

2025-2026 Kentucky White-Tailed Deer Harvest and Population Report

Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources



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Introduction

The Deer Program is administered under the Wildlife Division of the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources (KDFWR). It is overseen by a nine-member commission who are nominated by Kentucky's sportsmen and sportswomen and appointed by the Governor. The department employs about 450 full-time staff, which includes conservation officers, wildlife and fisheries biologists, conservation educators, and information and technology, public relations, customer service, and administrative professionals.

KDFWR funding is provided primarily by the sale of hunting and fishing licenses, boating registration fees, and federal funds, including grants based on the number of licenses sold in the state.

The Deer Program is tasked with managing the white-tailed deer herd in the state to provide ample hunting opportunities while balancing the needs of consumptive and non-consumptive user groups. The Deer Program is comprised of the Program Coordinator, Joe McDermott, and two Deer Program Biologists, David Yancy and Tommy Apostolopoulos. Deer Program staff are based out of the KDFWR Headquarters in Frankfort.

History of Deer in Kentucky

White tailed deer are native to Kentucky and were first reported by Dr. Thomas Walker in 1750 to be "plentiful" in portions of what is now southeastern Kentucky. This report was corroborated in 1773 by explorer Robert McAfee, stating that the number of deer around Henry County was "astonishing." However, due to unregulated harvest, the deer population began to decline rapidly in subsequent years. By 1810, naturalist John James Audubon noted that the vast numbers of deer that once roamed the Ohio River valley of Kentucky had already "ceased to exist." In 1946, KDFWR (known then as the Division of Game and Fish) initiated a comprehensive three-pronged white tailed deer project to facilitate the restoration of this important species. Components of this project consisted of refuge establishment, trapping and translocation of live deer, and habitat improvement work across the entire Commonwealth. Active restoration efforts concluded in March of 1999 and, after 52 years of trapping and translocation, 10,096 white-tailed deer had been stocked around the state. Kentucky now has a high-quality deer population that ranks sixth for all-time Boone & Crockett buck production and is estimated to be over one million animals strong, with nearly 100 deer entered into the record book from 2022 to 2024.

General Information about the 2025-26 Season

License and Permit Fees

License	Resident	Nonresident
Annual Hunting License	\$27	\$160
Senior/Disabled License	\$12	N/A
Sportsman's License	\$95	N/A
Youth Sportsman's License	\$30	N/A
Statewide Deer Permit	\$35	\$235
Bonus Antlerless Permit	\$15	\$15
Youth Deer Permit	\$10	\$15



Peyton McPeck, Martin County
185 0/8" Modern Gun

Season Dates and Bag Limits

	Early Season	Late Season
Archery	Sept. 6, 2025 – Jan. 19, 2026	
Youth/Senior Crossbow		
Crossbow	Sept. 20, 2025 – Jan. 19, 2026	
Special Antlerless Firearm*	Sept. 27 – 28, 2025	
Youth-only Gun	Oct. 11 – 19, 2025	
Muzzle-loader	Oct. 18 – 19, 2025	Dec. 13 – 21, 2025
Modern Gun	Nov. 8 – 23, 2025	
Free Youth Weekend	Dec. 27 – 28, 2025	

*CWD Surveillance Counties only

	Antlerless Bag Limit	Antlered Bag Limit
Zone 1	Unlimited with statewide and additional deer permits	1 statewide
Zone 2	No more than 4 deer	
Zone 3	No more than 4 deer, no more than 1 antlerless with modern firearm	
Zone 4	No more than 2 deer, no antlerless with modern firearm	

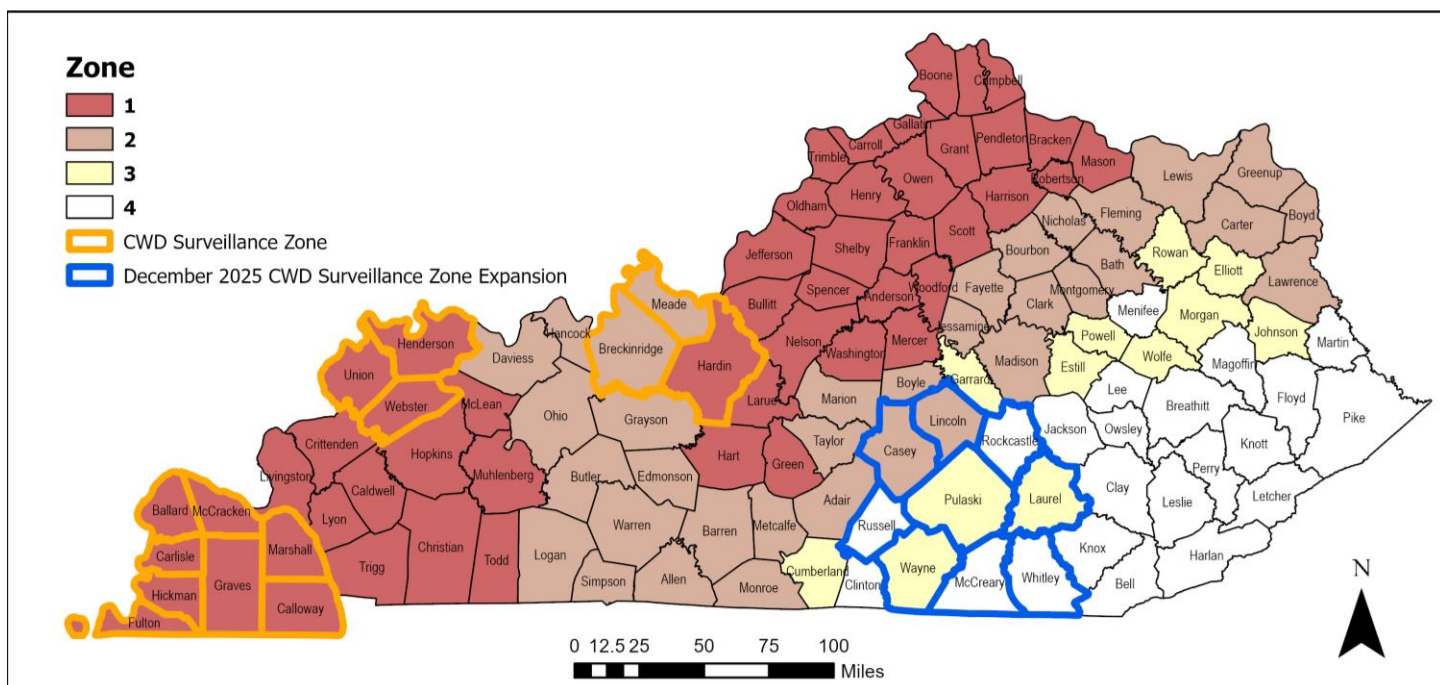


Figure 1. Deer management zones for the 2025-26 season.

Changes for the 2025-26 Season

- Early Youth Season expanded from 2 days to 9 days beginning the second Saturday in October statewide.
- Baiting and feeding ban was rescinded, with restrictions, in CWD Surveillance Zones, per Commissioner Authority for the 2025-26 deer season.
- Henderson, Union, and Webster counties added to the CWD Surveillance Zone following a wild CWD detection <2mi from KY border in Posey County, Indiana.
- A 2-day Early Antlerless Firearms season is in effect September 27-28, 2025, per Commissioner Authority, in all CWD Surveillance Zone counties (Ballard, Carlisle, Hickman, Fulton, Graves, McCracken, Marshall, Calloway, Union, Webster, Henderson, Meade, Breckinridge, Hardin).

Changes for the 2026-27 Season

- Adair, Boyd, Breckinridge, Butler, Carter, Daviess, Grayson, Greenup, Hancock, Lawrence, Lewis, Logan, Marion, Meade, Metcalfe, Ohio, and Taylor counties to be moved to Zone 1 from Zone 2 designation.
- Cumberland, Elliott, Garrard, Johnson, Morgan, and Rowan counties to be moved to Zone 2 from Zone 3 designation.
- Clinton, Jackson, Martin, Menifee, Pike, Rockcastle, and Russell counties to be moved to Zone 3 from Zone 4 designation.
- Casey, Laurel, Lincoln, McCreary, Pulaski, Rockcastle, Russell, Wayne, and Whitley counties added to the CWD Surveillance Zone following a wild CWD detection in Pulaski County during the 2025-26 deer hunting season.
- Special antlerless-only firearms season in CWD Surveillance Zone counties September 25-28, 2026, Zones 1-3 only.

2026-2027 Deer Management Zones

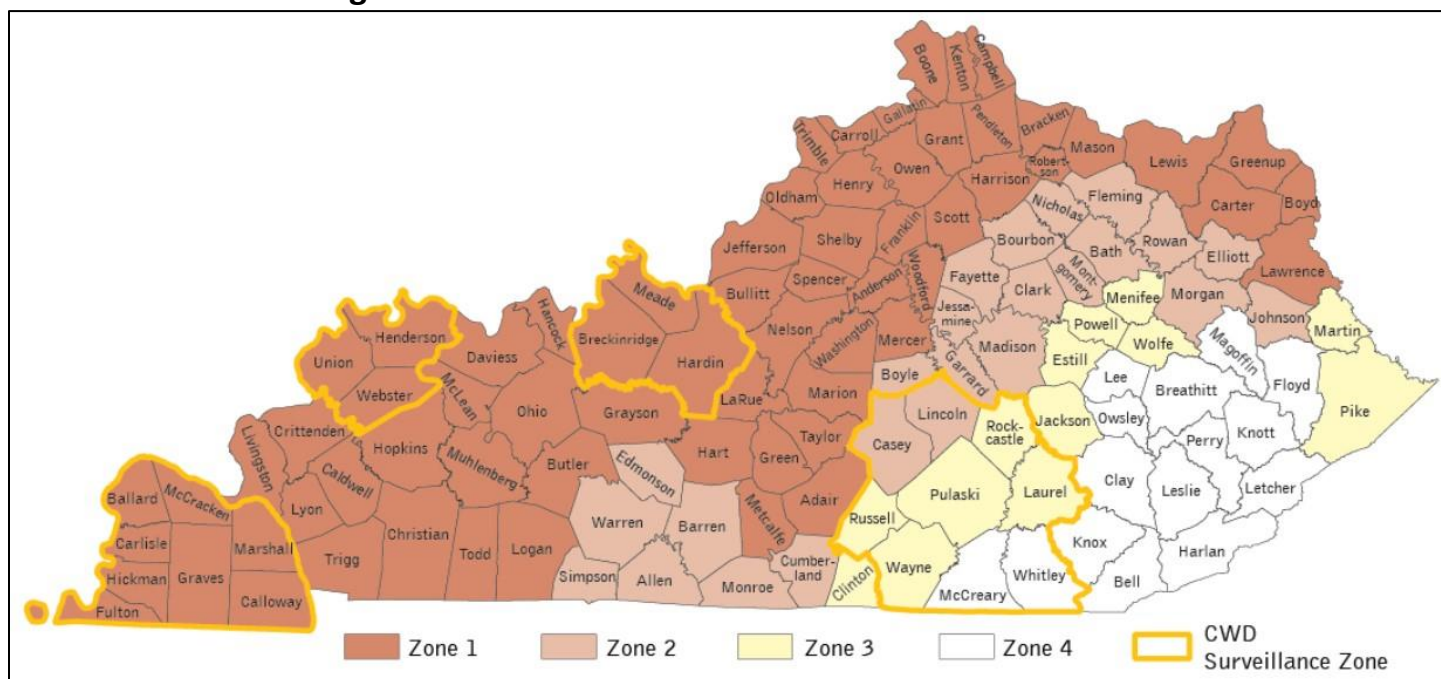


Figure 2. Deer management zones for the 2026-2027 season.

Population Status

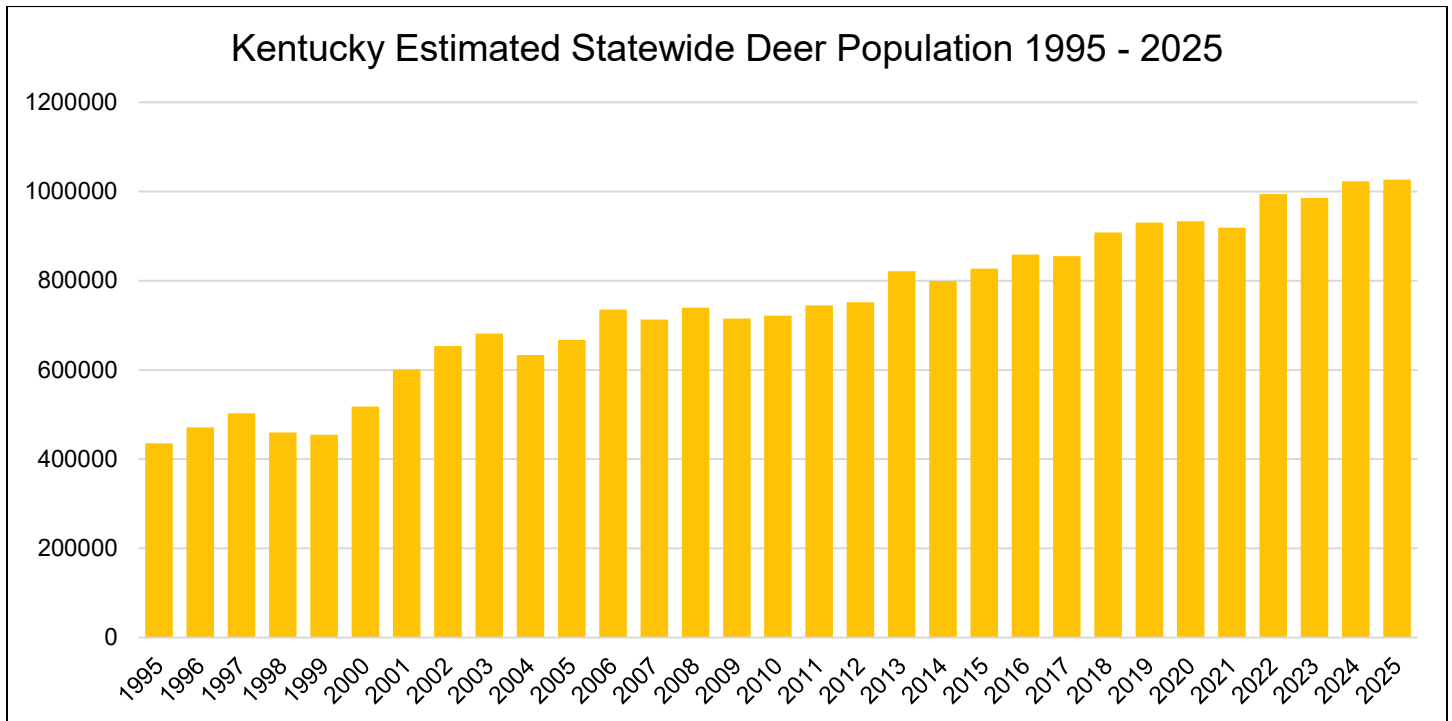


Figure 3. Estimated statewide deer population, 1995-2025.

Overall, the statewide deer population estimate shows an increasing trend (**Figure 3**). The 2025 statewide estimate was 1,026,543 deer at the start of the 2025-26 hunting season, which is a 0.3% increase from 2024-25 (1,022,977). Despite the unlimited antlerless bag limits in Zone 1 counties, these areas are still witnessing growth along with the rest of the state. This population estimate is generated from harvest and age structure data, which is collected through tele-check reporting and by KDFWR staff.

Of the 120 counties in Kentucky, 51 are designated as Zone 1, 34 as Zone 2, 13 as Zone 3, and 22 as Zone 4. Zone 1 counties have the highest deer densities in the state, are considered reduction zones, and have an unlimited bag limit on antlerless deer. At the other end of the spectrum are Zone 4 counties where the deer densities are the lowest and antlerless take is very limited. Zone 2 and 3 counties are at or near population goals and bag limits aim to maintain the densities present in those counties.

Statewide and county deer population trends are important; however, it is also important to acknowledge that deer populations can vary considerably within a region and even within a county.



2025 - 2026 Total Harvest Summary

The total number of deer harvested during the 2025-26 deer season (**Figure 4**) was 145,433, which is the second highest harvest in the last five years. While we observed a 3% decrease from the record 2024-25 season (149,868), the 2025-26 season was 2% higher than the 10-year average (143,624). A good [white and red oak mast drop](#) coupled with desirable hunting weather during most of the season led to one of the best total harvests on record despite a higher-than-average number of Hemorrhagic Disease reports in late summer. The 2025-26 season was the fourth season in a row that over 100,000 hunters harvested at least one deer. Hardin County saw the highest deer harvest this season with 3,543 deer, followed by Breckinridge (3,090), Christian (2,998), Hart (2,814), and Graves (2,698) counties (**Figure 5**).

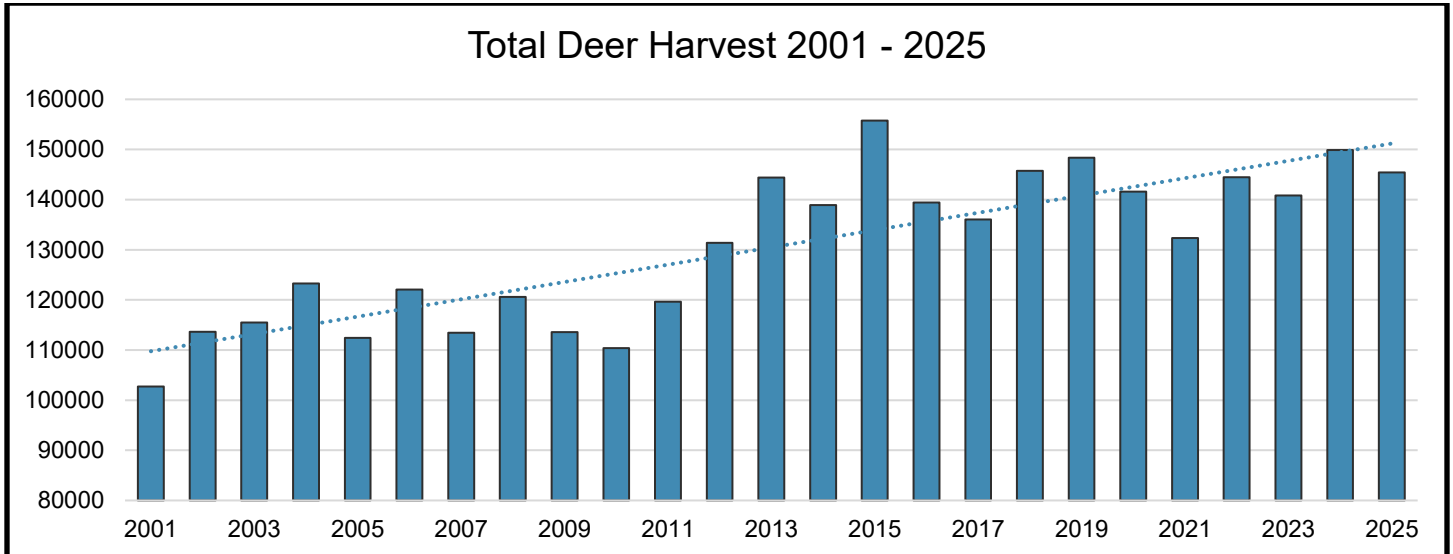
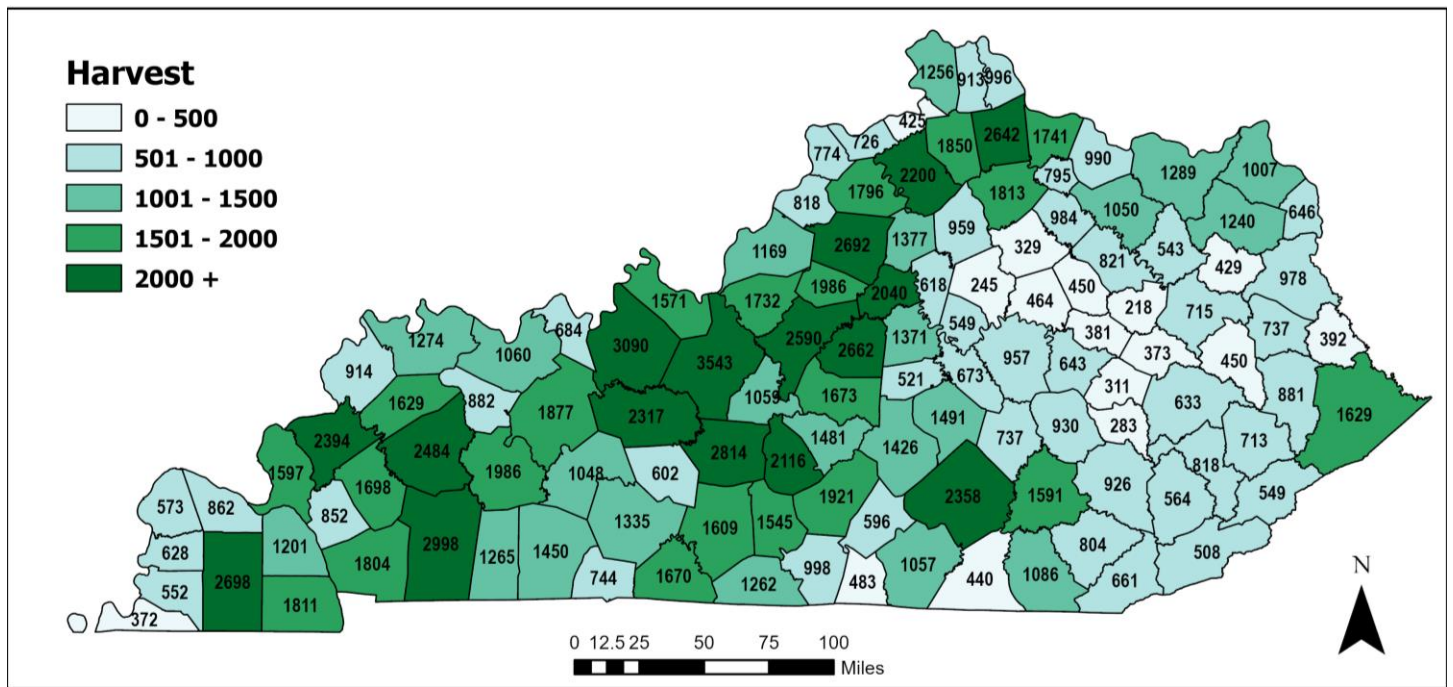


Figure 4. Total deer harvest by season; 2001-2025.



Antlered Buck Harvest

The total antlered deer harvest (**Figure 6**) was 74,411 during the 2025-26 season, which is nearly 4% above the ten-year average (71,744) and the third-highest antlered buck harvest on record. Antlered buck harvest rose for the third time in three years, indicating population growth statewide. When comparing antlered deer harvested per square mile of habitat, Anderson County (4.94 antlered deer/sq. mi.) harvested the most antlered bucks with Spencer County (4.57 antlered deer/sq. mi.) coming in second, and Pendleton County (4.28 antlered deer/sq. mi.) coming in third. Fayette County (0.55 antlered deer/sq. mi.) harvested the fewest antlered bucks per square mile during the 2025-26 season (**Figure 7**).

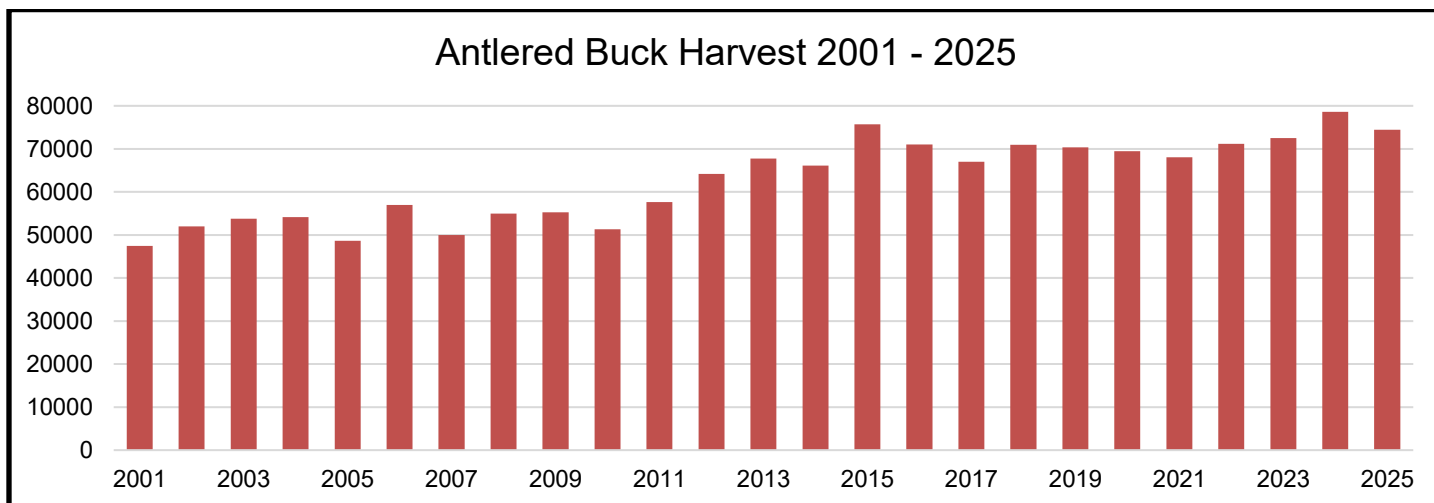


Figure 6. Antlered buck harvest, 2001-2025.

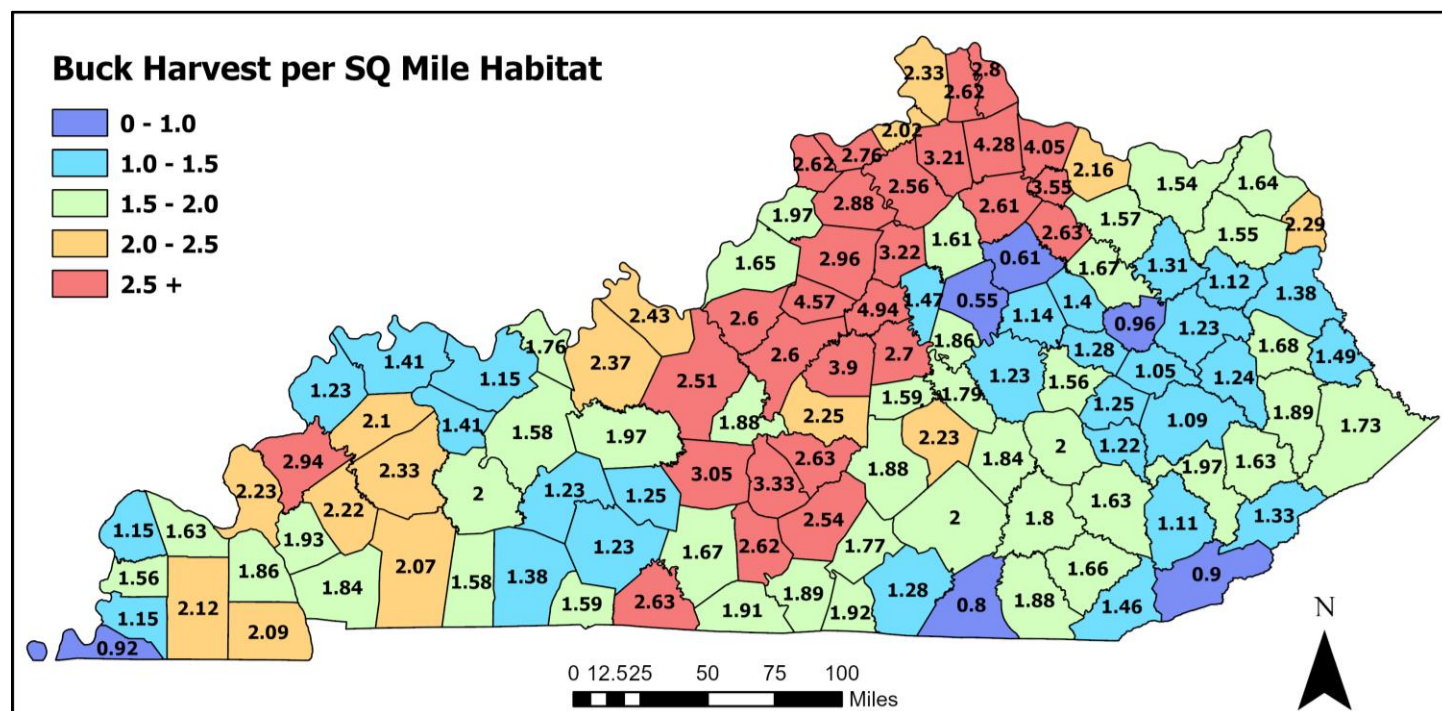


Figure 7. Antlered buck harvest per square mile of habitat, 2025-26.

Female Harvest

The total number of female deer harvested (**Figure 8**) during the 2025-26 season was 63,196 deer. This is 1.2% below the ten-year average and 1% decrease since the 2024-25 season. Although the total number of females harvested has remained steady year-over-year, the proportion of the harvest that is female has steadily declined in the last decade (**Figure 12**). When comparing female deer harvested per square mile of habitat, Spencer County (5.24 female deer/sq. mi.) harvested the most female deer followed by Pendleton County (4.70 female deer/sq. mi.) and Anderson and Washington Counties (4.6 deer/sq. mi, respectively). Menifee County (0.1 female deer/sq. mi.) harvested the fewest female deer per square mile during the 2025-26 season (**Figure 9**).

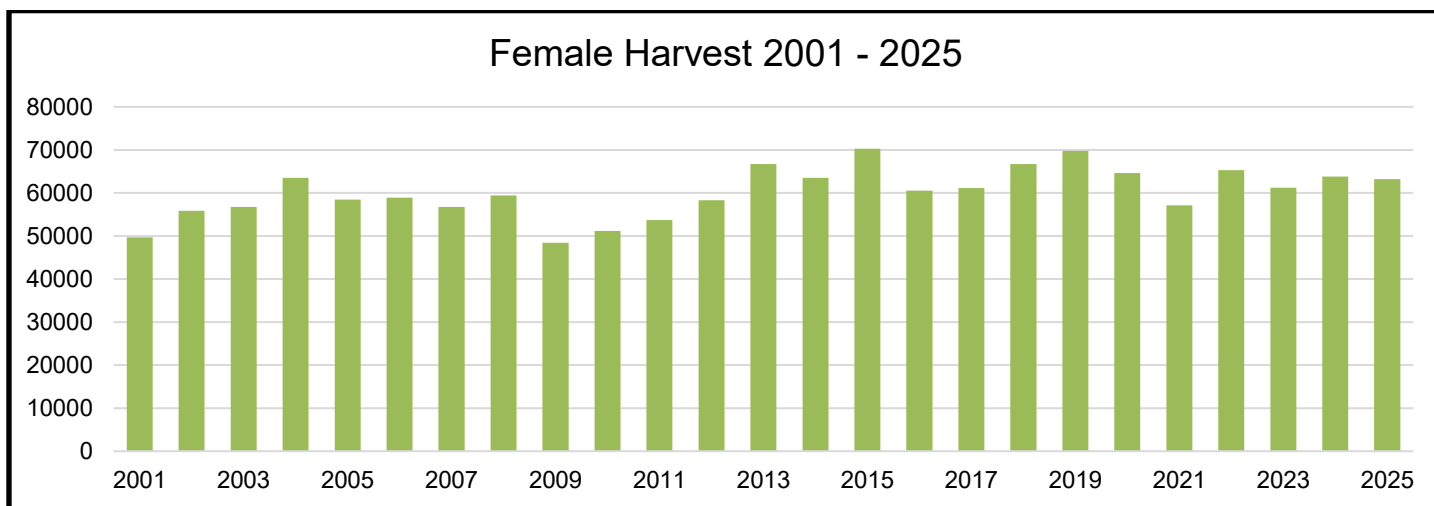


Figure 8. Female harvest, 2001-2025.

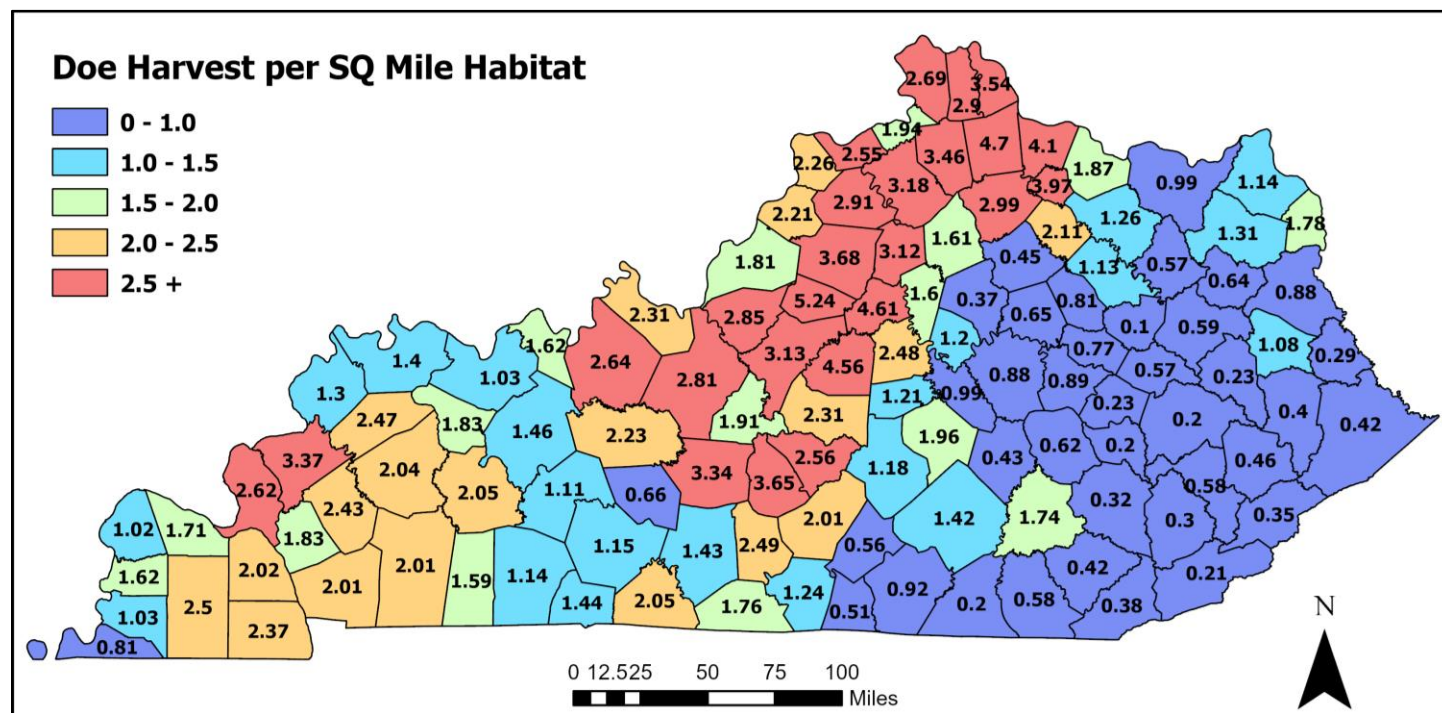


Figure 9. Female harvest per square mile of habitat, 2025-26.

Male Fawn Harvest

The male fawn harvest (**Figure 10**) was 7,826 during the 2025-26 season which is 1% below the ten-year average (7,910). 2025-2026 saw a 4.3% increase from the 2024-25 season (7,503), but the percentage of the harvest that male fawns make up has remained relatively stable (around 5%) for the last decade.

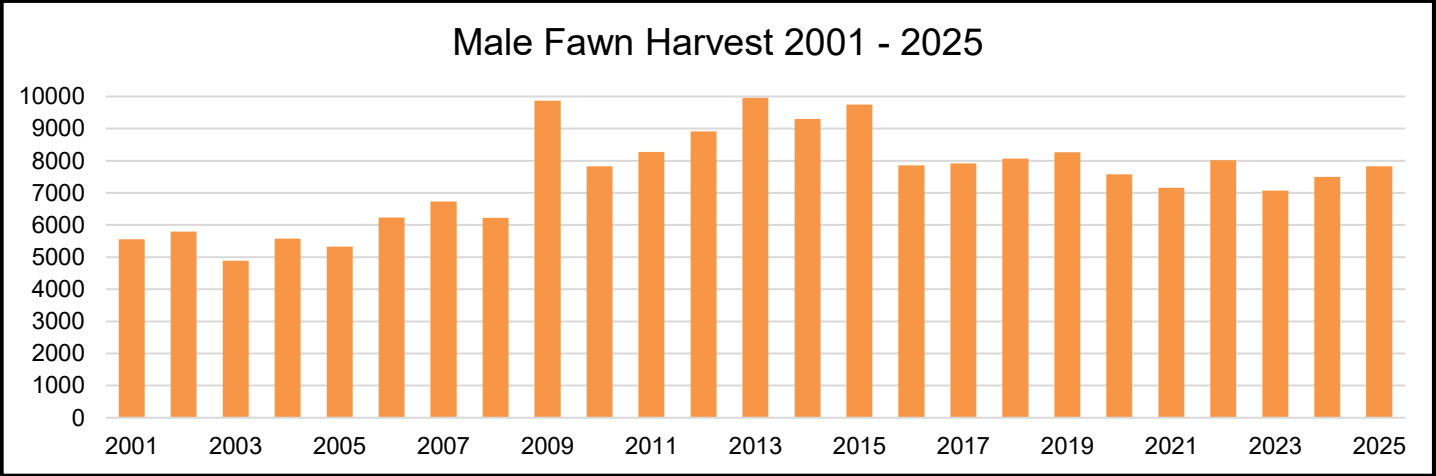


Figure 10. Male fawn harvest, 2001-2025.

Male Age Class Comparison

Deer hunters have been asked to include whether the inside spread of their antlered deer is greater or less than 11 inches when checking their deer since 2016. Male fawn information was already being collected, but yearling and adult male information was needed to better understand the distribution of the varying age classes of males within the total harvest (**Figure 11**). Hunters do a great job of letting younger age class males walk in hopes of seeing them reach their antler potential in older age classes.

Although the proportion of the harvest within these age classes has not changed in the last decade since KDFWR began tracking it via telecheck, the long-term trend of age structure is a testament to Kentucky’s one-buck statewide bag limit. In the 1980s, nearly 80% of the buck harvest was made of yearling bucks. In recent years, that proportion has completely flipped to around 20%.

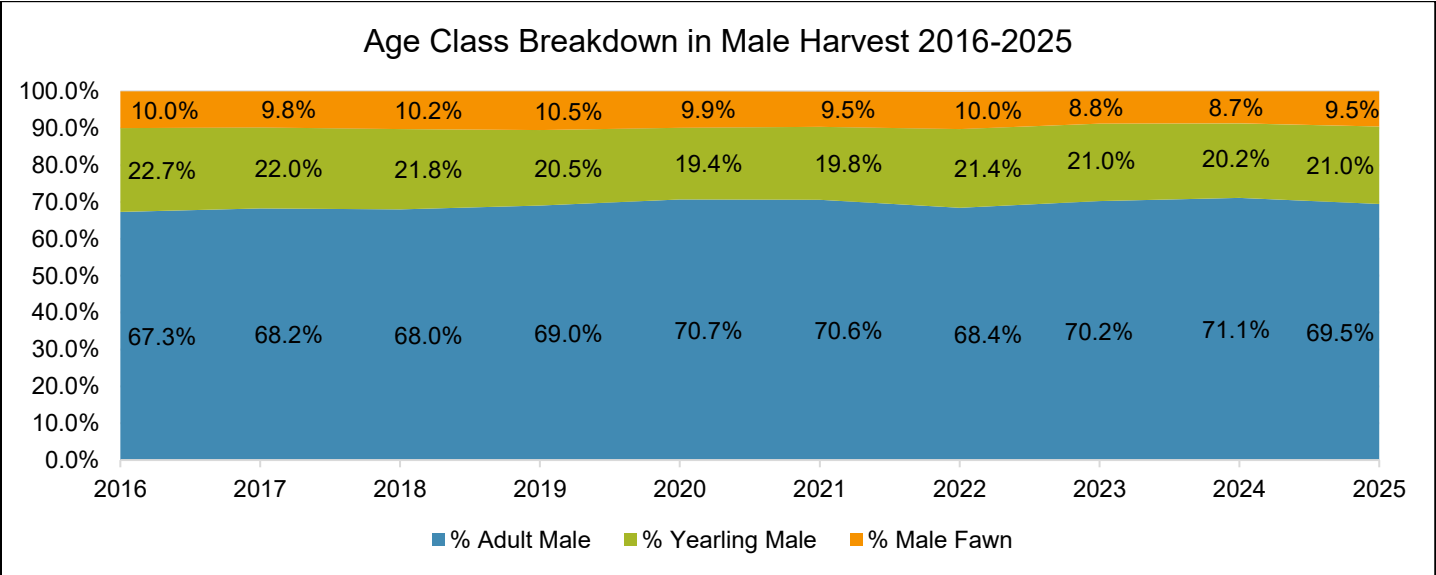


Figure 11. Estimated buck harvest by age class, 2016-2025.

2025 Management Goals

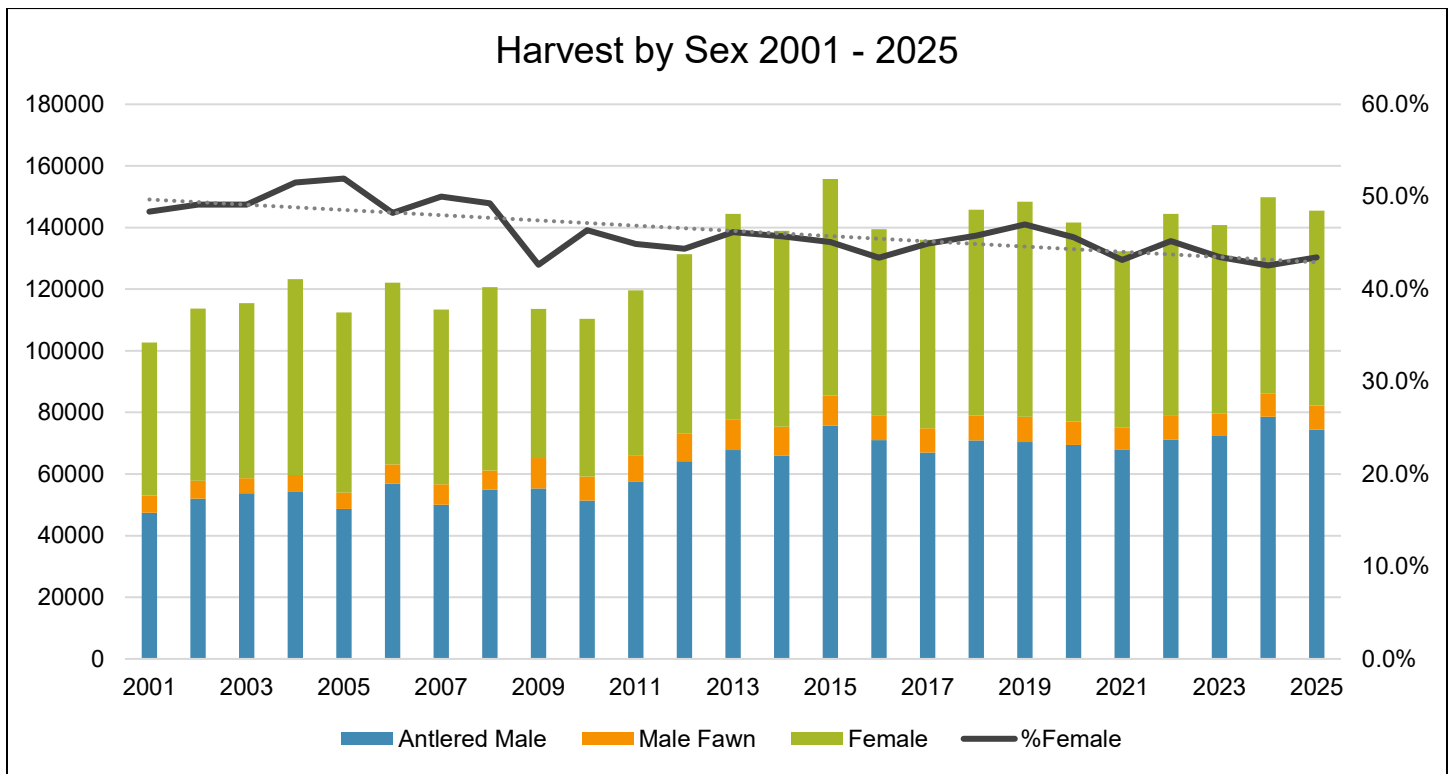


Figure 12. Harvest by sex, 2001-2025.

Kentucky's deer zones are controlled by manipulating the antlerless deer harvest limits within a county. Hunters in Zone 4 counties harvest an average of 1.1 deer per year while our most liberal Zone 1 counties only harvest 1.46 deer per year. That is a difference of < 1 deer per hunter per year despite an unlimited antlerless bag limit in Zone 1 counties. Couple this with the fact that 74% (77,837) of hunters only harvested one deer, and it's clear that there is a limit on the number of deer that hunters are willing or able to harvest. It is particularly discouraging when we consider that the national average is 1.8 deer per hunter per year. Lower harvest rates aren't always bad, however; they are actually desired in the more mountainous regions of Kentucky where the Department seeks to grow the herd (Zone 3 – 4). However, these lower-than-average harvest rates in the central and western two-thirds of the state are cause for concern as these counties (Zone 1 – 2) are slated for population reduction or maintenance.

A minimum of 30% of the standing crop of females must be taken each year to begin to see population level reductions. Higher harvest rates (40 – 50%) are more ideal for the significant reduction needed in some areas, but are oftentimes unreasonable to achieve. Kentucky hunters killed 18% of the standing crop of females in 2025, which is insufficient in curbing population growth where needed in Zone 1 and 2 counties. However, prior to this year's efforts, the Department has never publicized deer harvest goals for individual counties so hunters had nothing to "shoot for." Beginning with the 2025 season, the Department published antlerless deer harvest goals for each of its Zone 1 and 2 counties to give local hunters a reasonable goal to achieve, updating the progress of each county in their monthly harvest report found on KDFWR's website. Using 30% of the standing crop of females as a harvest goal, only one county, Simpson, of Kentucky's 86 Zone 1 and 2 counties met its goal in the 2025-26 deer season (**Figure 13; Table 1**).

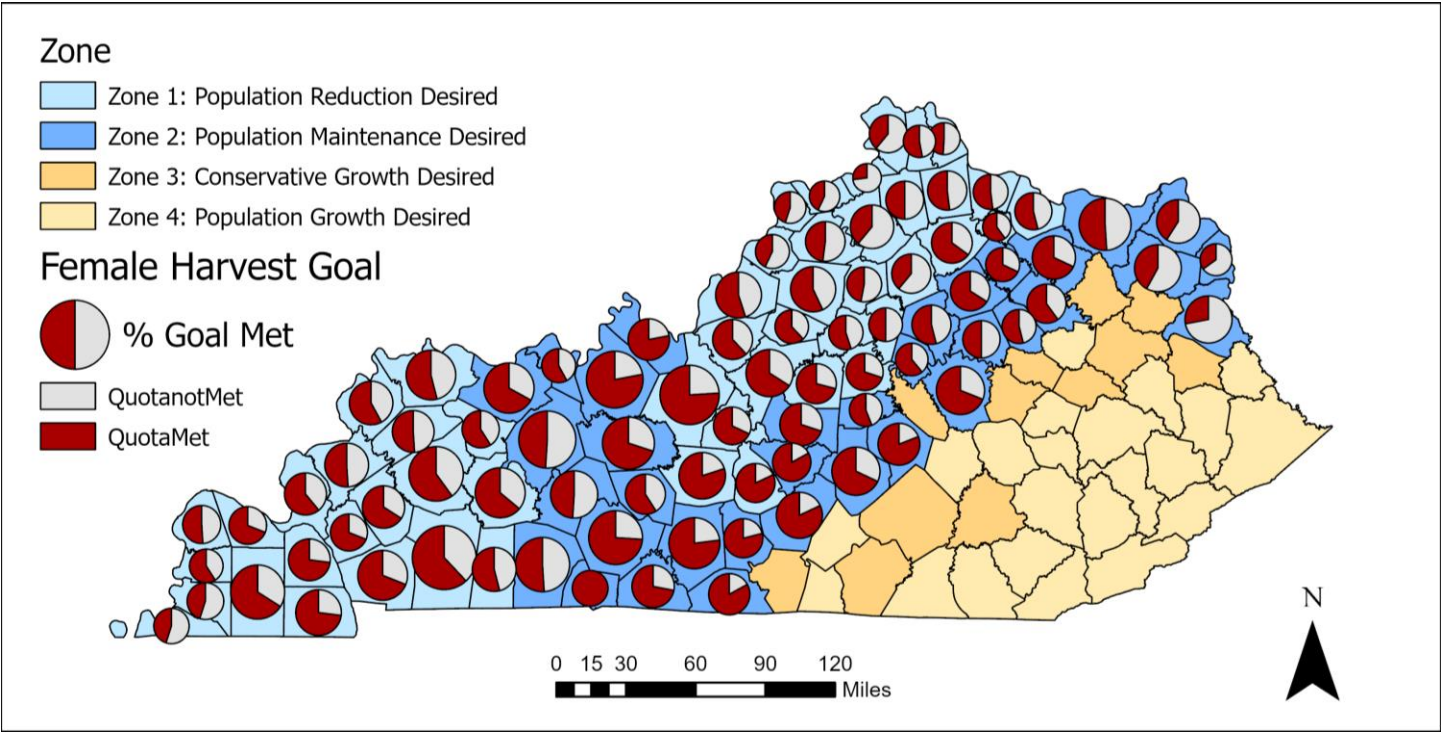
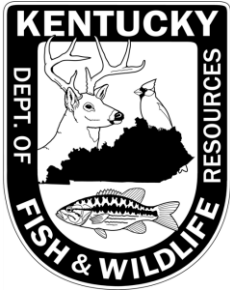


Figure 13. Female harvest goals by county, 2025-26.

County	Harvest Goal	Female Harvest	County	Harvest Goal	Female Harvest	County	Harvest Goal	Female Harvest	County	Harvest Goal	Female Harvest	County	Harvest Goal	Female Harvest	County	Harvest Goal	Female Harvest
Adair	965	811	Calloway	1202	911	Gallatin	750	187	Jessamine	321	204	Meade	842	704	Simpson	324	338
Allen	964	705	Campbell	1032	508	Grant	1709	894	Kenton	825	441	Mercer	882	619	Spencer	1517	978
Anderson	1647	928	Carlisle	497	307	Graves	2019	1380	Larue	723	500	Metcalfe	907	724	Taylor	796	684
Ballard	496	257	Carroll	740	326	Grayson	1575	1116	Lawrence	1343	364	Monroe	677	581	Todd	1148	596
Barren	860	698	Carter	1257	529	Green	1210	1046	Lewis	902	477	Montgomery	289	159	Trigg	1325	890
Bath	505	314	Casey	758	525	Greenup	949	386	Lincoln	803	653	Muhlenberg	1517	951	Trimble	733	334
Boone	1602	623	Christian	2224	1391	Hancock	531	302	Livingston	1321	816	Nelson	2002	1309	Union	801	444
Bourbon	183	131	Clark	313	162	Hardin	2090	1732	Logan	1328	628	Nicholas	550	413	Warren	853	615
Boyd	806	269	Crittenden	2410	1215	Harrison	1353	919	Lyon	642	392	Ohio	1815	857	Washington	1836	1365
Boyle	385	217	Daviess	696	467	Hart	1617	1380	Madison	513	379	Oldham	961	412	Webster	1725	819
Bracken	1574	829	Edmonson	350	200	Henderson	1165	605	Marion	1083	797	Owen	2894	1119	Woodford	598	302
Breckinridge	1711	1505	Fayette	170	95	Henry	1734	840	Marshall	758	591	Pendleton	2500	1305			
Bullitt	1363	834	Fleming	606	441	Hickman	568	251	Mason	803	444	Robertson	647	396			
Butler	1060	473	Franklin	1344	641	Hopkins	1863	1103	McCracken	574	417	Scott	1196	451			
Caldwell	1264	840	Fulton	381	165	Jefferson	1015	571	McLean	788	463	Shelby	2399	1401			

Table 1. Female harvest goals and harvest total, 2025-26. Counties not mentioned are those with growth desired.

The deer population will likely continue to grow in much of the Commonwealth without proper management by hunters, much like states north of Kentucky that are experiencing the effects of overpopulation. Overpopulation of deer herds can lead to adverse effects including but not limited to hindered antler development, smaller body sized deer, increased disease susceptibility and spread, higher deer-vehicle collisions, more crop destruction, skewed sex ratios, and lower quality buck hunting.



Harvest Summary by Weapon Type

Weapon	Female	Male Fawn	Male	Total
Archery	9,158	686	6,803	16,647
Crossbow	7,331	912	6,108	14,351
Firearm	41,262	5,612	58,540	105,414
Muzzle-loader	5,445	616	2,960	9,021
Total	63,196	7,826	74,411	145,433

Table 2. Harvest by weapon type and sex, 2025-26.

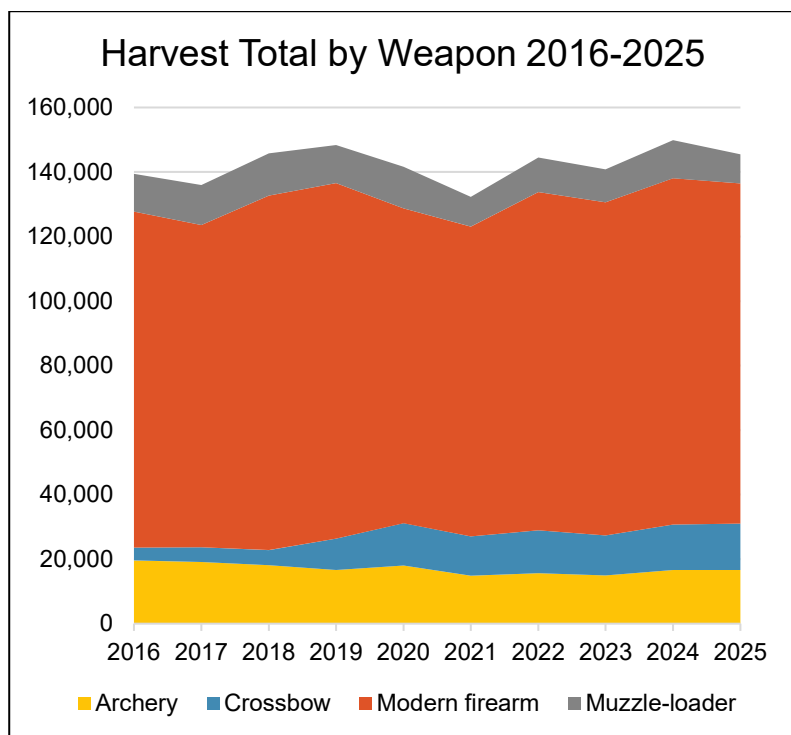


Figure 14. Total harvest by weapon, 2016-2025.

There were no major changes in the percentage of the 2025-26 harvest by weapon type (**Table 2; Figures 14 - 15**) compared to the 2024-25 season, though there was a dip in the muzzleloader harvest, likely due to poor weather conditions during the Early Muzzleloader Weekend. The archery harvest (16,647) was 11% of the total harvest, identical when compared to the last five seasons and the second-highest total harvest since 2020. The muzzleloader harvest (9,021) comprised 6% of the total harvest and the total was 15.1% lower than the five-year average (10,630). Crossbows, however, saw the highest harvest on record (14,351) and represented 10% of the 2025-26 total deer harvest. The total number of deer harvested by crossbow has increased 40% in the last decade, while the total number of deer harvested have not changed significantly. This season saw the highest recorded harvest by crossbow by over 300 deer. Crossbow harvest has steadily increased in the last decade, particularly after crossbow season was liberalized in 2018. Interestingly, more antlerless deer were taken with crossbows, muzzle-loaders, and archery equipment than antlered males, respectively. The modern gun harvest (105,414) saw a 1.8% decrease from the record 2024-25 season (107,392) but was also 3% higher than the five-year average (102,436). Sixty-nine percent of the overall harvest occurred during the modern gun season (**Figure 15**) when most Kentucky deer hunters go afield. On average, 10-15% of the total harvest occurs on the opening day of modern gun season (**Table 3**).

Modern Gun Season Harvest by Day				
Date	Day	Harvest	% of Modern Gun Harvest	% of Deer Season Harvest
8-Nov	Sat	16027	16%	11%
9-Nov	Sun	10914	11%	8%
10-Nov	Mon	8742	9%	6%
11-Nov	Tue	8313	8%	6%
12-Nov	Wed	5426	5%	4%
13-Nov	Thu	5197	5%	4%
14-Nov	Fri	5181	5%	4%
15-Nov	Sat	6944	7%	5%
16-Nov	Sun	6198	6%	4%
17-Nov	Mon	4048	4%	3%
18-Nov	Tue	1960	2%	1%
19-Nov	Wed	2594	3%	2%
20-Nov	Thu	2115	2%	1%
21-Nov	Fri	2355	2%	2%
22-Nov	Sat	7275	7%	5%
23-Nov	Sun	6428	6%	4%
Total		99,717	100%	69%

Table 3. Harvest by day, Modern Gun 2025-26

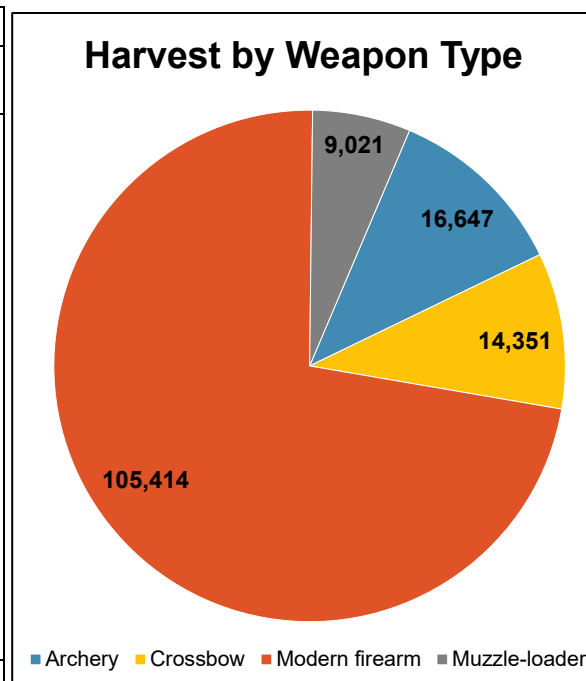


Figure 15. Harvest by weapon type, 2025-26.

Monthly Harvest Results

The 8,142 deer harvested in September is the highest harvest for September on record, likely due to the coolest opening weekend temperatures in recent memory. Fifty-one percent (4,114) of the deer harvested in September were female, and this year's September harvest was over 1,500 animals higher than the 10-year average. October saw a harvest of 15,610 deer with 5,645 taken during Kentucky's inaugural 9-day Youth Firearms season and 1,599 during the two-day Early Muzzle-loader season. Hunters harvested 106,306 deer during November, most of which occurred during the statewide modern gun season (99,672). December's take remained strong for the fourth year in a row with 11,591 deer reported harvested. Similarly, the month of January saw a record 3,784 deer reported harvested.

2025-26 Harvest Results by Permit Type

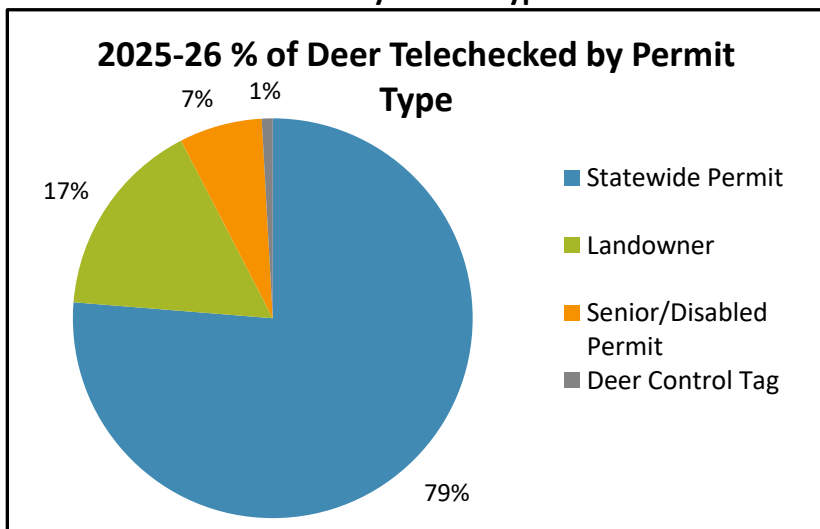


Figure 16. Percent of deer telechecked by permit type, 2025-26.

The percentage of deer telechecked by permit type (**Figure 16**) has remained stable over the years. However, with the increasing number of senior/disabled licenses sold, we would expect to see the senior/disabled harvest increase and the statewide permit harvest to decrease over time. Resident landowners are not required to purchase a hunting license or deer permit if they are hunting deer on their own property but are still required to telecheck any harvested deer. Deer control tags are used to mitigate deer damage and issuance has remained stable over the past six years.

Public Land Deer Harvest

KDFWR owns, leases, or manages more than 120 Wildlife Management Area's (WMA), Hunting Access Areas (HAA), and Outdoor Recreation Areas (ORA) across the state for public use (**Table 4**). Exceptions exist on some properties, but most of Kentucky's public areas are open to public hunting through quota hunts or under statewide regulations. The public areas are separated between five wildlife regions and are managed by regional staff in the Wildlife Division. The number of deer harvested on public land in Kentucky has been stable to increasing over the last decade in every wildlife region (**Figure 17**). Kentucky public areas saw the second-highest reported harvest on record with 7,396 deer in the 2025-26 season (**Figure 18**).

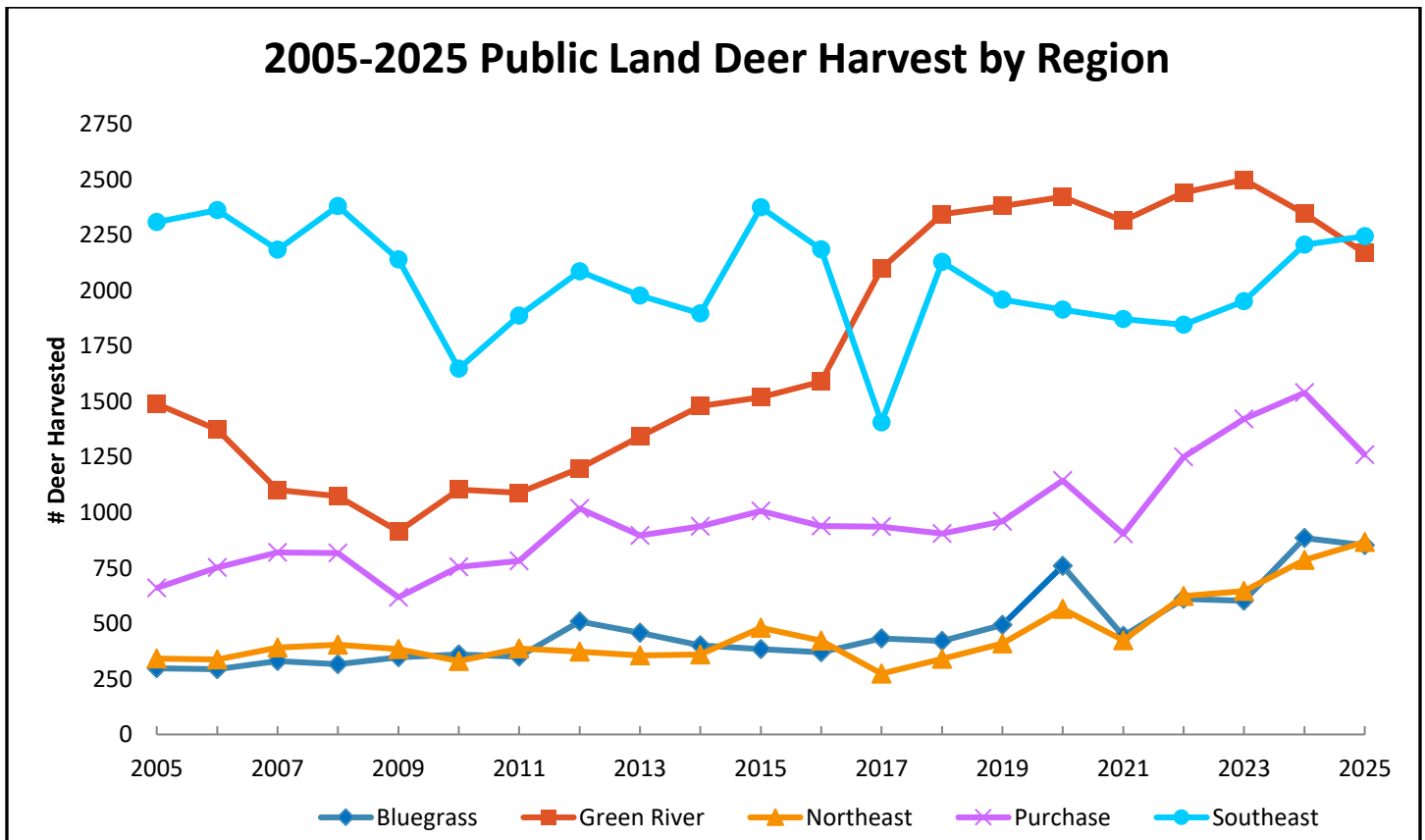


Figure 17. Public land deer harvest by Wildlife Region, 2005-2025.

Acres of Public Hunting Areas by Wildlife Region	
Wildlife Region	Public Land Hunting Acres
Bluegrass	83,216
Green River	171,248
Northeast	309,940
Purchase	224,340
Southeast	901,601

Table 4. Acres of Kentucky public land by wildlife region.

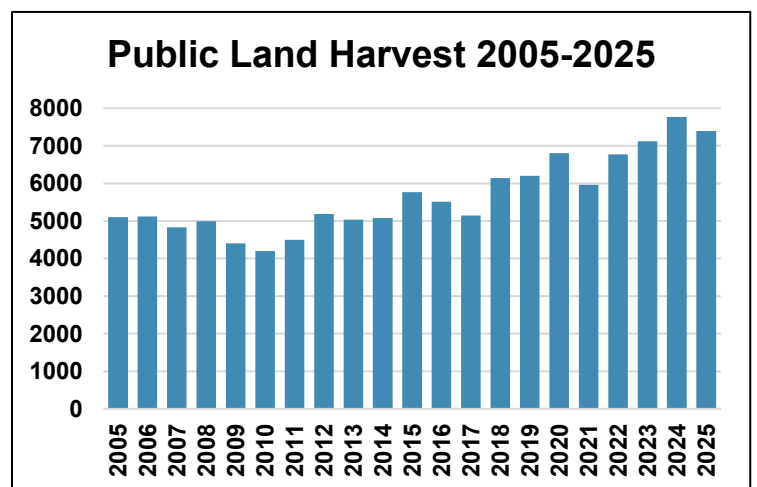


Figure 18. Kentucky public land harvest, 2005-2025.

Deer Quota Hunts

KDFWR offered 36 deer quota hunts on Kentucky WMAs during the 2025-26 season. Any resident or nonresident hunter may apply for a deer quota hunt in Kentucky, but only the persons successfully drawn for a quota hunt may participate. The application period for KDFWR deer quota hunts is the month of September when applicants can apply online at <https://fw.ky.gov/Hunt/Pages/Quota-Hunts.aspx>. Applicants will be given the option to pick a first and second hunt choice but may be drawn to participate in only one quota hunt. The non-refundable fee is \$3 per hunter to apply. Each hunter who applies correctly, but is not selected, will receive a preference point that increases the odds of being drawn the next year. Unselected hunters who do not apply the following year will lose all previously credited preference points. Applicants are selected based on individual preference points. Up to five people can apply together, but individuals within the group will have their preference points averaged (total number of points divided by total number of applicants). However, there is a 10% maximum allowance on non-residents to be drawn for each quota hunt. If any one hunter of a group numbers is drawn, the others in the group are automatically selected. The exception applies to hunt parties that have one or more non-resident applicants and where the quota hunt may have already reached the 10% maximum limit of non-resident hunters. If this is the case, then no member of that party will be drawn.

9,068 hunters applied for the 3,822 available spots at the 36 KDFWR deer quota hunts held in the 2025-26 season. Approximately 40% of applicants were drawn for a Kentucky quota deer hunt but drawing success varied from 6.7% to 100% depending on the property. There are quota hunts for general hunters (i.e., residents or non-residents with a statewide license), mobility impaired hunters, archery/crossbow hunters, and youth hunters. There are at least two deer quota hunts in each of the five wildlife regions across the state.

2025 Quota Deer Hunts	Harvest		Deer Seen/ Hour Hunted	Observed Antlered Deer:
	Female	Male		Antlerless Deer Ratio
Ballard WMA	11	6	0.45	1: 1.59
Beaver Creek WMA	0	6	0.20	1: 3.67
Big Rivers WMA and State Forest #1	6	2	*	*
Big Rivers WMA and State Forest #2	11	10	0.67	1: 1.94
Clay WMA	29	19	0.31	1: 1.82
Dale Hollow Lake State Resort Park	12	13	*	*
Dewey Lake WMA	4	6	0.32	1: 2.16
Fishtrap Lake WMA	13	17	0.25	1: 1.50
Greenbo Lake State Resort Park	2	1	*	*
Green River Lake and Dennis-Gray WMA	20	19	0.55	1: 2.57
Green River Lake and Dennis-Gray WMA				
Mobility-impaired	1	0	0.79	1: 1.4
Green River Lake State Park	8	6	*	*
Higginson-Henry WMA #1	5	14	*	*
Higginson-Henry WMA #2	1	5	0.69	1: 2.45
Kenlake State Resort Park	2	2	*	*
Kentucky River WMA	3	2	0.47	1: 3.14
Kincaid Lake State Park	10	6	*	*
Kleber and Rich WMA #1	1	6	0.24	1: 2.13
Kleber and Rich WMA #2	12	12	0.16	1: 5.26

Paintsville Lake WMA	16	13	0.37	1: 3.16
Pennyryle State Forest and Tradewater WMA	23	27	0.35	1: 1.86
Taylorsville Lake WMA #1	16	16	0.32	1: 1.85
Taylorsville Lake WMA #1 Mobility-impaired	0	0	0	1:4
Taylorsville Lake WMA #2	38	20	0.19	1: 3.91
Taylorsville Lake WMA #2 Mobility-impaired	0	0	0	0
Twin Knobs Mobility-impaired	0	0	0	0
Veterans Memorial WMA	2	2	0.17	1: 1.57
West Kentucky WMA	15	12	0.39	1: 3.05

Table 5. Public land quota hunt data, 2025-26.

* Hunters not required to submit a check card during these hunts.

Eighteen quota hunts required hunters to physically check their deer in for KDFWR staff to collect data on the area's harvest. This dataset, now over 30 years old on some WMAs, is used in conjunction with periodic herd health examinations to make confident management decisions regarding the deer herd on these areas. On those 18 hunts, a total of 576 deer were harvested. Of those, 297 were male (51.5%) while 279 (48.5%) were female.

The heaviest buck that was harvested this year was a 3.5+ year-old 8-point from Ballard WMA, weighing in at 220 pounds after field dressing. The same buck from Ballard WMA tied with a 3.5-year-old 8-point taken during the Taylorsville Lake WMA Hunt #1 for the largest outside spread, measuring 22.5 inches across. The heaviest doe harvested was a 3.5+ year-old from Green River Lake WMA, weighing 122 pounds after field dressing.



Fishtrap Lake WMA



Kleber WMA



Big Rivers WMA



Clay WMA



Dewey Lake WMA

Deer Permit Sales

The number of deer permits sold has been declining since its peak in 2015 but has seen recent resurgence and volatility (**Figures 19, 20**). The 2025-26 season saw a dramatic decrease from the 2024-25 spike, with total deer permit sales reaching 296,446. This total is 4% higher than the 10-year average. No information is available regarding how many resident landowners hunted deer, as they are not required to purchase a permit if hunting on their property. However, deer harvested by private landowners on their property make up 15-20% of the total harvest annually.

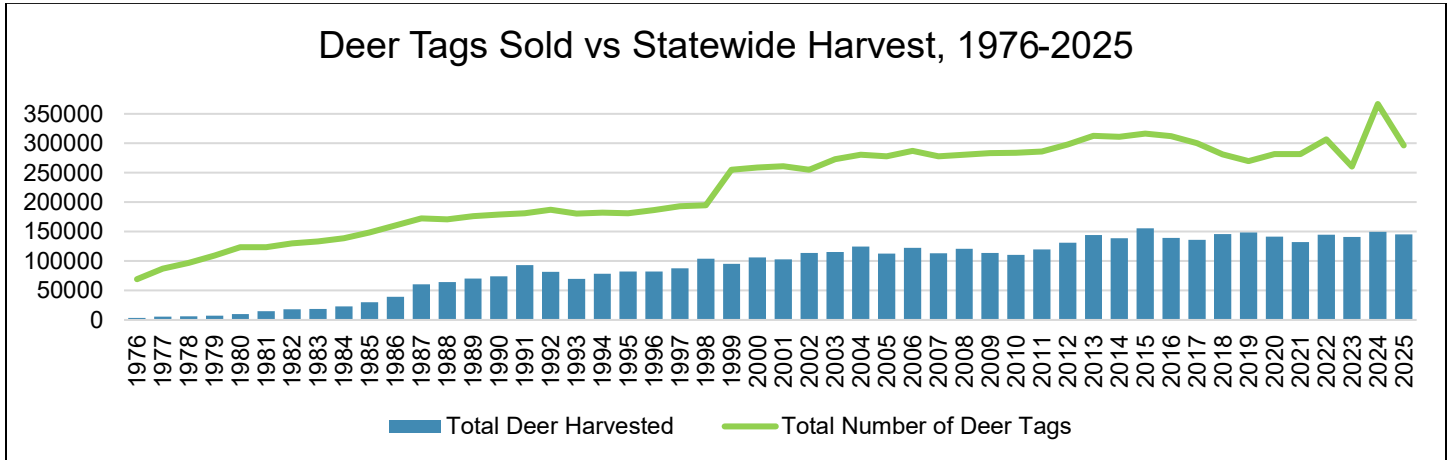


Figure 19. Deer tags sold vs statewide total deer harvest, 1976-2025.

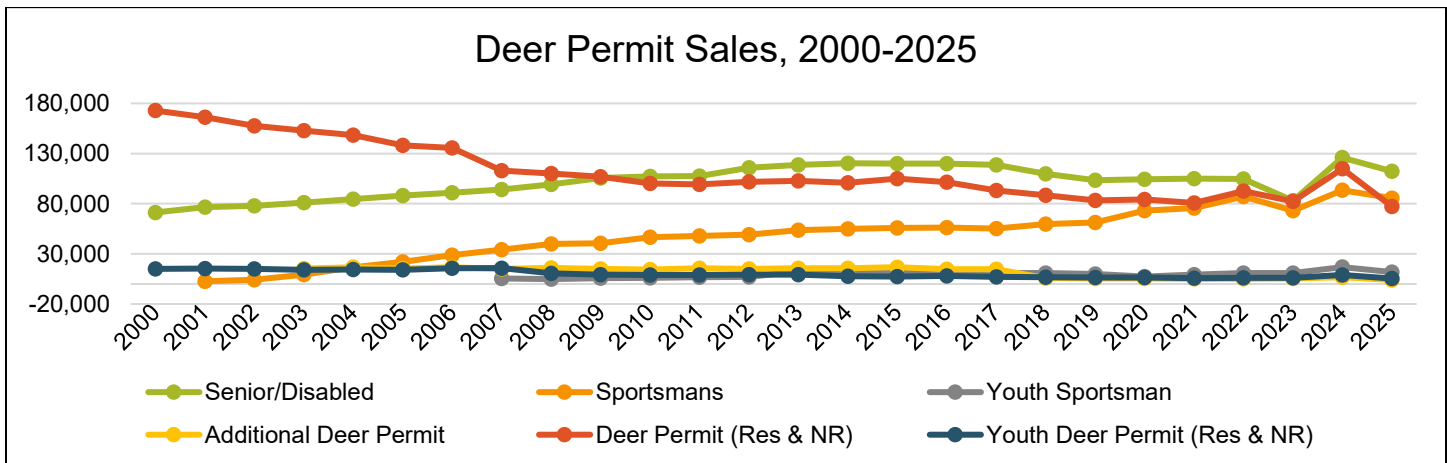
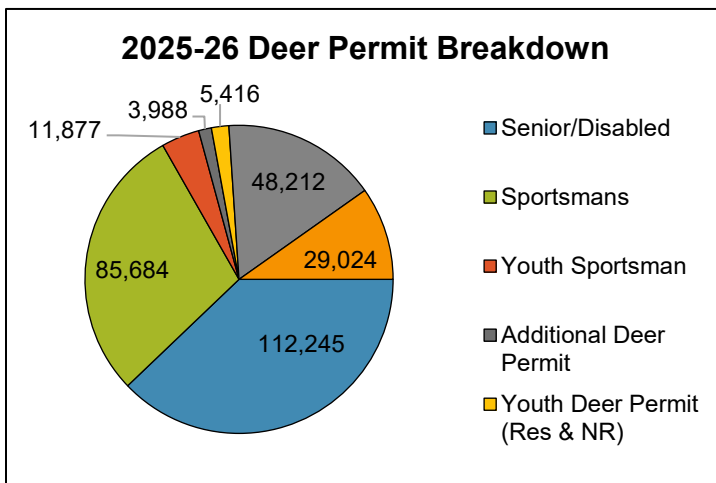


Figure 20. Deer permit sales, 2000-2025.



Upon further examination of license sales (**Figure 20, 21**), most deer permits are purchased by senior/disabled hunters (39%) followed by Sportsman License (28%) and resident deer permit buyers (16%). Although senior/disabled permit holders make up the majority of deer permits purchased, only 7% of the total deer harvest is made by senior/disabled hunters. This is likely because most senior/disabled permit holders are primarily purchasing this license type to fish and choose not to hunt deer or are not deer hunters.

Figure 21. Proportion of total deer permit by type, 2024-25.

Current Research

Kentucky's CWD Response and Management Plan utilizes two buffers of 10- and 30-mile radiuses to help focus CWD management and surveillance efforts. Beyond delineating the boundaries of our CWD Surveillance Zone, these buffers were designed to "capture"/ contain deer that disperse away from the core area and ensure sampling strategies and goals are adequate. However, deer dispersal rates and distances are largely tied to forest composition; deer disperse further and at higher rates in fragmented landscapes, and shorter distances where forests are more contiguous/ abundant. Kentucky's CWD Management Zone is located in a highly fragmented area that is dominated by row crop agriculture production. As such, it is possible that our CWD containment buffers may not be adequate in detecting the disease as deer disperse beyond the boundaries of our Surveillance Zone. KDFWR, in collaboration with University of Kentucky researchers, aim to capture and radio-collar up to 100 juvenile deer (i.e., 8 – 9 months old) inside the CWD Management Zone to monitor spring and fall dispersal events of yearling deer, which is the age at which most deer emigrate. Other anticipated benefits include auxiliary data collection including but not limited to cause-specific mortality rates, travel/ disease corridors, and habitat selection to support population modeling efforts.

The winter capture season of 2025-26 resulted in the capture and collaring of 51 deer, bringing the project's total collared deer in the area to 90 individuals prior to spring and fall dispersal windows.



Damage Mitigation

An overpopulation of deer can have a negative impact on the environment and humans alike. Overabundant deer populations may result in agricultural and landscape damage, be detrimental to forest health and regeneration, pose safety risks due to deer-vehicle collisions, and serve as vectors for the transmission of diseases. State, local, and private groups all have a role in helping to manage the state's deer population. The primary tool for deer management in Kentucky is hunting, but sometimes this framework alone may not be enough to curtail the issues that some stakeholders experience. Deer populations can outgrow what their habitat can reasonably sustain, known as exceeding ecological carrying capacity. However, a much less understood issue in modern deer management is social carrying capacity, which is essentially the number or density of deer that is socially acceptable in a given area. KDFWR staff can offer their assistance once this threshold has been reached in an area (see Contacts map on page 23). A local Regional Biologist or Game Warden will schedule an on-site visit to document damage and provide technical guidance on potential

solutions. Technical guidance can be offered in many ways, but the best damage mitigation strategy is a dedicated, long-term hunting regimen. In addition to hunting, assistance from KDFWR may come in the form of Control Tags (CTs), Destruction Tags (DTs), and the use of KRS 150.170 (**Table 6**).

Deer Control Tags Used in 2025				Destruction Permit Use from 2025			
Region	DCT's Issued	DCT's Used	% Used	Region	DDPs	DDPs Used	% Used
BG	1559	196	13%	BG	1610	472	29%
GR	2485	396	16%	GR	1952	394	20%
NE	111	53	48%	NE	7	6	86%
PR	663	109	16%	PR	969	232	24%
SE	1894	461	24%	SE	187	49	26%
Total	3607	1215	34%	Total	4725	1153	24%

*DDP use data were not complete at the time of publication

Table 6. Deer damage permit use, 2025.

Habitat Management

The Department's East Kentucky Habitat Initiative (EKHI) entered its fifth year during the fall of 2025. This initiative utilizes prescribed fire, aerial herbicide, and other practices to help reduce exotic and invasive species from overtaking the open areas of reclaimed mine land. Specifically, KDFWR focused efforts on large blocks of reclaimed mine areas on public and private lands where autumn olive has begun to completely overtake the grassland community. In addition, prescribed fire was utilized in the adjacent woodlands to reduce non-desirable species and stimulate oak regeneration. These habitat practices benefit many species, including deer and elk, by allowing a more diverse grassland and forb community to flourish, increasing nutrition along with creating more productive bedding and fawning cover for deer in these areas.

In all, KDFWR used prescribed fire to enhance habitat on over 10,300 acres of public and private land across the Commonwealth in 2025-26. Over 4,200 acres of this effort was concentrated on reclaimed mine land in eastern Kentucky.



East Kentucky Habitat Initiative

Disease Surveillance

Hemorrhagic Disease (HD)

Hemorrhagic disease (HD), which is a vector-borne disease of white-tailed deer, is caused by two related orbiviruses: epizootic hemorrhagic disease virus (EHDV) and bluetongue virus (BTV). HD viruses are considered the most important viral agents affecting deer populations in the United States. The virus is transmitted from animal to animal through the bite of an infected midge which is active in the late summer and early fall. Severe outbreaks are often associated with drought conditions because drought creates an increased amount of breeding habitat for the midges. The midges die off for the year after a hard freeze, eliminating new cases of HD.

HD is reported in localized areas from at least a few counties nearly every year in Kentucky, although outbreaks can be considerably large and widespread. In 2017, a large HD outbreak occurred in the eastern portion of Kentucky and had significant impacts on that deer population. Many of those areas continue to experience lower deer numbers primarily due to the habitat type in east Kentucky being predominately forested, where deer populations exhibit a much slower growth rate. In 2025, KDFWR biologists received over 900 HD deer reports throughout the state. When possible, KDFWR will test animals that have died of apparent HD. Widespread testing for HD is difficult due to the tissue collection process being extremely time-sensitive, but Kentucky's [Sick or Dead Deer Reporting Form](#) allows KDFWR to estimate the impact of HD each year. Of the 62 samples collected from deer between July and December 2025, 32 were positive from 31 different counties (**Figure 22**). This was a marked increase in reports and confirmed cases from 2024, which had approximately 170 reports and only 9 confirmed cases in 9 counties. KDFWR estimates that between 1700-1800 deer died of HD in 2025.

While HD does cause mortality among white-tailed deer, there are also animals that survive and produce protective antibodies, which can be passed to offspring. This is an important distinction when discussing this disease compared to chronic wasting disease, which is always fatal and was detected for the first time in Kentucky in 2023.

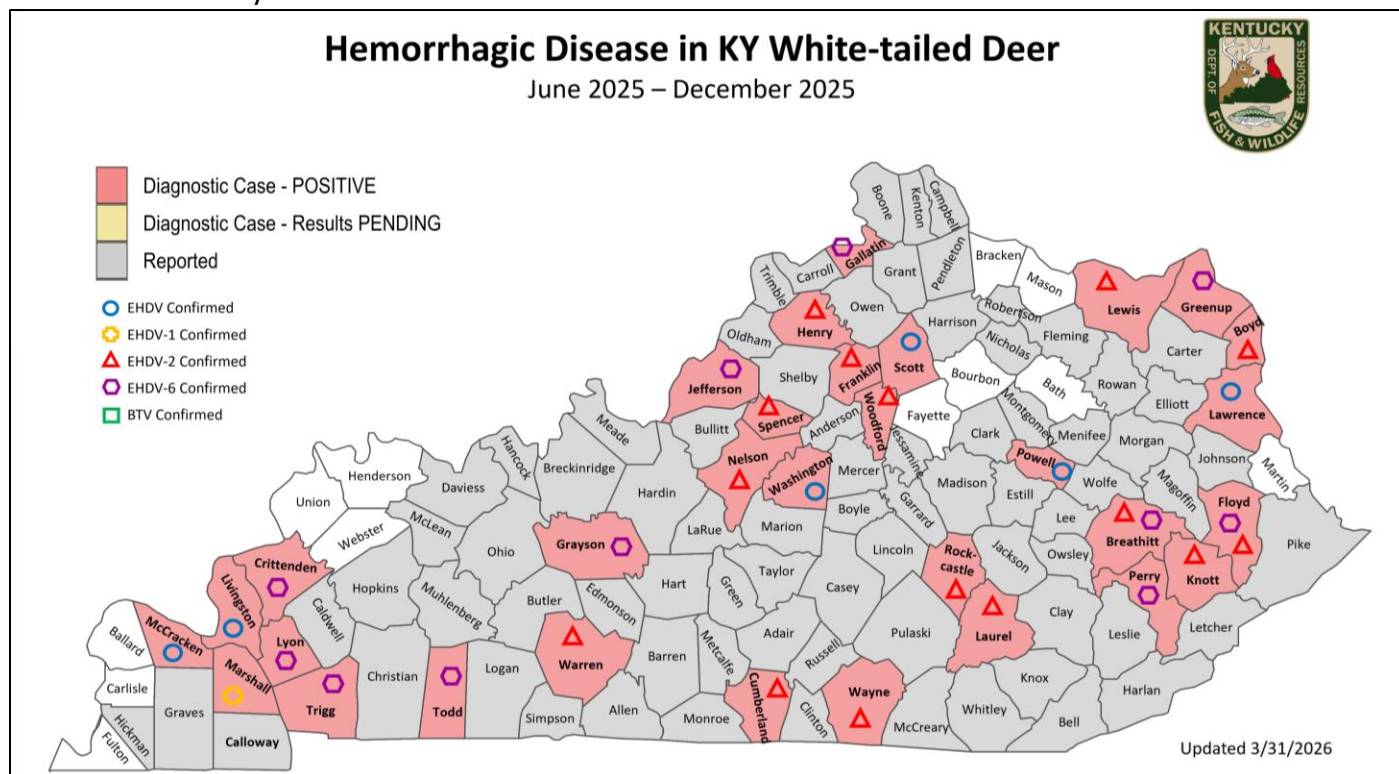


Figure 22. Hemorrhagic disease in Kentucky deer, 2025.

2025 CWD Response

Prior to the start of the 2021-2022 deer hunting season, the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency (TWRA) reported the discovery of a CWD positive deer eight miles from the southern border of Calloway County, KY. Tennessee has since reported positive deer in two counties that lie within 30 miles of Kentucky's border. Due to the proximity to the Kentucky border, the Department initiated the beginning steps of its CWD Response Plan, including the establishment of a CWD Surveillance Zone. Marshall, Calloway, Graves, Hickman, and Fulton counties were included in the original CWD Surveillance Zone. In December 2023, statewide surveillance efforts adjacent to the 5-county CWD Surveillance Zone detected Kentucky's first CWD-positive wild deer, a 2.5-year-old buck harvested in Ballard County. This detection resulted in KDFWR's Commission extending the CWD Surveillance Zone to include Ballard, Carlisle, and McCracken counties.

In October 2024, the Kentucky Department of Agriculture (KDA) notified KDFWR that a farmed white-tailed deer had tested positive for CWD in Breckinridge County. This detection triggered the CWD Response Plan, adding Breckinridge, Meade, and Hardin counties to the CWD Surveillance Zone. In July of 2025, KDA detected an additional 8 cases of CWD during depopulation efforts of the farmed herd.

Prior to the start of the 2025-26 deer hunting season, KDFWR was notified by Indiana DNR that a deer harvested less than 2 miles from Henderson County, Kentucky, tested positive for CWD in Posey County, Indiana. Due to the proximity to the Kentucky border, the CWD Response Plan was triggered by the KDFWR Commission and the three counties adjacent to the detection, Henderson, Union, and Webster, were added to the CWD Surveillance Zone.

The 2025-26 CWD sampling season resulted in the collection and testing of 10,034 deer across the Commonwealth (**Figure 24**), 5,041 of which were from the expanded 11-county Surveillance Zone. Out of those 10,034 tested, the state had two detections of CWD in wild deer throughout the season. One was in a 2.5-year-old buck that was harvested in close proximity to Kentucky's first wild detection in Ballard County, bringing the total number of positive cases in far west Kentucky to two. The second detection was an early-season harvest in Pulaski County through routine statewide surveillance, marking the first detection of CWD in southeastern Kentucky. This detection triggered the CWD Response Plan, where the KDFWR Commission voted to add the following nine counties to the CWD Surveillance Zone: Casey, Lincoln, Rockcastle, Russell, Pulaski, Laurel, Wayne, McCreary, and Whitley (**Figure 23**).

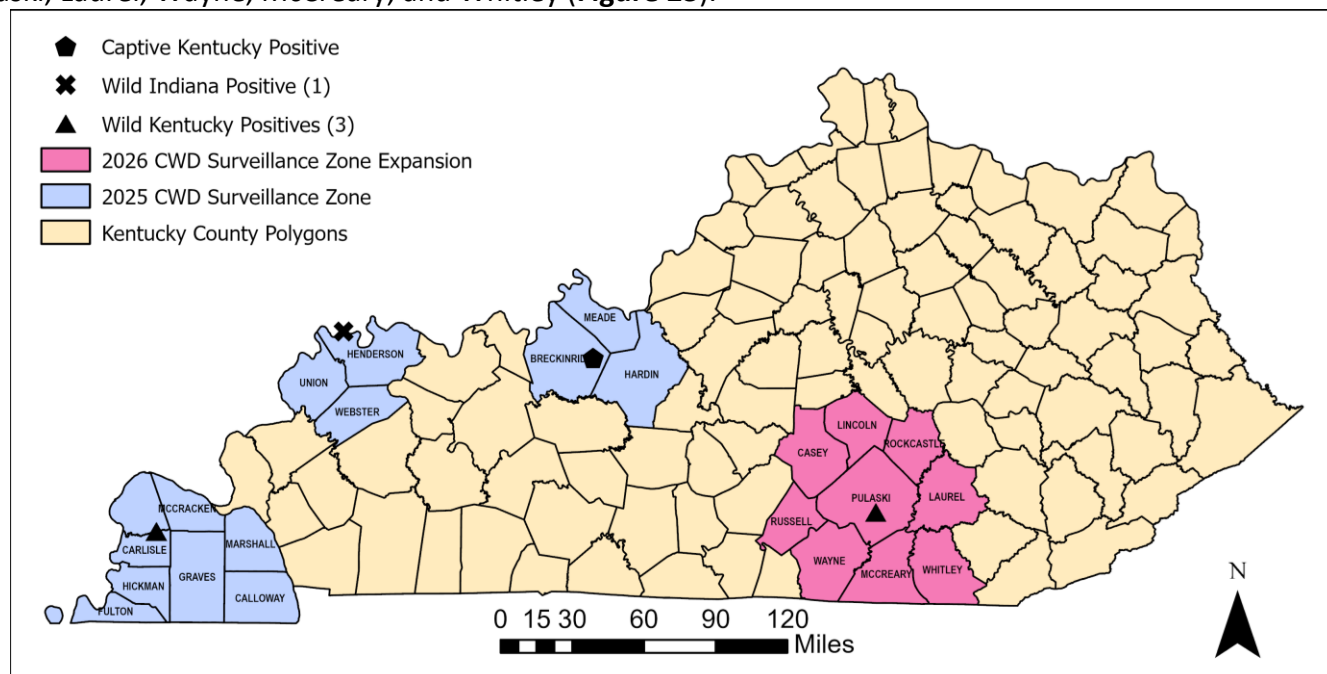


Figure 23. Chronic wasting disease (CWD) Surveillance Zones, 2025-26 (Blue) and 2026-27 (Blue and Pink)

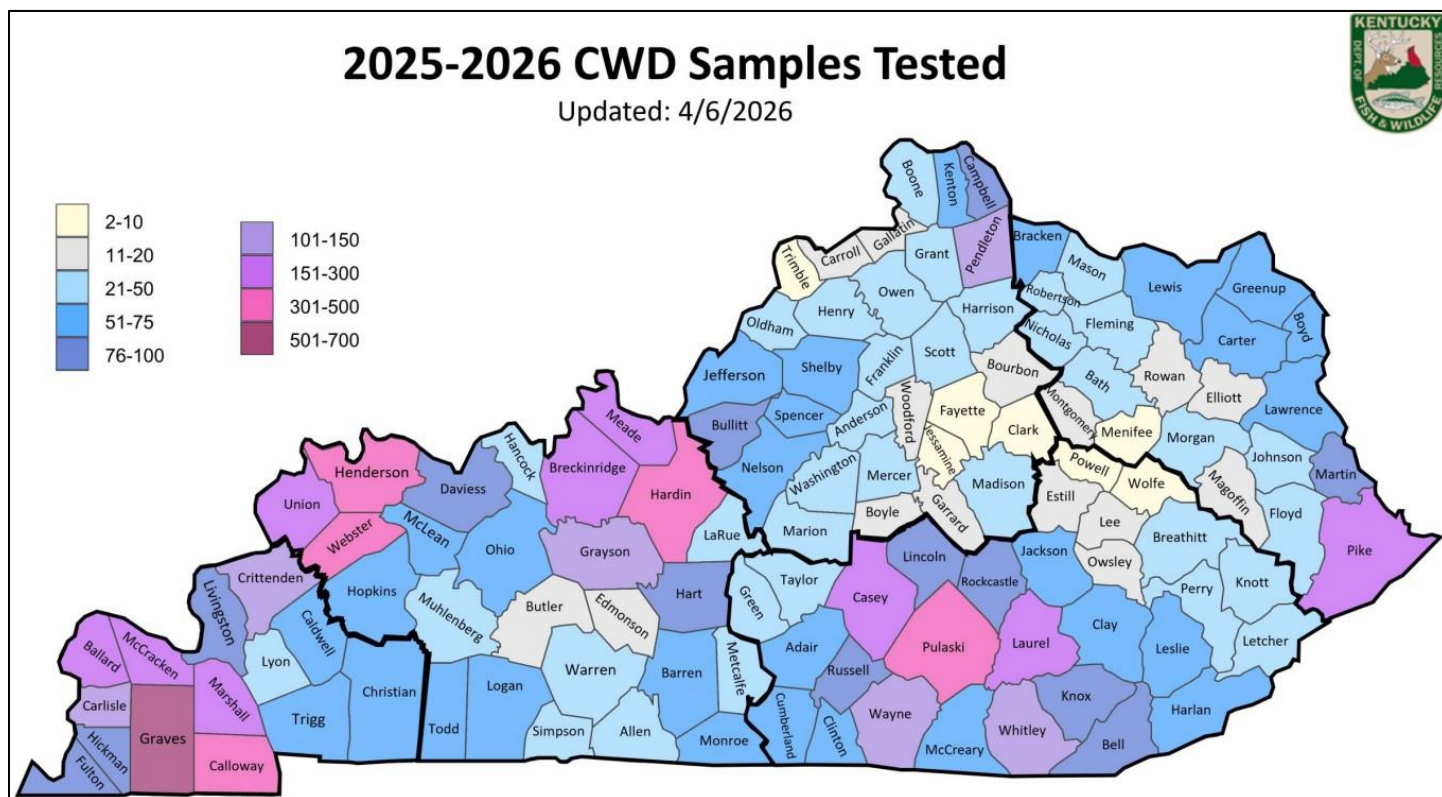


Figure 24. Final progress of CWD sampling per county, 2025-26.

Regulations for 2025-26

Under commissioner authority, two key changes went into effect for the 2025-26 season.

1. Baiting and feeding was allowed in all CWD Surveillance Zone counties, as long as it was not distributed by a contact feeder (e.g., troughs, funnels, gravity feeders without spreading abilities), giving hunters more tools to increase harvest in these areas.
2. A special two-day Antlerless Firearms Season was held on September 27-28, 2025 in all CWD Surveillance Zone counties. Hunters will be required to submit heads through [CWD Sample Drop-Off Sites](#) located throughout CWD Surveillance Zones. Over 600 antlerless deer were taken during this two-day season in its inaugural year.

Carcass Importation Law

In reference to 301 KAR 2:095: a person shall not import a cervid carcass or carcass parts that include any part of the spinal column or head. A person importing a legally taken cervid carcass or carcass parts may possess the items listed below:

- Antlers
- Antlers attached to a clean skull plate
- A clean skull
- Clean upper canine teeth
- Finished taxidermy products
- The hide
- Quartered or deboned meat

Contacts

Approximately 95% of Kentucky is privately owned. To successfully manage our wildlife resources, the KDFWR works cooperatively with Kentucky's private landowners. One of the essential ingredients in conserving Kentucky's wildlife resources is habitat improvement. Wildlife biologists are available to work with interested individuals or groups on properties that they own or have management authority on. KDFWR's Private Lands Program performed technical guidance visits on 56,031 acres for 731 private properties in 2025. Contact the local private lands biologist for assistance with wildlife management on your property.

