

## Dear Certification Specialist...

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*I have a lot of issues with deer. They are treating my farm like a salad bar. I have tried to keep them out, but I am at my wit's end. Is there any advice you can give me?*

*Signed,  
Oh Deer!*

Dear Oh Deer!,

As a certification specialist, I am restricted from giving advice by the NOP. However, Caleb Goossen, MOFGA's Crop and Conservation Specialist, can. He wrote the following in response to your question.

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**T**hough they can be picturesque, deer on the farm can cause real economic harm and pose a food safety concern. Dealing with deer is best accomplished preemptively by excluding them, rather than scrambling to react to feeding damage. It's hard to deter or repel deer once they realize just how tasty your "salad bar" is. Autumn brings more complication as summertime wild browse species disappear and deer look for other food sources.

With deer prevention, nothing is more true: an ounce of prevention is truly worth a pound of cure. By "training" the local deer to avoid your fields, you can hopefully keep them away from your crops before they can do any damage, instead of trying to keep them out after they have caused harm - and gotten a taste for the crop!

The gold standard for keeping out deer is a contiguous perimeter of metal deer fencing, at least eight feet tall. Installation of these fences can be expensive, but they require less labor than maintaining

temporary electric fences. I've heard many farmers say that the peace of mind was worth more than anything.

**T**emporary electric fencing is probably the most common and second most effective approach to excluding deer - though the devil is in the details. Many people have their preferred setups, swearing by added height, double-perimeter fences, or other complicated setups. Often a simple, single perimeter, double course of polytape electric fence is enough to do the trick - with a few important caveats. First and foremost is getting the fence up before your local deer know that there is something they want to eat within it. Second is training your local deer to know to avoid your electric fence. This is accomplished by baiting the fence with peanut butter, lightly smeared on the top row of polytape fencing every six to eight feet (with the power turned off during application!). It may seem a little mean to lure deer into getting a zap on the nose, but it can prevent the need for lethal controls. Reapply the peanut butter every few weeks to reinforce the training of your local deer population, as they'll keep testing the fence. It's also critical to maintain the fence by monitoring the output of the fence charger and cutting grass that can grow up to touch the fence and partially ground it (lowering it's "zap"). If conditions have been dry, you may need to dump water on the soil around the charger's grounding rods to maintain good electrical conductivity to ground. Remember though that nothing will stop hungry deer if they already know that tasty greens are inside the fence!

Wildlife Game Warden, Andrew Smart, generously shared his insights on dealing with deer pressure. Overall, he reports fewer calls about deer this year from farmers than he did last year, and he chalks that up to an abundance of acorns this year, a preferred wild food source for deer.

To repel and deter deer, Andrew recommends a couple tricks. The first is simply a trash bag attached loosely to a fence post so that it can flap in the breeze. Motion deterrents shouldn't be relied on for

more than a couple weeks because deer will soon get comfortable and ignore them. For more efficacy, try moving motion deterrents to new locations or using them intermittently through the season. The second trick that Andrew suggested is putting a radio out in the field at night. This technique has been useful for keeping deer out of his strawberries for almost two months, so far.

Regarding odor-based repellents, Andrew and I both agree: they can be very effective if re-applied when needed (rain can wash them away), but regular applications of most commercial formulations can get too expensive to provide a cost-effective control.

**A**ndrew also mentioned depredation permits as an option for commercial farmers as a "measure of last resort" to deal with a small population of deer that can no longer be effectively kept out of a crop. These permits allow a farmer to hunt off-season and at night, but only in the affected crop area. Andrew made it very clear that depredation permits are rarely provided, and he suggested that the significant damage which would justify a permit is usually enough economic incentive for a farmer to have a permanent exclusion fence installed. Farmers can contact local game wardens for more information about these permits.

While depredation permits may not be a viable solution for many, Andrew suggested that farmers should consider inviting hunters onto their land as an effective way to reduce deer pressure on an ongoing basis. He suggested that bow hunting is best, because its October start time catches deer when they aren't yet nervous about rifle hunting (and while they are still in their bad habits of checking out your crops!) Farmers can contact local game wardens to be connected with bow hunters and other deer hunting permit holders.

