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Deer collisions most likely in W.Va.

By The Associated Press

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- In West Virginia, where there's roughly one deer for every two people and the capital city boasts an annual deer hunt within its boundaries, it's no surprise the animals pose a common hazard for motorists.

On Monday, insurance giant State Farm added some hard numbers to back up the anecdotal impression, naming West Virginia the likeliest state for vehicle crashes involving deer.

Using its claims data along with state motor vehicle registration figures from the Federal Highway Administration, State Farm estimates drivers in West Virginia have a 1 in 39 chance of hitting a deer in the next 12 months. That's up from a 1 in 45 chance last year.

It's the third straight year West Virginia has been so identified by the Bloomington, Ill.-based insurer. Curtis Taylor, chief of wildlife resources for the state Division of Natural Resources, does not have to think hard about what that might be.

"The state is pretty much 100 percent deer habitat," he said. "We don't really have any big urban areas where you can't find deer."

The state has plenty of company. Nationwide, there were roughly 2.4 million crashes involving deer between July 2007 and July 2009, State Farm estimates, an increase of 18 percent from five years earlier.

Joining West Virginia in the top five are Michigan, Pennsylvania, Iowa and Montana. Two of West Virginia's other neighbors, Virginia and Maryland, are also classified as "high risk" states for deer collisions by State Farm. Virginia is 10th overall and Maryland 13th in collisions.

The least likely state for collisions is Hawaii, where drivers have a 1 in 9,931 chance of hitting a deer. State Farm says the odds of hitting a deer there are about the same as picking a piece of clover and finding it has four leaves.

West Virginia has about 1 million deer, according to the DNR, and 1.8 million people.

Even for drivers who don't hit deer, the frequency of collisions can create a problem because it may mean higher insurance premiums for West Virginians, according to State Farm spokeswoman Erin Bailey.

Deer collisions have been a recurring topic in the West Virginia Legislature, with lawmakers proposing legislation on the subject as recently as this year's session. The bill, which would have limited drivers' liability for repair costs when hitting a deer, failed to win passage.

The most effective way to reduce the problem is to reduce the number of deer, Taylor said.

"Hunting is the only way to control the deer population," he said.

To that end, the state has opened its first-ever September archery season in the middle of the month, allowing bow hunters to pursue deer in 36 counties. The following week, West Virginia opened a muzzleloader season. Four cities in the state, including the largest, Charleston, have urban deer hunts within city limits.