Developing Successful
Quality Deer Management Cooperatives

QDMA
INTRODUCTION

3 What is a Quality Deer Management Cooperative?

BENEFITS OF A QDM COOPERATIVE

3 Deer Herd Benefits
4 Hunter Benefits

ESTABLISHING A QDM COOPERATIVE

5 Planning an Organizational Meeting
6 Conducting an Organizational Meeting
6 Conducting a Follow-up Meeting
6 Membership in a New Cooperative
6 Accepting New Members
7 Case History — Crockery Creek Co-op
8 Dealing with Uncooperative Neighbors

ESTABLISHING GOALS & STRATEGIES

9 Antlerless Management Strategies
10 Buck Management Strategies
10 Habitat Management Strategies
10 Maintaining the Cooperative
11 Having a Successful QDM Cooperative

The QDMA is dedicated to ensuring the future of white-tailed deer, wildlife habitat and our hunting heritage.
Interest in improving white-tailed deer herd quality and hunting opportunities has increased greatly in recent decades. This interest has led thousands of landowners and hunters to implement deer management programs on the lands they own or hunt. However, many of these programs experienced limited success because the area under management was too small. As a result, many groups have abandoned their programs, while others have resorted to erecting high-fences. Other motivated hunters formed Quality Deer Management (QDM) Cooperatives. This publication provides a how-to guide for establishing and maintaining a successful QDM Cooperative.

What is a Quality Deer Management Cooperative?

A QDM Cooperative is a group of landowners and hunters willing to work together to improve the quality of the deer herd and hunting experiences on their collective acreage. Cooperatives vary in size, number of participants, and organizational structure depending on the needs and objectives of members. By forming a cooperative, members gain the management advantages of a larger landowner. Cooperatives are voluntary affiliations and in no way entitle neighboring hunters access to your property or diminish the landowner’s control. They are simply collections of landowners and hunters who agree to abide by specified deer management guidelines to improve management over a larger area.

** BENEFITS OF A QDM COOPERATIVE **

**Hunter Benefits**

Perhaps the most obvious benefit of a QDM Cooperative to hunters is the opportunity to hunt a high-quality deer herd containing an increased number of older bucks. However, there are numerous other benefits. One of the most important is the improved relationships with surrounding landowners and hunters. As groups unite in a common goal, they develop a sense of pride and accomplishment in their collective effort. This requires the establishment of honesty and trust — the two most important ingredients in a successful QDM Cooperative. Over time, this trust will result in the sharing of information and expertise that will improve the hunting and enjoyment for all involved.
QDM Cooperatives provide better control of illegal activities and management costs. In many cases poachers and trespassers go unnoticed because area hunters do not know who is authorized to hunt on nearby properties. All members should have a means of contact with one another and law enforcement to report any suspected illegal activities. Management costs may also be reduced. For example, it is more cost-effective to purchase lime, fertilizer, and food plot seed in bulk. Another possible benefit is the sharing of equipment or other resources.

QDM Cooperatives provide the opportunity to better manage the density, age structure, sex ratio, and distribution of the local deer herd. These characteristics are difficult to manipulate on small properties because deer may spend much of their lives on neighboring lands. This makes it nearly impossible to control deer density and improve buck age structure, and it is a leading reason why many QDM programs on small properties fail.

QDM Cooperatives also provide the opportunity to pool harvest and observation data, providing a more complete “picture” of the local deer herd and enabling more precise management recommendations to be established.

**ESTABLISHING A QDM COOPERATIVE**

The first step to establishing a QDM Cooperative is to identify a potential area. Generally, it is centered around a group of hunters already participating in or interested in establishing a QDM program. Aerial photographs and topographic maps can help determine the layout and distribution of habitat types on neighboring properties. In most cases, 2,000 acres or more are recommended. This may not always be possible, so adjust your goals accordingly.

Sometimes, identifying the landowners and hunters on neighboring properties will require some effort. One of the best ways is to talk with residents who have lived in the area for many years. They often know who owns most of the properties in the area. Other good sources include the county tax office, county agricultural extension agents, and regional wildlife biologists.

Once all the landowners and hunting groups have been identified, contact each personally and invite them to a meeting to discuss the possibility of forming a QDM Cooperative.

**Deer Herd Benefits**

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**Planning an Organizational Meeting**

The first step in planning an organizational meeting is to select a central meeting location, date, and time. In most cases, a community center, social club lodge, restaurant, hunting camp, or similar location is most appropriate. Determine the meeting date and time based on availability and proximity of attendees. If possible, provide a complimentary meal. It will increase attendance and demonstrate your level of commitment. In most cases, attendance at the initial meeting should be limited to landowners and key hunting club representatives. Ask them to RSVP by a certain date to get an idea of how many to expect.

It is also important to obtain the assistance of a wildlife
biologist with deer management experience. The biologist will help alleviate any concerns that you are just trying to “feather your own nest” and can answer biological questions relating to the benefits of a QDM Cooperative. There are several sources for wildlife biologists including state wildlife agencies, timber companies, private consulting groups, universities, and the Quality Deer Management Association. You may also want to include a representative from another successful cooperative and the local wildlife law enforcement officer.

As a final step, confirm the meeting specifics with each landowner and hunting club representative. Contact each by phone, then provide a written meeting invitation with the time, date, location, and directions. Invitations should be mailed two to three weeks prior to the meeting. Be sure to mention the biologist’s involvement in the meeting.

Some landowners or hunt clubs may not attend because they do not support QDM. Their resistance may be due to a lack of understanding of QDM, a lack of interest, or a reluctance to change. Do not press these individuals. Respect their right to dictate the type of management they desire on their properties. Often, they will join at a later date as they become convinced of the merits by other participants.

In most cases, the initial organizational meeting should be limited to landowners and key hunting club representatives. Invite an experienced wildlife biologist and, if possible, a representative from another successful cooperative.
Conducting an Organizational Meeting

Prior to conducting an organizational meeting, identify who will chair the meeting and introduce the biologist and any other speakers. It is best for the appointed spokesperson to welcome and introduce participants, provide a quick background on him or herself, and give a brief overview of the purpose of the meeting. It also is beneficial to distribute information on QDM and the benefits of a QDM Cooperative. Many of these items are available from the Quality Deer Management Association. Typically, few landowners or hunting groups will commit to participating during the initial meeting. Therefore, the stated intent of the initial meeting should be to explore the possibility of forming a cooperative, not to form the cooperative. This is an important distinction. Next, introduce the biologist and let him or her outline the benefits of the cooperative. Following this presentation, adjourn for the meal.

After the meal, the appointed spokesperson should regain the audience’s attention and outline how the cooperative could work. A brief written summary of key points can help generate discussion. These points should be very broad for the first meeting, with specifics determined in the follow-up meeting.

Conducting a Follow-up Meeting

Maintain frequent communication with all interested participants and hold the second meeting within two months at the same location. Hopefully, by the follow-up meeting, some landowners or hunting groups will have formally committed to establishing a cooperative. If so, make sure they are involved in the second meeting. This helps create a friendly atmosphere for others to join.

The follow-up meeting should begin with a quick recap of the first meeting. Next, begin securing commitments to the cooperative and establishing basic membership guidelines.

Membership in a Cooperative

Membership in a QDM Cooperative can be formal or informal. In general, the more properties and people involved, the greater the need for a formalized membership process. The membership process should include a simple written agreement signed by each landowner and club representative indicating they will abide by the established guidelines, though they may enact more stringent requirements on their own property.

It is a good idea to establish some formal acknowledgement of cooperative members such as property signs, vehicle decals, and/or membership cards. In most cases, no fee is attached to membership in the cooperative. Possible exceptions include costs associated with mailings to cooperative members, signs, decals, awards, or food for the annual meetings. If imposed, fees should be kept as low as possible to cover necessary expenses.

Accepting New Members

Hopefully, as the cooperative becomes successful, additional landowners and hunting clubs will wish to join. This is great but also deserves a few cautions. It is possible for a cooperative to become so large that it becomes unwieldy and inefficient.

The success of a QDM Cooperative is dictated by the quality and efforts of participants. New members can bring new excitement and new ideas but also may attempt to influence the direction of the cooperative. Before accepting a new member, existing members should review their current goals and policies and make these clear to prospective members.

Dealing with Uncooperative Neighbors

Uncooperative neighbors that do not follow the deer harvest guidelines may also limit management success. This is particularly true with young bucks being passed by members of the cooperative but harvested by non-members. Over time, some non-member groups can be encouraged to join. In other cases, a new landowner or hunting group may be necessary for positive change to occur.

Many property owners that do not allow hunting either do not understand the need to control their deer herds or may have continued on page 8
Ryan and Nate own property within a half mile of each other. Both had been thinking about starting a cooperative for a while. One day Nate drove over to Ryan’s when he saw him working outside. Both guys had noticed the “QDMA Practiced Here” signs they had on their properties and it prompted an easy start to a conversation. They had both been working with Michigan’s Cooperative Coordinator, had similar goals for the cooperative and even had the same cooperative name in mind.

Ultimately, they wanted to shape their local culture. Nate said, “having grown up being instructed to never talk about what you are seeing or where you are seeing them I was somewhat disenfranchised with the hunting community. Although hunting is often a solitary activity my goal was to create a culture where we can contribute to and celebrate one another’s success.” To see improved hunting satisfaction themselves, for their neighbors, and ultimately their children, in conjunction with building a true community was paramount. They held an initial meeting to seek out interest from their neighbors, and that night the cooperative officially kicked off with 500 acres. Just two years later their cooperative is over 5,000 acres.

They made a flyer and started going door to door promoting their first meeting and talking about deer management. Their initial goal was to build close neighbors and organically expand over the next 5-10 years. About 7 miles away the Ridge Cooperative was starting with Will and Jeff leading the effort. The two cooperatives decided to combine for educational events so they could have a larger group for guest speakers, yet work on the more local level when setting harvest goals.

The cooperatives meet a few times a year. They like to have an educational meeting to learn more about deer and habitat management. They share trail camera pictures with each other in the fall and discuss which bucks are shooters. They do not have determined criteria for which bucks are fair game, but do strive for an older age class and live by the example they hope their neighbors will embrace. After season they celebrate the hunt, in the spring they conduct a browse survey and in the summer a trail camera survey. They use that data along with observation data to help set antlerless harvest goals and to discuss realistic buck harvest goals. They also work with their local DNR biologist and Cooperative Coordinator as well with their planning.

Many of the neighbors have lived in the area for decades, but many don’t know each other. The biggest rewards that Ryan and Nate have experienced is the growth in relationships and communication. They are working with the farmers and bridging relationships, helping to reduce crop damage by harvesting increased antlerless deer as needed. The friendships that have developed because of these cooperatives have resulted in helping each other with habitat projects, purchasing bulk seed through the QDMA’s Conservation Seed Program and access to an incredible wealth of deer knowledge. The best part is now they are in community with other passionate deer hunters!
Regardless, never give up hope and keep these landowners and non-member groups informed of the activities and successes of the cooperative. Nothing will do more to encourage their participation in the future than to make it clear that they are missing out on the benefits of membership. It also is a good idea to encourage these landowners and hunters to attend QDM seminars or to join the Quality Deer Management Association. Once they gain a better understanding of QDM, they will be more likely to join the cooperative in the future.

If all else fails, recognize that some losses to neighboring properties will occur and manage accordingly.

**ESTABLISHING GOALS & STRATEGIES**

Once the QDM Cooperative is formed, realistic deer management goals and strategies must be established. The goals should be specific and measurable. Goals could include increasing the average body weight and/or antler measurements for a given buck age class, improving the adult sex ratio, and reducing the percentage of button bucks in the harvest. The time required to achieve these goals depends on the management strategies selected, habitat quality, and commitment level of participants.

Changes will not occur overnight, and participants should commit for a minimum of three to five years. Once goals are established, specific management strategies should be developed to achieve these goals.

**Antlerless Management Strategies**

As with buck management strategies, doe management strategies should be established with the assistance of an experienced deer biologist. Often, participants will restrict doe harvest to those at least 1½ years of age to minimize the harvest of buck fawns. Where available, QDM Cooperatives should work with existing deer management programs administered by the state wildlife agency or approved consultants under Deer Management Assistance Program (DMAP). These programs often allow greater flexibility for antlerless deer harvest. This greatly increases the ability to control deer density — a challenge in some areas. Some DMAPs have minimum acreage requirements which preclude small landowners from participating. However, most allow the minimum acreage requirement to be met through the formation of a cooperative.

Inevitably, some deer will be harvested that do not meet the harvest criteria. These animals still provide useful harvest data and every effort should be made to ensure they are reported. Initially, hunters making mistakes should be given the benefit of the doubt and dealt with leniently. However, increasingly severe penalties may be required for repeat offenders.

Collecting reliable harvest and observation data is critical to the establishment of sound harvest recommendations and tracking the success of the deer management program over time. Hunters may be reluctant to provide harvest and/or...
or observation data because they do not wish to reveal locations of deer sightings or harvests. One way to address this problem is for the hunters on each property to collect their harvest and observation data and supply it to a state or private wildlife biologist, a Co-op manager, or the QDMA sponsored Co-op Coordinator in your state after the hunting season for analysis. This person can remove any hunter- or property-specific details and compile a report for the entire cooperative. Such a report should include the total number of does and bucks harvested by age class, their physical characteristics, and how this information compares to the established goals of the cooperative.

Habitat Management Strategies

Another benefit of a QDM Cooperative is the ability to manage habitat over a larger area. Specific goals regarding the management practices (food plots, controlled burning, timber harvest, fertilizing native vegetation, etc.) and total acreage or percentage of each habitat type desired within the cooperative should be established. A good rule of thumb is to maintain a minimum of 2 to 3 percent of the cooperative in high quality food plots annually and an additional 5 to 10 percent in an early successional stage through burning, mowing, disking or applying selective herbicides. The use of an aerial photograph is necessary in identifying the best locations for each habitat type. It is recommended that a long-term habitat management plan be created for the entire cooperative.

Another useful habitat management strategy is the establishment of sanctuaries, areas that are not hunted. These areas provide a safe haven for bucks during the season and help reduce losses. Where possible, sanctuaries should be 50 acres or larger and contain thick vegetation. Also, habitat management efforts should be directed away from borders with uncooperative neighbors to encourage deer to spend a greater proportion of their time within the cooperative.

Buck Management Strategies

Initially, most QDM Cooperatives establish a mechanism to protect yearling and possibly 2 1/2-year-old bucks from harvest. Over time, other age classes also may be protected. Methods commonly used include antler restrictions, body characteristics, buck quotas, gross Boone & Crockett score, or limiting hunters to harvesting only those bucks they will have mounted by a taxidermist. The restriction selected should be area-specific and based on previous harvest data and recommendations from an experienced deer biologist. In some cases it may be necessary to allow buck harvest exemptions for youth, disabled, elderly, or other groups. These should be made cautiously and on a property-by-property basis.

Get Involved with a Local QDMA Branch!

For leaders of QDM Cooperatives, valuable assistance may be as close as your nearest QDMA Branch. QDMA Branches are local volunteer groups of QDMA members like you who work to promote Quality Deer Management in their local hunting community. With grassroots education efforts and fundraising, they promote better deer and better deer hunting through QDM. Existing educational events may help you spread the word among your neighbors, or you can volunteer to assist your Branch in hosting new events. If there is not a QDMA Branch near you, your QDM Cooperative can serve as the nucleus for a brand new Branch.

For more information, visit QDMA.com and contact your nearest QDMA Regional Director.
Maintaining the Cooperative

Once a cooperative is established, the challenge is to maintain it and promote participation by neighbors. Annual meetings will help, but interest may begin to wane over time. It is recommended that cooperatives meet at least once or twice annually to review progress and fine-tune goals. Many cooperatives meet prior to and following the hunting season.

The pre-season meeting should involve a review of the previous year’s harvest and observation data to establish objectives for the upcoming season. The post-season meeting provides an opportunity to review how well members adhered to the guidelines and any problems that arose. It also is a great time for members to bring the mounted heads, antlers, or photos of any harvested bucks for members to view.

Communication is critical to the success of a cooperative. This goes beyond the meetings. A social media page or contact list is a great way to share information to those that may not have been available for a meeting. It also can serve to pass along incidental information throughout the year, such as disease outbreaks. Finally, be patient, expect mistakes and obstacles, and always work as a team.

Having a Successful QDM Cooperative

Ensuring the success of a QDM Cooperative requires forethought, planning, and commitment of all members. Formulation of goals and expectations of the group requires considering local limitations of the deer herd and habitat. Therefore, a participating biologist should assist with goal setting. Every member must be committed to passing immature bucks for their cooperative to succeed. The field-judging skills needed to evaluate antler size and age “on the hoof” require
While a successful QDM Cooperative requires planning, patience, and commitment, the results can be impressive. Time and experience. Since recruiting more bucks into older age classes will take multiple seasons of hunter restraint, members must patiently await significant population changes. By setting realistic goals and expectations, establishing trust among participants, and working together effectively, QDM Cooperatives can achieve long-term success.