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Deterring deer in headlights

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Hoping to reduce the number of collisions between cars and deer, Essex County is installing a roadside alarm system in South Mountain Reservation.

The system is activated by cars' headlights and emits a blue strobe light and a sound similar to a car alarm.

The sound, which is supposed to mimic an animal in distress, does not hurt the deer's ears but instead makes them frightened so they leave the area.

"It makes them uncomfortable," said Ed Mulka, a co-owner of Jafa Technologies of Mount Laurel, a technical consulting company that sells the devices. "It's something new, they don't know what it is."

More than 200 of the "Deer Deter" devices are being installed on posts on a 3-mile stretch of Brookside Drive in the county reservation this month and the county is seeking additional funding to install them at other county reservations in the future.

Essex County Executive Joseph DiVincenzo said 303 dead deer were taken off county roadways last year and he thinks the new devices, being marketed as "Wildlife Crossing Guards" can reduce that number.

"Hopefully, this is going to prevent it," said DiVincenzo. "It's about the safety and security of our residents."

The devices have been installed along a highway in Colorado and a section of road near Fort Dix in Burlington County. DiVincenzo said prior to starting the county's first deer hunt at the reservation last winter, he saw a presentation on the deer deterrents last fall.

Mulka said the devices have been tested and used extensively in parts of Austria and since they were installed along Saylor's Pond Road near Fort Dix, no deer/car accidents have been reported on that road.

"We know it works with more than deer," he said, noting that one Austrian study showed a reduction in rabbits being hit by cars. "There's too many deer. You've got to approach it from more than one way."

The devices have been installed at 50-yard increments on either side of Brookside Drive and can be reprogrammed to emit a different sound or to change volume. Mulka said if a driver has the car windows closed, they probably won't hear the sound. The deer do not activate the devices, only car beams do, so the animals can cross freely when no cars are around.

DiVincenzo said the \$20,000 cost of the deterrents was paid for through a grant from the Essex County Parks Foundation and a grant from Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield of New Jersey.

He said he's applying for another grant to pay for the devices at other county roads -- including roads in the Eagle Rock and Hilltop reservations.

DiVincenzo said the sound devices are just one part of the county's deer management plan. He said he will continue to have a hunt at the reservation to keep the deer population down and will also embark on replanting parts of the reservation that have been eaten by the deer.

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