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Soybeans Legitimate Supplement Feed for White-tail Deer

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Editor's Note: This is the second in a two-part series on supplemental feeding of white-tail deer.

When it comes to sustained production of quality white-tail deer in Southeastern habitats, nutrition is the key. Decades of observation, literature review, and experimentation have provided overwhelming evidence that the steady decline in average body and antler size in Southeastern white-tails is a result, not of "bad genes," but of poor nutrition.

One long-term research project supporting the importance of nutrition began in 1985, with the collection of fawns at random from across Alabama. Researchers successfully raised 31 male fawns and a comparable number of females, weaning all to a pellet ration that research has shown meets the year-round nutritional requirements of white-tailed deer. At 17 months of age, the yearling bucks weighed an average of 128 pounds and averaged 4.1 antler points. The average weight of the antlers was 150 grams.

In the next stage of the project, the three "best" and three "worst" males were selected from this group, based on antler and body size. Each of these was bred to four females randomly selected from the captive herd. When evaluated at 18 months of age, the offspring of the "superior" bucks were comparable to those sired by the "inferior" bucks. Average weight was 141 pounds, with antlers averaging 4.6 points and 242 grams in weight.

The most interesting observations came when this group of bucks was 2.5 years old. They weighed an average of 198 pounds, significantly higher than the average body weights and antler points from the yearling male deer taken by hunters from the various game management areas throughout Alabama. In 1998-1999, the averages were 109 pounds and 3 points; in 1999-2000, the averages dropped to 103 pounds and 2.6 points.

The data illustrate that inadequate nutrition, not genetics or age, is the primary barrier to producing a sustained yield of quality white-tails.

Looking to Soybeans

To help address the nutritional deficiencies that exist among wild deer that eat only natural foods, researchers launched a three-year study into using raw, whole soybeans as supplemental feed for captive white-tails. A control diet of a low-protein (8 percent), low-energy (+/-55 percent TDN) was established to approximate the natural diets available to wild deer in Southern habitats.



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