

FACTS PROVE SATURDAY DEER OPENER DIDN'T WORK.

By Randy Santucci

When the PGC Board of Commissioners changed the Monday deer opening day, moving it two days earlier to Saturday, only one day after Thanksgiving, their reasoning was completely refuted by all evidence they are required to assess. I have tracked opinion and PGC license sales data for the 3-year test period promised by the agency, and the case is clear that the Monday opener should be restored.

It is not cheap taking out these advertisements, but I feel all hunters should know the facts. To sum it up, "speculation" rather than science drove the original Saturday opener decision. Ignoring the 2017 PGC hunter survey, which showed 65 % opposed changing from Monday, and 82 % of hunter contacts to the agency opposed the change also, plus a significant number of hunters contacting legislators were in opposition. What should have been the trump card - their staff survey science analyzing several of their hypothetical Saturday opener benefits came back not supporting their positions. Again, speculation rather than science ruled the day. All the data pointed against changing the traditional Monday opener.

Fast forward three years, and let's review where things stand. The change has seen continued strong opposition from many hunters. If this was a good decision, one would have certainly believed the opposition would have waned, but it hasn't. Bad ideas rarely correct themselves. On December 19th 2021, an outdoor writer for Lancasteronline.com, did a story titled "Three years in, plenty of PA deer hunters say they "hate" the Saturday gun opener" and the consensus among those hunters interviewed was they want the Monday opener back.

Although the 2019 opposition voices and data were truthfully strong enough to not change the Monday opener, 3 years in, declining license sales just strengthen the position that this was a mistake. In addition, the 3-day buffer lost after Thanksgiving has proven to be needed to button up family issues, finalize hunting related issues, allow time for rural economic participation, and allow time for a large portion of camp hunters as well as other traveling hunters to accomplish many tasks leisurely, rather than at a ridiculously rushed pace. A lot of hunting related activities, fundraising events and mentorship time have died since the Saturday change. Over and over, 'no time' or 'too rushed' are the statements understandably heard far and wide across the state.

People have said if we didn't like the Saturday start, we can wait until Monday to hunt. Well, the reverse is true. If people didn't like the Monday opener, they could've waited for a Saturday to hunt.

There are two main categories that would be primary indicators of Saturday opener impact, adult and youth resident license sales. From 2018, (the year prior to the Saturday opener change), youth sales have continued dropping respectively in 2019, 2020 and 2021 the Saturday opener 'test' years (-5,963). Adult resident sales also dropped by (-11,855). These two categories strongly influence the future of Pa. hunting, and certainly were high in the minds of the commissioners when changing the opener. This could be the most disappointing and serious failure surrounding the Saturday opener theory.

The PGC surveyed college age hunters and the agency's Dr. Coren Jagnow told the commissioners from her survey, "Most students stated they would miss class for a lot less reasons than the opening day of deer season" so simply put, most college students would not be influenced by the Saturday opener. In summary the youth sales continued to decline, and a majority of college age students were not affected with this change as speculated.

Moving up the age scale, the PGC claimed hunters new in the workforce would have no vacation time to take off Monday, and would buy a license due to a Saturday opener. After the first Saturday opener in 2019, the 22- to 34-year-old age category of hunting license buyers, certainly the most representative of young hunters entering the work force, increased by only 12...yes 12 licenses statewide!

That brings us to our adult and senior hunters, coincidentally by far the largest segment of hunters in Pennsylvania. Many of these hunters have strong hunting roots anchored in the soil of tradition, hunting with friends and family; young and old. Some from hunting at camps, and many from traditions resulting from having time within the after-thanksgiving weekend. Camaraderie and fellowship are as important as hunting itself to this group (again our largest).

Adult resident license sales spiked up from Covid in 2020 over 2019 by 17,819 licenses which was an anomaly, and identified as such by the PGC, but all of that increase and 7,563 more were lost in 2021.

The Saturday opener did nothing to retain this increase of license buyers as adult and Junior license sales dropped in 2021. As stated, prior, adult resident sales today are behind 2018 before the Saturday opener was implemented.

The Saturday opener has now been proven to not be better for our youth, adult hunters, overall license sales or the sport in general.

Sadly today, many hunters that preferred the Monday opener, somehow were led to believe the PGC decision in 2019 was based on research and factual truths, accepting the Saturday opener would make our sport better and bring in young hunters. Although possibly done with good intentions, the Saturday opener was little more than a 'shot in the dark' that missed. I wonder if those hunters would still "go along to get along" knowing the Saturday was initiated from speculation, and 3 years in, youth sales have dropped incrementally each year of the Saturday opener. Commissioner Daley analyzed the opposition data gathered in 2019 which caused him to astutely withdraw his Saturday opener proposal. He ultimately resigned from the PGC board over this miscarried decision. The PGC always claimed they "Follow the Science" the new science now seems to be speculation regardless of the outcome.

I implore the board to correct a wrong, and do away with the Saturday opener and change it back to Monday. Put the Sunday the following week creating 13 days of continuous rifle deer hunting.

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