To support landowners in the region to increase their agricultural and forestry yields.
- To improve and stimulate the supply of high quality wild venison to local markets.



The targets for project support included: a specific number of processing plants, collection storage facilities, collecting vehicles purchased, number of websites designed, marketing initiatives, number of jobs created, businesses supported, created and growing. Other outputs included the amount of private sector investment brought into the rural economy (match funding), the added value to venison, and significant improvement in the quality of woodland.

By providing a match funding incentive of 40% (50% in the first year) to landowners, businesses and deer stalkers in the East of England, the project sought to add value to venison sales and generate a sustainable wild venison supply chain, thereby increasing the supply and availability of wild venison to local, regional and national markets. Match funded incentive support was given in the form of capital investment (items such as extraction equipment, larder/chillers, processing units and delivery vehicles) and revenue infrastructure (such as marketing, branding, and website design).

The Project has been a fantastic success. Over the three years we have:

- Supported 49 projects with £400,000 of funding at a grant rate of up to 50%, including:
 - 36 chiller storage units.
 - 17 Processing rooms / equipment.
 - 20 Extraction Vehicles.
 - 9.75 jobs created.



Perhaps more importantly we have achieved:

- 67,996 ha of landscape with increased deer control.
- 7,751 ha of woodland covered.

We have through the project learned a number of key lessons which will be published shortly in a comprehensive final report but in brief:

- In RDPE terms the projects supported are frequently of very low value (i.e. under £10K) so a simplified or streamlined application procedure would be a considerable advantage for applicants and administration.
- The overheads have been kept to a minimum and speed of start-up increased by working alongside (and sharing resources with) a “sister” RDPE project – Woodfuels East.

We also identified a number of barriers to future projects that need to be addressed if a project is to succeed, including:

- Funding for Project Officers to lead the project is essential and often not eligible as part of the project, so although RDPE funding for incentives may be available it would need another funding source to pay for the staff time. Feedback from applicants make it clear that many would not have applied without the ‘hand holding’ through the application process and the necessary audit trail.
- The need for other areas to highlight the need for improved deer management as one of their actions to aid biodiversity and improve rural economy and social interaction.
- The need to be able to allow individual small investments (with collaborative elements) rather than insist up front collaborative investments from several landowners which has proved a barrier in the East Midlands.

We believe that success in the East of England was enhanced by:

- The East of England Deer Forum.
- The East of England Development Agency support initially.
- Forestry Commission expertise and enabling support and commitment to act as the “banker”.
- Partnership working with the Deer Initiative.

In conclusion this was an exciting, novel and extremely successful approach to improving deer management and thus protecting and improving our woodlands which would not have been possible without Partnership working and the support of the Forestry Commission and the Deer Initiative.

Final reports will be available from The Deer Initiative david.hooton@thedeerinitiative.co.uk