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Deer, Lyme create worry Officials want state to focus on problems

Author: Dirk Perrefort

STAFF WRITER

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BROOKFIELD -- Elected officials from throughout the region agreed Friday to issue a letter urging state officials to put more focus on Lyme disease and to control the area's deer population.

Members of the Housatonic Valley Council of Elected Officials, a regional planning agency made up of chief elected officials, voted to send the letter to Gov. M. Jodi Rell.

"We recently received a letter from the governor's office about the potential hazards of West Nile virus and to be on the alert," said Redding First Selectman Natalie Ketcham, who proposed the letter. "While the governor's letter was appropriate, there have been nine cases of West Nile virus in the state since 2003 and 60,000 cases annually of Lyme disease."

Ketcham said she wants the group to send the letter so state officials will put the issue on their "radar screen" and urge the state Department of Environmental Protection and the state Department of Public Health to work together.

"The state has promoted the aggressive control of the mosquito population in order to combat West Nile virus but has failed to exert an equivalent effort to control the deer populations in order to combat Lyme disease," the letter said.

"Lyme disease is a far more serious vector-transmitted infection that has both severe short- and long-term consequences for those who contract it. ... Lyme disease can cause chronic and disabling neurological damage."

Sherman First Selectman Andrea O'Connor, who contributed to the letter, said she hopes state officials will make the issue a priority.

"Although there are a lot of people who like Bambi visiting in their backyard and don't feel like shooting them, there are alternative ways to deal with the deer overpopulation in the state," O'Connor said, noting Sherman has the highest rate of Lyme disease in the area.

"Both the environment and the deer themselves are suffering from the overpopulation."

Newtown First Selectman Herb Rosenthal said other tick-borne illnesses could also be addressed by reducing the deer population.

Ketcham said officials with the South Western Regional Planning Agency, which includes Wilton, Weston, Norwalk and Westport, have expressed an interest in signing the letter.

"We all know people who have had serious consequences from Lyme disease," Rosenthal said. "What we are really talking about here is prevention."

Anthony Marr, founder of Heal Our Planet Earth, will give a free presentation on suburban deer management at 7 p.m. Thursday in the Newtown Meeting House, 31 Main St., Newtown.

Contact Dirk Perrefort at dperrefort@newstimes.com or at (203) 731-3358.