Testimony to PA Senate Agriculture Committee

4/4/2007 – Lake Ladore, Wayne County

Submitted by Robin Wildermuth, Consulting Forester
and Volunteer w/ Quality Deer Management Association

Good afternoon. My name is Robin Wildermuth. I am a graduate biologist and forester, I operate a forest consulting business and I am Acting President of the NEPA Branch of Quality Deer Management Association. I would like to share some thoughts on the current issues with regeneration of our forest resources and also on the potential of wood energy in our rural communities.

As you are no doubt aware, our current forest resource consists of maturing stands of timber which originated around the turn of the century from heavy cutting or from farmland abandonment. A tremendous hardwood forest grew back which has made PA the largest producer of hardwood lumber in the nation. This resource has been an asset for our rural landowners, providing necessary income for farmers and hunt clubs. It has also provided habitat for our game species, particularly deer. Regenerating these forests and improving habitat value has become a frustrating and expensive proposition and in most cases fails.

Our forests regenerate or heal themselves from disturbance by relying on a "bank" of seed, seedlings, saplings, and shrubs which in combination are called the understory of the forest. When mature trees die, blow down, or are cut, the understory responds with a flush of growth to fill the opening. Thick understory growth provides a ready supply of food and cover for wildlife including deer. When the understory of the forest is healthy, extensive tree mortality or even poorly planned timber harvesting still has a good chance of successfuly regenerating the forest.

Our current problems with forest regeneration are complex and include several factors:

First, the deer herd has been over the carrying capacity of the habitat since the 1960's and the understory has been decimated by overbrowsing in many areas leaving only ferns,

beech brush or huckleberry. Thick, diverse understory can produce 10X the food supply for deer as an open forest, so as deer hunters, our organization realizes we have to build the habitat back in order to expect more deer numbers. In addition research shows a smaller, healthy deer herd can reproduce itself at 2-3X the rate of a weak herd in terms of fawn production. We support the Game Commission's efforts to manage the deer herd based on indices of reproduction and habitat health.

Second, much like the selective browsing of deer, poorly planned "selective" logging to take the best trees of high value and leave smaller trees, low value species, or poor quality trees has depleted the seed production capability of our forests. With the best seed trees gone, regeneration becomes more difficult. Low value timber stands also can't support the cost of herbicide and fence treatments which often necessary and can cost up to $600/acre, making it financially difficult to get landowners to invest in our next forest.

Additionally, invasive species have caused continual problems in our forests and there is no sign this will change. Gypsy moth, hemlock wooly adelgid, beech bark disease, and chestnut blight are all major factors in mortality of trees locally and were all introduced from other countries. Emerald ash borer will be the next one to sweep across the area, removing another species from our mix of options. Invasive plant species are creating problems by taking over the understory. Acid rain has added to the stress on our forests and soils. These problems will increase which makes it even more urgent that we solve regeneration problems before it becomes more difficult.

I would ask that you support the PGC's current direction to balance the deer herd and to also support any efforts to provide research, education or cost share funds to landowners who are struggling to establish forests for the next generation.

To switch gears, I have also been following the wood energy industry for 25 years or more and remain puzzled why more is not happening in Pennsylvania. I mentioned the accumulation of low value growing stock in our forests from poor forest management decisions. We have lost jobs and markets from the closure of at least 2 pulpmills in the

state which provided markets for approximately 1.5 million tons of low grade wood. Why not promote wood energy as alternative markets for this material?

Markets would provide options for landowners interested in proper management. Wood is renewable and growing forests would recapture carbon dioxide released from combustion, making it carbon neutral. Wood combustion is low in sulphur and nitrous oxide emissions and ash. It would keep money and jobs in our region versus adding to our foreign debt and complicating national security. The technology is in use throughout the world to combust or gasify wood to produce electricity, steam, or wood gas for turbines. Methanol production is fairly straight forward using the same process proposed for the Schuylkill County coal dirt gasification project and ethanol production is on the verge of becoming competitive. The logging force is in place and would react to the opportunity to supply new low grade wood markets. Many other states are well beyond PA in the use of wood energy. New England just had 2 more 50 MW electric generating facilities announced and GA has a wood waste to ethanol plant in the planning stages. With our wood producing heritage and our proximity to energy demand, why aren't we promoting this industry to strengthen our rural economies?

Thank you for your time.