

Oakley mayor: Fish, Game 'can stay out of town'

By Ken Levy
Times-News correspondent

OAKLEY - Frustrated Department of Fish and Game officials complain they continue to be stonewalled in their attempts to set up a deer hunters' check station in Oakley.

And that makes it difficult for them to track the area's deer populations and talk to small-community hunters, they say.

Carl Nellis, regional director for Fish and Game in Jerome, said the conflict began in 1994, when Oakley Mayor Dennis Smith, City Councilman Gary Lloyd and others were cited by Fish and Game enforcement officers on charges of illegal hunting activities in southeast Idaho.

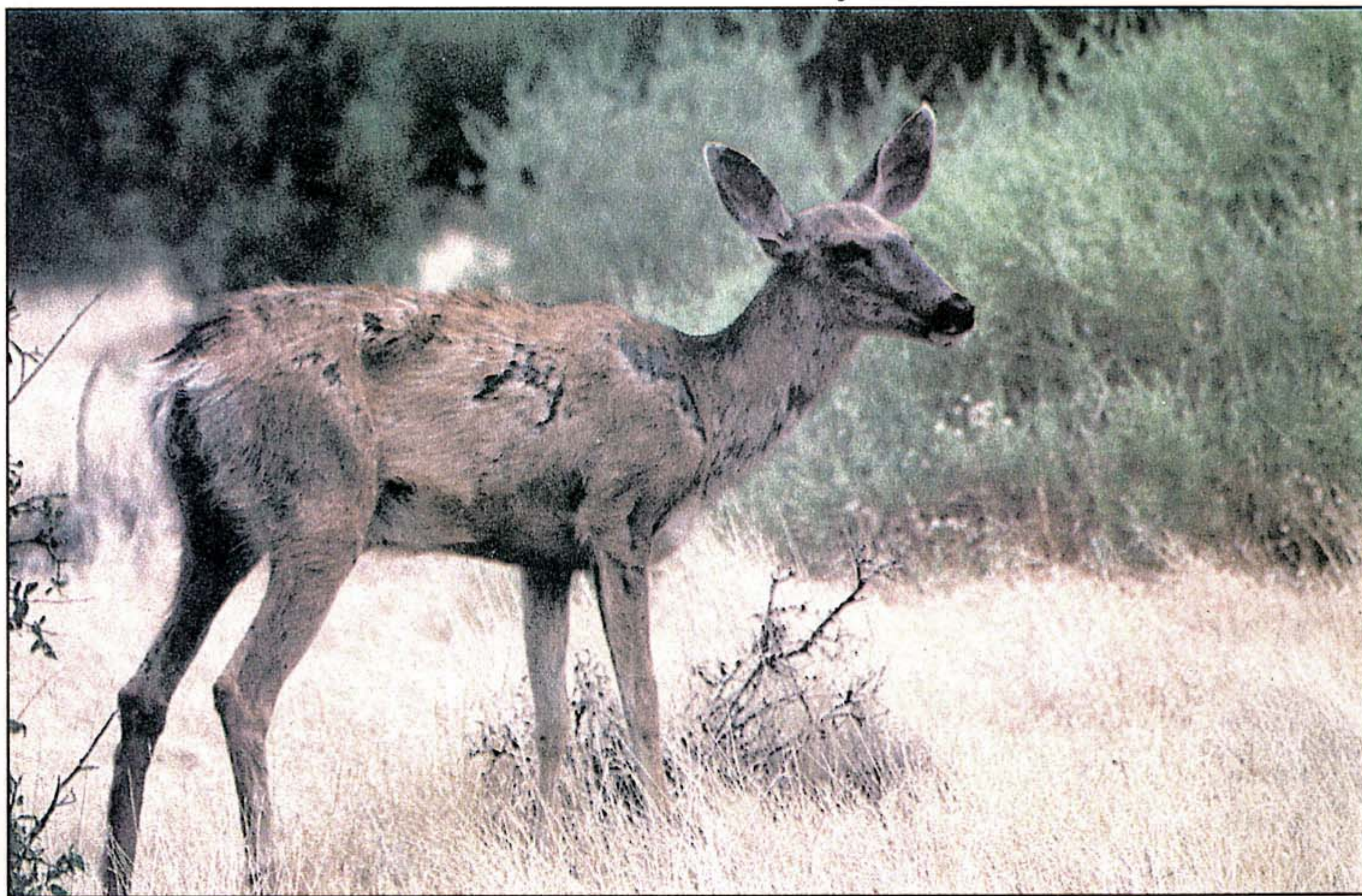
Smith had his citation overturned, but Lloyd paid his fine, Nellis said.

"We were told we weren't allowed to have (a check station) in the city limits," Nellis said. "It happened the same year of those citations."

But Smith said he and his party were "totally framed" by Fish and Game officials, who cited them on charges of using dogs for deer hunting, along with other offenses.

"I could have paid my fine, and saved a lot of stress," Smith said. "But I wasn't about to pay a fine for something I didn't do."

Last year, Oakley officials refused to allow Fish and Game to set up the checkpoint, according to Nellis. This year, Fish and Game's calls seeking permission to set up in time for the early October opening of deer hunting season were ignored, he said.



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Department of Fish and Game officials claim they are unable to determine accurately the general health and survival conditions of deer populations in a key area near Oakley without a check station there.

Smith said the council voted 4-0 to prohibit the check station last year. This year, Fish and Game regional wildlife

manager Randy Smith - unrelated to the mayor - said he made his request with Lloyd, who never returned his calls.

Lloyd said he "didn't know anything

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about it" and declined to comment further.

"We expect to be treated fairly and decently," Dennis Smith said. "We don't need to be harassed, and they can stay out of town. They're not welcome here until they stop harassing people."

Mike Todd, regional conservation educator for Fish and Game, said he last set up the check station in Oakley in the fall of 1994. Todd said the mayor drove up and told him the check station was a safety hazard and that Fish and Game was not wanted in Oakley.

"It blindsided me," Todd said. "The only reason we were asked to leave was because Mr. Smith was mad because he got a ticket."

But the mayor denied that.

"The reason we asked them to

move is because they were set up by a narrow bridge and were creating a traffic hazard," he said. "I suggested three or four places they could have gone, they could have moved a block away, but they chose to leave town."

"This is a management station, not just for law enforcement," Randy Smith said.

Fish and Game officials are trying to gather data on mule deer populations in a roughly 1,000-square-mile region which includes the Mount Harrison, Almo, Elba, Oakley and the City of Rocks area, Todd said.

The stations collect information on deer populations and conditions, survival and birth rates through antler size, the animal's sex and body condition, and information on the kill location, Nellis said. Information also is gleaned through phone surveys with hunters.

"One thing we hear is that we never listen to the public, especially in small, outlying communities like Oakley," Nellis said. "The check stations allow us to talk to people. Without the opportunity to run one, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The surveys help us estimate the harvest, but it doesn't put us there face to face."

Of concern is the area's reputation for producing mature bucks, Randy Smith said. The severe winter of 1992-93 caused a 30 to 50 percent loss in deer populations, and this region "does not seem to be coming back at the rate other populations have in nearby units - it's not rebounding as quickly, and we're uncertain why."

He said Fish and Game may seek to develop a check station site east of Oakley.