**RESOLUTION # 24**

**DEER IMPACTS ON AGRICULTURE**

**WHEREAS**, deer continue to be among the most crop-destructive types of wildlife in New Jersey with farmers reporting at least some damage to crops from deer browsing, including a third of farmers surveyed by the New Jersey Farm Bureau reporting at least $10,000 in annual crop damage from wildlife, primarily deer, and five percent reporting $50,000 or more in annual wildlife crop damage, and a Rutgers University study that targeted a smaller number of farms found similar statistics; and

**WHEREAS**, crop losses of this magnitude, and at this level of lost productivity, negatively impact farm viability in New Jersey; and

**WHEREAS**, an in-the-field analysis by Steward Green to estimate deer populations in eight study areas, encompassing more than 12,730 acres, or approximately 25 square miles, in Atlantic, Burlington, Cumberland, Hunterdon, Mercer, Monmouth, Passaic, Somerset and Warren counties revealed that there were on average, approximately 80-100 white-tailed deer per square mile in the areas covered by the study; and

**WHEREAS**, experts agree that a healthy and sustainable deer population density is far below what was found in the study, perhaps as low as five to 15 deer per square mile, and;

**WHEREAS**, the severe overpopulation in the areas studied has led to “economic loss from crop/landscape damage, automobile collisions, an increased risk of Lyme disease, as well as the continuation of depleted habitats that threaten New Jersey’s forest lands and other native wildlife”; and

**WHEREAS**, production agriculture farmers across the state are enduring unacceptable levels of crop damage, incur out-of-pocket costs for protection, change cropping decisions and also often have to hunt deer themselves on depredation permits in a constant effort to minimize monetary losses from over-abundant deer, and the overpopulation of deer in New Jersey also impacts the general public in the form of increased collisions between deer and automobiles on the state’s roads, the destruction of valuable home landscaping plants by deer feeding on those plants, destruction of understory habitat necessary for other wildlife species, disruption of forest regeneration, among other impacts; and

**WHEREAS**, there are 3,000 fewer hunters in New Jersey than there were just 10 years ago, according to the Department of Environmental Protection; and

**WHEREAS**, discussions on the subject have revealed that there is a lack of butchers willing to do the work needed to make Hunters Helping the Hungry successful, and continued funding in the State budget will help in recruiting butchers to do this important work; and

**WHEREAS**, the development of a commercial venison market and industry beyond community-feeding programs such as Hunters Helping the Hungry would help spur additional hunters and butchers involved in harvesting and processing deer for meat; and

**WHEREAS**, the New Jersey Legislature recently passed, and the Governor signed, a measure that establishes a deer-fencing program and accompanying funding for non-preserved farms, like the one that has existed for years for preserved farms, and that funding is critical, given the significant expense of installing deer fencing on a farm; and

**WHEREAS**, that program has not yet begun to be implemented due to language and administrative questions that lingered after it was signed into law; and

**WHEREAS**, a comprehensive, long-term, multi-species wildlife-management plan, including not only the times when the farmer’s crops are in the field but also when they are not, with a permit worded accordingly, is necessary to help New Jersey’s farmers plan for and carry out a consistent, goal-oriented management of wildlife, especially deer, that causes damage to crops and remains present on the farmland throughout the annual farming cycle; and

**WHEREAS**, it has been the responsibility, for nearly a half-century, of the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection to manage the state’s deer population, and the failure to do so (as evidenced by the current extreme overpopulation) has created this economic hardship for New Jersey’s agricultural industry, along with the rest of New Jersey’s residents; and

**WHEREAS**, confidence among farmers in the NJDEP Division of Fish & Wildlife’s ability and/or willingness to confront the issue is running low.

**NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED**, that we, the delegates to the 109th State Agricultural Convention, assembled in Atlantic City, New Jersey, on February 7-8, 2024, do hereby strongly urge that the Division of Fish & Wildlife continue to allow “baiting” with corn, apples and other produce for the hunting of deer, as it helps to improve both the safety and effectiveness of hunting in areas near residential development and provides a revenue source for farmers and food retailers.

**BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED**, that we oppose legislation that seeks to prohibit “deer baiting” by hunters in areas designated as “black bear habitat,” in part because the legislation fails to define “black bear habitat,” leaving open to interpretation of the Department of Environmental Protection what areas of the state in which someone could be charged with breaking the law, as well as leading to a further increase in the existing deer over-population that causes millions of dollars in crop damage a year.

**BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED**, that we urge that the responsibility for managing the state’s deer population be moved from the NJDEP and placed instead in the New Jersey Department of Agriculture, which understands and will consider both the agricultural and broader societal impacts of the deer population when making decisions about the management of deer.

**BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED**, that we urge further funding to be approved by the Legislature and Governor in the FY2025 budget for deer-fencing on non-preserved farms (preserved farms already having a dedicated source of funding for that purpose) to help farmers protect their crops from deer browsing and reduce the amount of accompanying financial loss, and that we urge that questions surrounding the measure previously passed for that purpose be addressed so that it can be fully implemented.

**BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED**, that we support the expansion of wildlife damage surveys and management plans for deer, as well as for other wildlife, for New Jersey, as well

as deer/wildlife damage research and education by the Rutgers/NJAES.

**BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED**, that we strongly urge the Legislature and Governor to continue providing funding in the State budget for Hunters Helping the Hungry so that venison gleaned from hunting can continue to be effectively donated to community feeding organizations, and for the Department to work toward establishing a commercial deer-hunting/venison-processing pilot program to demonstrate how a controlled reduction of the wild deer herd can be an additional source of meat, specifically the development of a broader venison market.