

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

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Weston Conservation Commission

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Town Land Managed for the Benefit of People, Plants, and All Wildlife

The Massachusetts Conservation Commission Act, passed in 1957, authorized each town in Massachusetts to establish a locally appointed municipal agency to plan for natural resource protection, acquire important land and water areas, and manage these properties for conservation and passive recreation. Since that time, the Weston Conservation Commission has protected about 2,000 acres of conservation land, established 100 miles of walking trails so that people can enjoy nature, and has become a model for dozens of communities. One of Weston's most treasured resources is the amount of protected open space for the enjoyment of present and future generations.

The Commission honors the Act's twin goals of conservation and passive recreation by managing conservation land for the benefit of the wild species that inhabit it, both flora and fauna, as well as by providing for passive recreation. The Commission undertakes its mandate to manage Weston's open space for the benefit of people, plants, and all wildlife by:

- Conducting firewood and timber harvesting to promote healthy forest regeneration.
- Treating hemlock trees to combat the invasive and harmful woolly adelgid.
- Monitoring habitat plots throughout town to assess ecological change over time.
- Caring for conservation land by marking property boundaries and inspecting them often.

Climate change and development threaten open space in Weston, as they do in many Massachusetts communities. However, there are other, more subtle threats, that will also have a deleterious effect on the land that many residents consider to be the heart of our community. Spreading invasive species and deer overpopulation are beginning to take their toll on the land we cherish.

Last year, the Commission embarked on a new objective: protecting Weston's wildflowers, shrubs, and ground-nesting birds by working towards an ecologically desirable level of deer density. Interest in this issue began when the Commission received a number of letters from residents urging the town to look into the problem of too many deer. Many residents felt that Weston needed to be proactive at managing a dense deer population that is defoliating suburban backyards and town forests, causing traffic accidents and contributing to the spread of Lyme and other tick-borne diseases. Following a year of study in 2011-2012, the Conservation Commission recommended, and the Board of Selectmen unanimously approved, a decision to allow carefully controlled deer hunting on 5 town conservation parcels during the fall hunting season.

Weston's first year of hunting on public land was free of incidents, and resulted in a deer harvest that will have a meaningful effect on numbers. Combined with the private hunting that occurs annually, 36 deer were harvested in Weston in 2012. The Commission believes that deer hunting, when added to the deer fatalities caused by car collisions and coyote predation, can slow the growth and eventually reduce the overall deer population. The program will be

monitored and re-evaluated annually. In addition to the hunting program, the Conservation Commission has initiated long-term scientific studies to assess the impact deer are having on the forest understory. Deer exclosures have been installed in three locations and vegetation growing within these “fenced off” areas will be compared with the vegetation growing in the adjacent “deer available” areas. Maple and buckthorn seedlings have been tagged and will be measured annually. The Commission will embark on its first annual lady’s slipper census this spring.

A group of citizens has filed a warrant article for town meeting. Article 20 would change the town’s general bylaws by prohibiting hunting of any kind on all town-owned land, thereby removing hunting as a land management tool.

Without this effective land management tool, the deer population will increase unabated. Weston will continue to see the adverse impact to ground nesting songbirds, forest regeneration, and spring wildflowers that have been abundantly documented in other places where high deer densities have become established. A bylaw change prohibiting deer hunting on conservation land removes the only practical tool the Commission has for maintaining a healthy forest and reduced deer density. The Commission asks for the support of residents at town meeting on May 15th for its holistic land management program. The Commission subscribes to Aldo Leopold’s Land Conservation Ethic: *“A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.”*