



SIKA HERD OF SPECIAL INTEREST

OCTOBER-DECEMBER 2026 SOUTHERN KAIMANAWA SIKA MANAGEMENT – FAQs

What is happening?

The Game Animal Council and Sika Foundation, with contractors, are carrying out thermally assisted aerial hind management in the Southern Kaimanawa area.

This work aims to reduce female sika and their family groups to more appropriate levels. Reducing the number of breeding females over time, supports a lower density, healthier, male dominated herd with reduced browsing pressure on vegetation, and better-quality stags.

Why is it happening?

In July 2026, the Sika HOSI (Herd of Special Interest) was formally designated by the Minister for Hunting and Fishing, meaning sika in the Kaimanawa and Kaweka Forest Parks are now legally recognised as a game animal and managed for hunting purposes as well as conservation outcomes, under the Game Animal Council Act 2013.

These management operations follow on from the Sika Foundation's previous work and contribute towards meeting two of the objectives in the Sika HOSI herd management plan, specifically:

1. Sika are managed in a manner that allows for canopy regeneration and supports the maintenance of forest ecosystem processes and the protection of threatened species and their habitats.
2. Provide for high-quality recreational hunting by maintaining and improving hunter values associated with the sika herd.

REZ_MU (Remote Experience Zone Management Unit)

Seedling ratio indices collected in the 2025 REZ remeasure show a ~49% increase in mountain beech seedling occupancy in the short tier (0 - 30cm) since the 2022/2023 baseline measure. To ensure sufficient seedling survival in and through the tall tier (30cm – 2m), ensuring deer densities are maintained at appropriate densities is needed.

WPK_MU (Waipakihi Management Unit)

Seedling ratio indices collected in the 2025 WPK baseline shows only ~ 20% of mountain beech seedlings in the true left mountain beech habitat are surviving to the tall tier (30cm

– 2m). Starting management to reduce browse pressure is needed to ensure canopy replacement occurs.

When is it happening?

Between 20 October and 6 December 2026.

For how long?

Around 35 hours will be carried out in the Remote Experience Zone (REZ) between 20 October and 20 November. If it is found that more management is required in the REZ, additional hours will be added within the operational timeframe.

Additional information: Management has been undertaken in the REZ annually since 2022. Sustained annual adaptive deer management operations for the initial “knock down” phase can be up to 3–4 years. Eventually operations will be able to shift into a less intensive “maintenance and monitoring” phase to ensure densities are maintained at levels that ensure canopy replacement occurs following natural canopy collapse.

Around 15 hours will be carried out in the true left of the Waipakihi River (WPK) between 20 November and 6 December.

Additional information: This will be the first year that management has occurred in the WPK management unit. Monitoring will be undertaken to inform any future management actions following this activity.

Three to four weeks has been allowed for both operations to enable any possible weather delays.

What is being targeted?

Both operations are targeting hinds. Focusing on hinds reduces the potential reproductive rate of the herd, helps maintain lower densities, and adjusts herd structure to a healthier, male dominated herd with reduced browsing pressure on vegetation.

Operations are being undertaken as late as possible (particularly in Waipakihi) at a stage where stags have as much velvet to enable operators to distinguish the sex of the animal more easily.

How do you differentiate stags from hinds with thermal assisted operations?

Operators use robust process to assess animals before they engage, including animal behaviour, body type, group dynamics. They follow a strict shot process and a “dual ID” protocol to ensure a hind focused approach, with four forms of operational verification to review post operation (thermal footage + scope recoil footage + cockpit go pro footage, and thermal camera mounted go pro footage).

How will you know how many hinds to remove?

Hunter feedback will be essential to adapt sika management over time. As the Sika HOSI is implemented, the GAC and Sika Foundation will be engaging with sika hunters to understand their experiences in relation to herd health, hunting opportunities and environmental health. Previous herd and ecological monitoring in the REZ and WPK have shown a need to continue management in REZ and start management in the WPK in order to achieve positive outcomes for hunting and conservation.

Additional information: Previous management in the REZ has resulted in positive outcomes in this management unit. There has been increased seedling growth and sika reproductive rates recorded, indicating reduced browse and enhanced herd health. The number of quality stags encountered (and left) has also increased. While monitoring indicates things are moving in the right direction toward hunting and conservation objectives, further management is required to achieve sustainable outcomes. Further monitoring will be undertaken to continue measuring the impact and success of these operations, with future management actions being adapted to the data collected.

No previous management has been undertaken in the Waipakihi. Natural die-back in the management unit has been observed since 2019, increasing the importance of immediate deer management to ensure sufficient canopy recovery processes can occur. By supporting the canopy recovery process, we can support a healthy environment that in turn, supports healthy sika to hunt.

Die-back in forests is a natural process where areas of the forest reach the end of their natural cycle and die-back. This can also be caused by environmental events (drought stress), rendering trees more susceptible to insect (platypus beetle) and other pathogen attack. Large areas of canopy collapse can also occur following weather events. When there is any form of natural canopy collapse, it's essential that deer densities are at levels that allow the forest understorey to have sufficient coverage of canopy seedlings to eventually replace trees that have collapsed.

The Department of Conservation is responsible for leading ecological monitoring in all areas of the Sika HOSI and the data collected will contribute to future management decisions for these areas.

What would happen if we did nothing in these areas?

The herd and habitat would decline resulting in poor quality environments, animals, and hunting experiences.

Can I book, stay in, or use the huts/tracks in the operational area?

Yes, there will be “buffer zones” put in place for tracks, huts and structures to ensure operators are aware and actively avoid all potential user group activity in the operational area.

Will I be safe?

Yes, operators will check in with DOC hut bookings before operations commence. There are strict protocols in place to ensure that all users of public conservation land are kept safe during these operations. If any park users are encountered, operators will leave the immediate area and operate elsewhere.

I was planning to hunt these areas during this time – what should I do?

Hunters may like to target the true right of the Waipakihi River instead. Operations will only be taking place for the Waipakihi on the true left. You might also like to target the Kaweka North area, which was heat mapped in 2025, showing areas with higher densities of hinds. [You can see the Kaweka North heat map here.](#)

Will this impact other recreational users in the area?

Hikers or trampers, particularly those planning to do the Umukarikari and Thunderbolt tracks, may notice helicopters operating in the area but should not be impacted by this work.

Notices will be loaded to the Department of Conservation website prior to the operations taking place, with public signage installed at the entry points for these walks.

What time of the day will the shooting take place?

Generally, mornings and evenings. If conditions allow, there may be operations undertaken during the day.

Are we surveying the area first?

We know from previous herd and vegetation monitoring that sika management is required in both operational areas to improved herd health and to enable seedling regeneration.

What vegetation monitoring will take place?

As part of Sika Foundation's Adaptive Deer Management and Research plan seedling ratio and faecal pellet indices have been captured over seven management units. Moving forward under the Sika HOSI, the Department of Conservation will be overseeing the motoring ecological objectives.

What herd monitoring will take place?

Animals will be recovered where possible for autopsy and data collection (jaw, condition scores, weight and reproductive status). Any meat recovered will be utilised either to mana whenua or the mince for foodbank programme.

Will the monitoring data be publicised?

Absolutely. Transparency is vital for the Game Animal Council and Sika Foundation, and a crucial part of the Sika HOSI management approach. Data will be reported in quarterly

and annual reports and shared via the Game Animal Council and Sika Foundation online channels, including the Sika HOSI email newsletter ([sign up to the newsletter here](#)).

For vegetation monitoring, the Game Animal Council and the Sika Foundation will work with the Department of Conservation to help understand the response in the habitat and help guide the management operations moving forward. Parts or all of monitoring technical reports may be shared in annual reporting or publications.

Will you tell us where hinds are removed and stags sighted?

Yes. This information will be provided in quarterly and annual reports and shared via the Game Animal Council and Sika Foundation online channels, including the Sika HOSI email newsletter ([sign up to the newsletter here](#)).

Will any deer be recovered for jaws or meat?

Where possible, animals will be recovered for autopsy and data collection (jaw, condition scores, weight and reproductive status). Any meat recovered will be utilised either to mana whenua or the mince for foodbank programme.

It is possible that more will be able to be recovered from the Waipakihi operation as this is the first year that management operations are being undertaken and there may be more animals in the open areas. In the Remote Experience Zone, because there has been previous management, it is possible that the animals will be in more covered areas making animal recovery more difficult and less cost effective.

What are the benefits to the environment?

Active and adaptive management of the sika herd allows for canopy regeneration and supports the maintenance of forest ecosystem processes and the protection of threatened species and their habitats.

Managing deer densities (in particular, targeting sika hind matriarchal family groups living in discreet home ranges) decreases the impacts on the habitat “at place” to ensure canopy replacement will occur following natural canopy collapse.

What are the benefits for hunting?

The natural ecosystem and the habitat that supports our game animals are the foundation of the hunting experience.

Experienced hunters understand that a healthy habitat supports healthy game animals. They also know that game herds are renewable resources. A game animal herd can recover from poor management in a matter of years, but for our forests and other native habitats it takes far longer (decades). It is therefore critical to do what we can to assist with good game animal management as this will ensure the protection of our native ecosystems while providing for consistently high-quality game animal herds and quality hunting.

A major threat to a healthy habitat is having too many game animals. If a game animal population exceeds the carrying capacity of the ecosystem, then food will be in short supply, and animals will struggle to gain weight and develop into its full potential. This leads to poor-quality meat animals, poor stag quality, poor hunting opportunities and an ecosystem in decline.

Responsible hunter-led game animal management can balance the needs of the herd, the hunter and the habitat. Achieving this balance ensures high-quality meat animals, high-quality stags, high-quality hunting opportunities, and a high-quality environment.

In short, managing game animal populations supports:

- Improved herd health indicators (condition, reproductive rates, skeletal size)
- A higher proportion of young animals available for harvest
- Higher quality venison
- Higher quality stags
- More intense rutting activity with increased competition between stags for fewer better condition hinds.

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