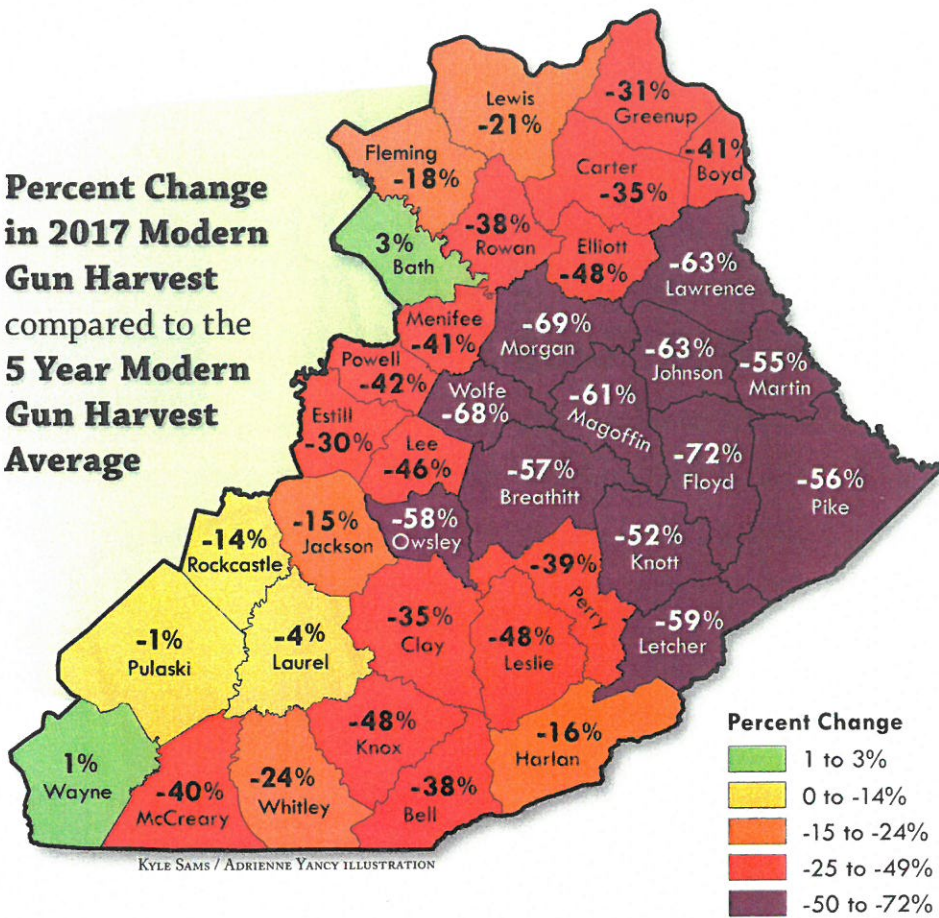


**Percent Change
in 2017 Modern
Gun Harvest
compared to the
5 Year Modern
Gun Harvest
Average**



Biologists Gauge Disease Impact

Deer season recommendations delayed until March

By Gabe Jenkins

WILDLIFE BIOLOGISTS ARE poring over the most recent deer harvest and disease impact data to make their upcoming recommendations for the 2018-19 seasons.

With a significant outbreak of epizootic hemorrhagic disease (EHD) recorded in 2017 – with areas in eastern Kentucky being the hardest hit – deer program bi-

ologists with the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources deferred their recommendations to the Kentucky Fish and Wildlife Commission on deer seasons from the usual December meeting to the March meeting.

By pushing back the timeframe, biologists will have ample time to run population models and review all the data to ensure the

best possible recommendation for hunters in eastern Kentucky.

A new online reporting system available to the public provided valuable information regarding the spread of EHD in Kentucky during the 2017 outbreak. However, because Kentucky Fish and Wildlife staff did not have the time or resources to substantiate the majority of reports and individual cases, biologists view this information cautiously when making decisions on deer seasons.

While the number of individual deer impacted by EHD can never be determined with absolute certainty, the 4,625 individual reports received by the department gives biologists a feel for the severity of the outbreak. Part of the difficulty in determining actual numbers is that some deer felled by EHD were never seen or reported. In other cases, the same deer carcass could have been seen by several people and reported multiple times.

What is certain is that deer harvest dropped dramatically during modern gun season in areas most affected by the disease. Data indicated that in the core counties of the outbreak zone, deer harvest dropped 30 to 72 percent when compared to the 5-year average harvest.

One of the issues biologists will consider is whether the drop is due to a significant loss of the deer population, or there were fewer people hunting.

During years with severe EHD outbreaks, many hunters may simply chose not to hunt. Others may hunt elsewhere. Some might pass on deer they normally would have harvested.

An analysis of deer permits sold in counties most impacted by EHD show a 50 percent drop from 2016 to 2017. The loss of so many hunters on the landscape provides a clue to the steep decline in deer harvest in those areas.

There is room for optimism. Prior to the outbreak, deer populations in most of eastern Kentucky were at the highest levels ever documented. Experience also shows the deer herd is resilient and can rebound quickly. Eastern Kentucky deer faced a high exposure rate in the core counties. The deer that remain will have an excellent level of herd immunity to EHD for many years to follow. Wildlife biologists fully expect the deer herd to rebound in the coming years as a result. ■