

Deer Cull Delayed Until 2015 at Earliest

Judge issues restraining order; supervisor cites need for impact study



Opponents of a plan to kill thousands of deer in East Hampton Town and Village rallied on Jan. 18.

Recent developments have made the prospect of a planned mass killing of deer in East Hampton Town and Village appear extremely unlikely during 2014.

East Hampton Town Supervisor Larry Cantwell said that a hunt that had been proposed by the Long Island Farm Bureau in cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture would not take place this winter because a state-required environmental impact study could not be completed in time, among other issues.

Mr. Cantwell said on Friday that he and other town officials had concluded that "a cull was not something we were going to be able to participate in in the next couple months."

In a memo sent Thursday to the other members of the town board, Mr. Cantwell and Town Councilman Fred Overton wrote that an environmental impact statement was likely to be "required before we formally agree to participate in the Long Island Farm Bureau program, based on existing case law."

The memo also cited a "minimal" response from private property owners willing to allow federal sharpshooters on their land. Mr. Overton is the town board liaison to the deer management program.

"There is a lot of work that has not been done to this point in order for the town to carefully consider signing an agreement," Mr. Cantwell said on Friday. "There are more questions than answers."

Whether the board wants to consider participation in the program next year, Mr. Cantwell said, "is an open question."

Meanwhile, in what opponents called a significant victory, Judge Andrew G. Tarantino Jr. issued a temporary restraining order on Friday in State Supreme Court in Riverhead preventing the Town and Village of East Hampton and the town trustees from engaging in a lethal deer population reduction.

In his order, Judge Tarantino said that East Hampton Town's deer management plan was delayed pending a return to court by the sides on Feb. 10 or 13.

Fifteen individuals, along with the East Hampton Group for Wildlife and the Evelyn Alexander Wildlife Center of the Hamptons, all represented by the New York law firm Devereaux, Baumgarten, filed the lawsuit against the town, village, and trustees last month.

The suit followed the previous town board's November vote authorizing a contract with the Long Island Farm Bureau and United States Department of Agriculture for an organized cull. East Hampton Village okayed the plan in December.

Opposition erupted soon after the plan was announced. An online petition had 11,689 signatures as of Friday, and opponents, led by Bill Crain of the East Hampton Group for Wildlife and Ron Delsener, a concert promoter and animal activist who has a house in East Hampton, drew some 250 people to a rally at Hook Mill and Herrick Park in East Hampton on Jan. 18.

The sides have disagreed on the rationale behind a cull, with proponents arguing that Lyme and other diseases and deer-vehicle collisions constitute a public health emergency. The destruction of residents' landscaping and subsequent proliferation of deer fencing have also been cited.

Opponents dispute the scientific basis of the proponents' argument. "I see the [temporary restraining order] as a significant victory for the deer," Mr. Crain wrote in an email. "I believe the cull will be stopped in the long run, too, because it lacks scientific basis. Whereas the town board's deer management plan and the village mayor's comments point to growing deer abundance, the scientific surveys indicate an East Hampton deer population in decline. The cull actually threatens to wipe the population out."

In addition, Mr. Crain wrote, "contrary to what the cull's advocates say, researchers have not found a link between deer populations and Lyme disease because disease-carrying ticks also feed on other animals. The cull is based on a false sense of panic and resorts to killing rather than seeking humane ways of co-existing with the deer."

Mayor Paul F. Rickenbach Jr. of East Hampton Village did not immediately return a call seeking comment.

Joe Gergela, the executive director of the Long Island Farm Bureau, would not comment on the temporary restraining order, citing advice of counsel.

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