BRITISH COLUMBIA
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Winter Deer Feeding – *Important considerations for anyone who is considering winter deer feeding.*

Winter deer feeding has occurred across North America as part of both government managed ungulate programs, and as undertaken by private citizens who simply wish to connect to nature in their own way, keeping deer healthy and as a part of their lives. Typically private winter feeding programs conducted by individual landowners become more commonplace during more harsh or severe winters and while this can benefit deer populations, if not conducted with specific considerations to the nutritional requirements of deer in winter, can result in tragic consequences, in effect *killing them with kindness*.

Due to continued public interest for local deer herds across North America, many aspects of deer nutrition and the societal attitudes related to winter deer feeding, have been the subjects of many studies. Resulting from these works is a general policy statement from government and land management ministries that the public should not feed deer in any situation. At the same time, government ministries recognize that some citizens will still conduct their own feeding; if this is undertaken, the ministry would recommend:

1. **DON'T** feed *just* hay, or alfalfa, or corn, or wheat or barley; instead feed a mixture of corn and oats (1 part cracked corn to 4 parts oats). A pelleted ration made by Purina (and other manufacturers), can be purchased and is far superior to all other types of feed nutritionally, but this is more difficult to feed and is higher in cost than the 1:4 corn/oats mixture. Whatever type of food is provided, it is extremely important for the food supplier to ensure that the quality of food remains high. Wet, rotted or mildewed food can harm all wildlife including birds and deer, and cause infections, disease and even death.
2. **DON'T** start feeding until about mid-February and once started, feeding must continue until April or longer, depending upon the arrival of spring conditions. Feeding could occur earlier in severe winters (e.g., late January), but a deer's metabolism needs to undergo an annual cyclic pattern which is created through winter conditions and food supply. If feeding is started too early in normal winters, deer fail to complete this cycle and this may lead to the development of digestive problems. In severe winters deer complete this cycle in December and could benefit from feeding in January. This emergency situation is rare and the food supplier must consider the cost of the additional feed and time commitments. Deer would fare better in severe winters not being fed at all, rather than if they were fed in January and due to economic reasons, the feeding was stopped in February.

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3. **DON'T** feed deer sporadically or just on some weekends. Deer feed stations need to be checked at minimum, every 10 days, once the decision to start feeding has been made. Each 10 day feeding could require several 25kg bags of feed, and this feeding must continue until spring. When deer are fed artificial foods, their metabolism quickly speeds up and it cannot shut down as easily. Sporadic irregular feeding will do more harm than good and cause deer to burn up fat reserves that they require to survive through the spring green-up period.
4. **DON'T** place feed in wide open or inaccessible areas, or in areas that present a risk to deer. Areas such as roadsides, front lawns and open fields are poor locations. An individual must decide which is important to them; feeding deer for the good of the population, or feeding deer simply for viewing opportunities. Admittedly, there are locations that can address both points mentioned. The best feeding locations will be areas along traditional game trails and in locations that offer protection from deep snow accumulations, the weather and predators.
5. **DON'T** place feed in just one large pile as this will result in social stresses within the herd and increase physical conflicts and injuries as deer fight over the food. One-pile feeding also increases the potential for disease, parasite and sickness transmission between deer. Food placements should force the deer to move between small piles, thereby removing the territorial attitude some deer develop toward the feeding location; this will also reduce the predation risk of deer that return to feed. Small piles help ensure that the feed is completely eaten at each site and results in less waste food, while maintaining a better quality of the food provided.

Instead of supplemental feeding and the costs, liabilities and negative outcomes that can result, the ministry would recommend that concerned landowners incorporate habitat enhancements on their property to better enable deer to survive those harsh winters. Planting desirable food crops; leaving an outside row of crop around your fields for wildlife; planting or enhancing desirable food/fruit shrub and browse species; and creating habitat conditions in your forested areas that help deer to survive winter are far better solutions that ensure that natural deer populations are never out of alignment with the habitat's carrying capacity. Your cooperation in understanding the many risks and very limited rewards of operating feeding stations for deer is appreciated. *Please, don't kill your wildlife with kindness.*

For a more detailed information sheet, please contact the Ministry of Environment office in Smithers, at (250) 847-7260.

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