

Email Exchange with Washington State Fish & Game: Wildlife Biologist June 2015:

Question: There are conflicting concerns in our community on Whidbey Island. Some people love to feed the deer. Many people are concerned about what is being fed to the deer. The coats on our deer families look as if they have some sort of disease. There is also concern what is being fed to the deer is causing the deer diarrhea which isn't good for them, yards, our water system.

No one wants to become the "police". Our community board of directors thought best to provide information to our community members. That allows each individual to decide what is best for our environment, deer and of course their personal property.

Answer: The health problem you are seeing on Whidbey is a condition called "hair loss syndrome" http://wdfw.wa.gov/conservation/health/hair_loss/index.html. Deer congregating in one place and feeding them non-native, non-wild food(s) probably exacerbate the problem for deer on Whidbey, but we see it in fully wild animals that aren't being fed by people too.

Feeding deer corn and apples no doubt causes diarrhea, which you saw in our staff veterinarian's article http://wdfw.wa.gov/living/winter_feeding/wildlife.html. We try to impress this upon people who insist on feeding wildlife. Food and meal sharing is a vital part of all human cultures so it's darned hard to get people to understand that this is a human value and they are not helping wildlife when they feed them.

The deer population on all of the islands in Puget Sound is very high because the only predators are humans and their cars. Whidbey once had bears, cougars, wolves who kept the deer (and elk) populations in check.

It's a real challenge to convince some people that their intended kindness is cruelty and the best thing we humans can do for wildlife is keep them wild.