Dr. Deer's™ PRESCRIPTION

Do I Need A Fence? Part 1 of 2

By Dr. James C. Kroll, Ph.D.

One of the most pleasurable things I do all year is participate in the annual Texas Trophy Hunters Assocation's three Hunters Extravaganzas. Attending the trio of shows is one of the ways I learn about what's on your mind and what's going on out there in the woods or brush.

Talking with people is a treat, but sometimes I'm exasperated by the things some folks say.

"We just got into a management program," one guy volunteered, "and we've high-fenced our ranch."

Well, that was interesting, but on questioning the fellow, he managed to convince me he wasn't "managing" his deer herd at all, but rather he somehow equated a fence with management. When you add in what a hot-button topic fencing is and the amount of misinformation on both sides of the issues, I decided to devote this column to helping you, first, decide if fencing your property is the right thing to do, and second, whether you own property or not, learn about the facts related to high fences.

What Should I Consider?

One of the things I remind landowners about is that putting up a high fence is a serious decision. First there's the cost, which is substantial. At today's steel prices and labor, you're looking at somewhere between $18,000 to $20,000 per mile. Second, and probably just as important, when you fence your property, you're taking on the welfare of your deer from that day forward or until you take down the fence. That is a serious decision that cannot be taken lightly, so let me walk you through the thought processes of taking this significant step in your management program.

First you need to ask why you want to fence your property in the first place. Is this a decision made just because "everyone else is doing it," or is there a legitimate reason for building a fence?

We conducted a research project some time ago on why people high-fence their property. The No. 1 reason was "frustration." I often have said that the average deer hunter sees a buck for three seconds—deer, buck, *boom*! Landowners who genuinely try to manage for quality bucks tire quickly of letting a young buck go,

To fence or not to fence: Make sure you thoroughly weigh the pros and cons of putting up a high fence around your property. Once you do, you're going to have to live with whatever genetics wind up inside.



Faith Delgado Photo

only to have it shot by a neighbor. That's when the fence goes up. In fact, my investigations seem to support that the very first high fence in the Texas Hill Country was a simple barrier fence between two neighbors, one erected for those very reasons just listed. I've also often said there's no such thing as a "partial" fence. The barrier fence quickly turned into a perimeter fence, and high-fencing was underway.

Here's a question for you: who built the first deer-proof fence in the U.S.? Answer, George Washington. In fact, as far back as the early Romans, landowners have attempted to control the movements of game animals using some type of barrier (the Romans used a wooden stockade fence for this purpose). This immediately created all the fussing and fighting we see between neighbors today. However, the high fence is not the first fence to have created public perception problems. Truly, all the arguments you hear today about high fences are exactly those made during the 1800s about barbed wire fences—"The land is free and it isn't right to fence wild cattle in!" was the cry then.

Is A High Fence For Me?

A high fence is in your future if the answer is "yes" to the following questions:

- Is your property of sufficient size to support a viable habitat and herd?
- Do your neighbors consist of very small properties or absentee landowners who do not have a serious interest in quality deer management?
- Do you have the resources and ability to provide a healthy environment for your animals?
- Do you have clear goals as to what you are trying to accomplish?
- Are there genetics problems with the resident deer herd?

One thing I never get into is the discussion of how big a property should be to high-fence it—and that's a trap the anti-management, anti-hunting folks love to deploy. The fact is you can have a fair chase situation with as little as 100 acres of high-quality deer habitat, given a reasonable density of deer and proper hunting techniques. It also is a fact you can have 3,000 acres of land tha does *not* satisfy these criteria! Size is not the issue, habitat quality and nature are.

I often hear professional biologists insist the answer to producing bette bucks on small tracts is cooperative: The folks who support this idea gen erally come from the Hill Country, where resident landowners with lon standing family traditions abound. I other areas, such as East Texas, ther are numerous smaller holdings and many absentee landowners, making cooperatives difficult to assemble if not impossible. Even in South Texas there are ranches bordered on all sides by "ranchitos," with deer blind distributed around the edges of lanc being managed for trophy bucks.

Deer should be able to do very well on the habitat that exists on your property. That means there has to be good habitat present and you have to be committed to managing that habitat. Activities such as burning, brush management, grazing manipul tion, tree harvesting and thinning are all expensive and must be conducted

regular intervals. Supplemental feeding and food plots also are necessary to support a fenced herd. All of these things cost substantially, and you have to go into it with that realization.

What this boils down to is that, if you think a high fence is the only component of management, then walk away from it. You need to establish exactly what you're trying to accomplish in your management program. Are your goals realistic? How many bucks do you want to take annually? What kind of bucks (quality or trophy) do you want to produce?

Too many times I've heard agency biologists tell landowners to "live with the deer they have on the property." I'm here to tell you, when you fence a property, you experience what biologists call "genetic drift." With high-fencing, you essentially reach into a population of deer and randomly pull out a sample, i.e., you're going to have to live with the genetics of the deer that end up inside the fence. For instance, if you're in an area where bucks have been hammered over the years, more than likely the genetic composition of this confined herd is subpar. Yes, you probably can extract genes that eventually will produce good bucks, but my research shows it will take about 20 years to do so. Since the average guy purchasing property or already owning property is older than 50 years, this doesn't make much sense, and that means you'll probably have to stock better genetics, which, of course, increases the cost of the management program.

So you see, there are lots of things to consider before you invest in fencing your property. In the next installment of this two-part series, I'll discuss the criticisms and concerns expressed by laymen and professionals about high fences, giving you an objective base from which to make decisions. We'll see how the old dictum, "Many a beautiful theory has been murdered by a ruthless gang of facts," holds true.

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