

About 80,000 Oklahomans will be smiling Thursday if they look outside and see rain falling and check the weather forecast and see breezy, cooler weather heading into the weekend and early next week. A little rain forecast for Saturday isn't much of a problem for muzzleloader hunters. Worries about keeping your powder dry are a thing of the past for most modern-day, "traditional" black-powder firearms. Much-needed rainfall will make the woods more comfortable and less "crunchy" for the nine-day muzzleloader season that opens Saturday and continues through Nov. 1. After a downward trend in muzzleloader seasons the past several years, the forecast is a welcome sight. "It's looking up," said Erik Bartholomew, big-game biologist for the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation. "With the cooler weather and the daylight decreasing, the deer will be moving a little more." With drought and warm, dry, windy weather the past few muzzleloader seasons, success rates and participation have declined, while archery season participation has increased, Bartholomew said. "It's been a general slight downward trend even back to 2006," he said. "We were up a little last year, but overall the numbers, especially compared to archery, is still down overall." As to why the muzzleloader hunter numbers have dropped, Bartholomew said there is no clear reason. It may be a combination of people migrating to bows and crossbows with the long archery season, or it may be frustration due to the warm, dry weather conditions. A lot of hunters don't like hunting before the first frost comes along and kills some of the gnats and mosquitoes. The 2014 season had 80,000 muzzleloader hunters afield and 96,000 bowhunters, he said. Of course, bowhunters have a long season, Oct. 1-Jan. 15, while muzzleloader is just a nine-day season. Still, especially with modern black powder weapons, muzzleloader season offers a chance to reach out a little further and take some of those shots for which an archer is not well equipped. With photo period changing, deer should be showing more "pre-rut" activity. "I do have some reports of people seeing a little more activity on rubs," Bartholomew said. "Some of the bachelor groups are breaking up now and they'll be starting to

flex their muscles a little bit.â€• Pre-rut is not â€œrut,â€• however, and he cautions against using heavy-handed scents and calls during muzzleloader season. A little tickle of the rattling antlers is OK, maybe a doe bleat, but not much more. He also recommends targeting natural food sources. â€œI did hear a report out of the Bristow area about people not seeing deer on their cameras ... at feeders,â€• he said. Rather than sitting on the feeder, it will be a better bet to find deer along travel corridors to and from those rub lines, and on natural food sources like acorns, persimmons and agriculture crops. Overall, however, this muzzleloader season looks better than any in recent memory. Deer are fat and healthy, with many reports of does with twins and several reports of triplets around the state this summer, he said. Every year someone hunting the muzzleloader season connects with a big buck. Find those natural food sources, travel corridors, get yourself out there in a stand or pop-up blind downwind of the action and see if you canâ€™t find some success this year.