

HUNTING ON CHESAPEAKE FOREST LANDS

The Chesapeake Forest Lands are most of the former land holdings of the Chesapeake Forest Products Company. They are comprised of 460 parcels totaling more than 58,000 acres in the five lower Eastern Shore counties. In 1999 the State acquired half of these lands utilizing Program Open Space Funding and The Conservation Fund (on behalf of the Richard King Mellon Foundation) purchased the remaining half and then “gifted” the lands back to the State.

The Chesapeake Forest Lands have traditionally, been hunted (primarily for deer) by over 200 organized hunt clubs, many of these Clubs have continually leased these lands since the 1960’s. As a condition of the purchase, these clubs had permission to hunt individual tracts for a period of three years under a right-of-entry (ROE) agreement that was developed by the Department. The agreements identified the terms, under which the tracts could be hunted, specified a cost for this privilege and conditions of use which need to be followed. When the Chesapeake Forest lands were acquired, there were 223 ROE agreements on a total of 54,962 acres of Chesapeake Forest (94.4% of the total land area). The ROE agreements on the gifted lands, along with the remaining 82 ROE agreements on the DNR purchased lands were extended in 2001 to June 30, 2004, as a way to maintain a consistent management approach until a process could be identified on which lands would be opened to public hunting.

In 2002, the Department began a public planning process by forming a Citizens Advisory Committee. This group consisting of diverse representatives from the forestry, conservation and recreational community began to assist Forest Managers in the development of a Sustainable Forest Management Plan for Chesapeake Forest. In 2002, while the Department’s planning process was still underway, the Maryland General Assembly enacted SB 599, Natural Resources-Hunting and Licenses and Stamps, which was amended (on the recommendation of Delegate Kenneth Schisler, District 37B) to include Section 3: *“(1) it is the intent of the General Assembly that, in accordance with Sections 10-209 and 10-308.1 of the Natural Resource Article, the Department of Natural Resources utilize special fund revenue generated as a result of the licensing fee increases under this Act, as appropriate, in order to open to public hunting at least half of the total acreage that is leased for hunting to private individuals on the properties known as the Chesapeake Forest lands by the 2005-2006 hunting season.”*

As a first step in meeting the requirements of SB-599, the Department opened several tracts during 2002 for public use. These tracts include, the Vantor and Lathrop tracts, which comprise 455 acres in Wicomico County. They encompass a hiking trail that demonstrates various forest practices however this area is not open to public hunting, due to possible conflicts in use. The DeWolf, Osborne, and Mansion Farm tracts in Dorchester County, the Cordrey and Whitesburg tracts in Worcester County, which total 1,553 acres, were open to public hunting as well as other uses. The Buck Harbour tract in Worcester County totaling 318 acres was also opened for hunting but is restricted to wheel chair access through an agreement with the Wild Turkey Federation. In this first year, the Department had decided not to impact any existing club agreements, so no hunt clubs occupied any of the tracts identified above.

In the 2004 Legislative Session, two additional bills relating to hunting on Chesapeake Forest were introduced and ultimately failed. As a result of the legislative and public

deliberations, a consideration of numerous alternatives and in accordance with the intent of SB 599, the Department decided to implement a hunting program that is a combination of public and club hunting. Using a specific set of guidelines, tracts suitable for public use were identified. These tracts were opened over a two-year period in order to have sufficient time to develop parking areas, mark boundaries and install gates. During the 2004/2005 hunting season 12,178 acres were opened and an additional 13,897 acres were opened for the 2005/2006 hunting season. On the remaining tracts, the hunt clubs that previously had ROE agreements were offered an opportunity to enter into a State lease for the same tracts for a five-year period which the vast majority of the Clubs did. As Clubs decide to give up their lease, these Chesapeake Forest tracts will go into a lottery system to be made available to other Hunt Clubs. At the end of the five year lease period Hunt Clubs that have satisfactorily met all the conditions of their lease will be offered an additional five year lease renewal. At the end of the lease renewal period all of the leased tracts will be placed back into the lottery system.

These lease agreements have provide an important source of revenue (estimated at \$350,000/year), which helped support land management activities on the entire forest. The hunt clubs also provide important services in terms of land management, such as maintaining roads and trails, minimizing trespass, reporting illegal dumping and other activities.

Information on the lottery for the club hunting program is located on the main Chesapeake Forest webpage. More detailed information on management of the properties that comprise Chesapeake Forest Lands can also be found on the main page by clicking on the link for the Sustainable Forest Management Plan.