

TO: Larry D. Voyles, Director

FROM: Lawrence M. Riley, Assistant Director
Wildlife Management Division

PRESENTER: Brian F. Wakeling, Game Branch Chief

TITLE: Presentation of the Proposed Hunt Guidelines for the fall 2014 through spring 2016 for Commission Approval.

DESCRIPTION: The Commission will consider and may vote to approve proposed hunt guidelines for fall 2014 through spring 2016. The Commission may choose to consider this agenda item through separate actions on the individual guidelines that address each Commission Order. The Commission may direct the Department to consider changes and/or new opportunities in the hunting and/or trapping guidelines. A detailed description of proposed hunt guidelines is available for public review at all Department offices.

DATE: August 12, 2013

Summary:

The Arizona Game and Fish Department solicits public review and comment concerning proposed hunt guidelines every other year. The Department's proposed hunt guidelines (attached) were developed to reflect prior Commission direction, biological limitations, Department input, and public comment. The Department routinely receives comment regarding guideline during the interim between review cycles.

The Department shared 126 written comments with the Commission on March 9, 2013 and another 27 written comments on June 15, 2013. At the June meeting, the Department also shared comments provided by 55 participants at 9 public meetings held around the state during May 28–June 7, 2013. Attached to this memo are another 31 comments the Department received between June 15 and July 31, 2013.

Also attached to this memo are the recommended amendments to the hunt guidelines based on biological analyses and public comment received to date. Following is a summary of the substantive changes to the hunt guidelines, comments related to those proposed changes, and Department responses.

SUMMARY OF SUBSTANTIVE RECOMMENDED CHANGES TO OVERALL GUIDELINES

- No substantive changes recommended

GENERAL PUBLIC COMMENTS AND DEPARTMENT RESPONSES

1. *Offer more CHAMP hunts.*

Commission Rule provides for special accommodations for Challenged Hunter Access/Mobility Permit (CHAMP) hunters. The Department recommends specific CHAMP seasons with permit levels that approximate demand, yet try to provide a specific season during a time when other hunters are not in the field. The specific unit for which seasons are recommended are also carefully evaluated to ensure that CHAMP hunter access may be readily accommodated. Each Region that offers a season recommends the season dates that they believe provide the optimal opportunity. CHAMP seasons will continue to be selected in units without other current open seasons, although CHAMP hunters are eligible to participate in other hunts as well.

2. *There are too many permits and too many hunts.*

Hunting seasons often feel busy to those hunters fortunate enough to draw a tag. Yet permit numbers and season structure are recommended on the basis of several biological factors, including male to female ratios, recruitment, and population trends. Two years ago the Commission adopted guidelines that raised the management objective for male to female ratios for both deer and elk. The recommendations for these guidelines are to increase the lower management objective for turkeys as well. Seasons are structured to allow adequate time for breeding and protection of the reproductive segment of the population unless biological indications allow for more liberal harvests. Seasons are stratified to provide periods in which hunting pressure is reduced for specific species. The Department believes that these hunt guidelines provide a balance among permit levels, hunt frequency, and biological objectives. The Department recommends no change to guidelines in response to this comment.

3. *While I believe the hunt guidelines are biologically sound and socially acceptable, I believe they should allow for "out-of-cycle" revision in the event of catastrophic events, like a wildfire or Chronic Wasting Disease outbreak.*

The hunt guidelines are exactly that – guidelines. There have been a number of occasions when the Commission or the Department have deviated from guidelines due to unforeseen circumstances. When the Department makes a recommendation that deviates from guidelines, we explain the rationale for the recommended deviation and the Commission considers the rationale carefully before making a decision. Additionally, a response plan exists should CWD be detected in Arizona. The guidelines provide adequate flexibility and implicit mid-cycle reviews when warranted. The Department does not recommend a change to guidelines in response to this comment.

4. *Too many tags are allocated to archery hunters. Over-the-counter deer and javelina archery hunts are having too much of an influence on those herds.*

The hunt guidelines provide guidance on allocation for the various weapon types for deer, elk, pronghorn, and javelina. This guidance is designed to provide an equitable allocation of harvest based on demand and, in some instances, hunt success. While this approach may not be perfect, it provides an unbiased approach to allocating permits.

The Department monitors deer and javelina herds annually in most areas. Archery javelina permits are limited in most areas because archers hunt success is high enough to warrant careful regulation; archers have relatively low hunt success on deer, and less regulation is warranted. In areas where archers have greater influence on overall management objectives, the Department permits archery deer hunting so as to effectively regulate their take under those circumstances.

The Department does not recommend any change to guidelines based on these comments.

SUMMARY OF SUBSTANTIVE RECOMMENDED CHANGES TO DEER

- Explicitly excludes antlered hunts for juniors-only within alternative mule deer management units;
- Clarifies the intent to have juniors-only hunts encompass a holiday when possible;
- Changes the objective for hunt success to a range of 15–25% from 15–20%;
- Adds Unit 17A as an alternative mule deer management unit;
- Increases the range of planned population growth in Unit 12A West from 5–7% to 5–10%; and
- Manage archery hunting seasons for mule deer, white-tailed deer, or any antlered deer dependent on species-specific harvest proportions

PUBLIC COMMENTS AND DEPARTMENT RESPONSES REGARDING DEER

1. *Do not run general rifle seasons concurrent with muzzleloader season in the same hunt area as has been the case recently with 6B hunts for muzzleloader any antlered deer and rifle whitetail deer.*

The muzzleloader and general hunting seasons for Unit 6B have been stratified since 2012 with the 2013 seasons dates of October 25–31, 2013 for muzzleloader any antlered deer, November 1–7, 2013 for general antlered whitetail deer, and November 8–14, 2013 for general antlered mule deer.

2. *I know mule deer populations are at a low level, but you should move some hunts into the rut period and use antler point restrictions, say at least a 4x4 to be legal.*

The hunt guidelines currently provide for a limited amount of late season hunting for mule deer during a time period when breeding behavior is likely. This is the time of year when they are

most vulnerable to harvest, and providing too much of this type of opportunity may result in greater harvest than desired.

Antler point restrictions are another approach that is often described by uninformed hunters as a good method by which to regulate take. The idea seems straightforward and promising; if we just don't allow hunters to harvest young bucks, they will grow older and bigger and be available for harvest later. Most western states and provinces have, at one point in time, employed some type of antler point restriction attempting to increase the number of "trophy" bucks in their herds. After decades of use and many evaluations reporting disappointing results, most western states and provinces have discontinued statewide antler point restrictions. The two main reasons for abandoning widespread antler point restrictions are: (1) unacceptable accidental-illegal kill, and (2) harvest mortality was increased (focused) on the very age classes they intended to promote. Available data and experience suggest antler point restrictions result in no long-term increase in either the proportion or number of mature bucks, or the total deer population. A few jurisdictions still have limited areas with antler point restrictions, due to hunter preference not a biological need. The use of antler point restrictions in a combined strategy with general open seasons is used in at least one case to maximize hunting opportunity.

Most western states and provinces have concluded that sustainable improvements in buck:doe ratios and the number of mature bucks can only be realized by reducing harvest through: 1) a limited quota license system that decreases overall total buck harvest (as we do here), or by 2) setting a very short hunting season in early fall when mature bucks are less vulnerable. While antler point restrictions may increase the proportion of bucks in certain populations with low buck:doe ratios, there is no evidence they substantially increase the total number of adult (mature) bucks.

SUMMARY OF SUBSTANTIVE RECOMMENDED CHANGES TO PRONGHORN

- No substantive changes recommended

NO COMMENTS REGARDING PRONGHORN ANTELOPE

SUMMARY OF SUBSTANTIVE RECOMMENDED CHANGES TO ELK

- Clarification of units or portions of units classified within the various management zones;
- Clarifies the intent to have juniors-only hunts encompass a holiday when possible;
- Explicitly includes late archery hunts (November seasons) within the weapons allocation formula; and
- Changes the objective for hunt success to a range of 25–35% from 20–30%;

PUBLIC COMMENTS AND DEPARTMENT RESPONSES REGARDING ELK

1. *I believe the current philosophy of offering as much "opportunity" as possible for most elk hunts makes for a poor hunt experience. You can cram more hunters in the field and lower the hunt success rate and achieve your management objectives or you can provide*

a quality hunt experience, with a high success rate at the cost of going hunting less often. I much prefer the latter. If I want to hunt elk in a crowd I can always go to Colorado. I would like to see the Department repeat their hunter survey on hunt opportunity versus hunt quality and see if the original figures still hold.

Current elk management guidelines state that "the Department's elk management goal is to maintain and, where possible, enhance elk populations at levels that provide maximum and diverse recreational opportunities, while avoiding adverse impacts to the species and its habitat while minimizing land use conflicts." Many times what drives permit numbers in elk management are attempts to avoid adverse impacts to elk habitats and conflicts with other land users; this is especially true with antlerless permits. Opportunity is not driving those management decisions and the Department cannot afford to trade higher success rates with fewer hunters in the field and expect to reach management objectives. Wildlife managers take hunter density into account when recommending permit numbers and use hunt guidelines to stratify hunts and maintain hunt success. Creating more hunts to put fewer hunters in the field at one time is simply not possible in many units as the calendar is already full with hunts from August through February. Overlapping hunts has not been favorable for most hunters. Current hunt guidelines prescribed hunt success for late general bull hunts at 20–30%, but these are recommended to increase to 25–35%. The average hunt success across all general bull hunts (excluding limited opportunity hunts and early bull hunts) in 2012 was 38% and the average hunt success across all general antlerless hunts (excluding limited opportunity hunts) was 41%.

2. *On the archery elk hunts there is no need to have cow and bull hunts at the same time, this results in water hole conflicts... Maybe try a stratified hunt, like in turkey to spread out the hunters a little more between the two. More guys would be able to hunt and not conflict with each other's hunts, more people would apply, equals more revenue and happy hunters. I would do away with those late season archery elk tags; they are useless for elk management and conflict with hunters scouting for their late rifle tags. Those elk that late in the year have already been pushed and run ragged through the rut and all the prior hunts. Let's give them a little break and have the late cow hunt before the rifle bull hunts, due to the bad weather usually happening around the first week or so of December.*

It is difficult to avoid overlapping the archery antlerless and bull hunts. Hunter opinion in the past indicated that neither antlerless or bull hunters were willing to reduce season length and stratify seasons to reduce hunter density in the field during the archery hunts. Changes in season dates also could increase the likelihood of missing the elk breeding behavior sought during these archery seasons. Due to the scheduling of other hunts that end immediately before the archery elk hunts and hunts that begin as soon as they end, there is not room in the calendar for lengthening hunts. Most archery hunts have a fraction of the number of tags that are authorized for firearm seasons.

With the exception of Units 22 and 23, there are only 25 tags in the late archery hunts and those 25 hunters hunt an average of 6 days during their 14-day hunt. This level of disturbance is minimal and should not be disturbing hunters scouting for other hunts.

The timing of late, general season cow hunts is usually dependent on management objectives for elk in a given unit. Typically, December cow hunts are recommended to address wintering elk herds and achieve desired population objectives, but they may also be put in place to help alleviate crowding issues during early hunts. Where weather and access present substantive issues, these hunts are not generally recommended.

The Department does not recommend any change to hunt guidelines in response to these comments.

SUMMARY OF SUBSTANTIVE RECOMMENDED CHANGES TO TURKEY

- Changes the objective for hunt success to a range of 15–20% from 10–20%;
- Use 3-year averages for calculating proportion of harvest attributed to juniors-only harvests and adjusting season structure; and
- Allows archery over-the-counter seasons in all A quality units.

PUBLIC COMMENTS AND DEPARTMENT RESPONSES REGARDING TURKEY

1. *Eliminate the fall turkey hunt.*

Turkeys are a species that are prone to wide swings in population numbers and when turkeys are abundant; fall, either-sex hunts do not have a negative effect on the population with only 5-10% of the population being harvested.

Fall turkey hunting has been offered in Arizona since 1946. The Department does not believe that limited permit numbers during a 1-week fall turkey season negatively influences turkey populations in Arizona. Research conducted in Arizona during the early 1990s demonstrated that even with over-the-counter fall hunts, harvest removed about 3.5% of the female segment of the populations. Hunt guidelines for turkey use hunt success to influence permit numbers. For 2014–2016, the Department is recommending that success rates increase to 15-20%, which will result in a more conservative hunt structure. In addition, the Department is currently conducting a study in Regions 1 and 2 to determine if the influence of fall hunting on turkey populations is excessive. The results of this study will be considered when setting fall permit numbers in the future. The Department does not recommend any change in hunt guidelines in response to this comment.

SUMMARY OF SUBSTANTIVE RECOMMENDED CHANGES TO JAVELINA

- Explicitly adds the ability to extend HAM or general seasons to 11 days should the eleventh day encompass a holiday; and
- Removes Unit 8 from the over-the-counter archery season and manages it under standard management guidelines.

PUBLIC COMMENTS AND DEPARTMENT RESPONSES REGARDING JAVELINA

1. *Increase hunt opportunity for javelina by having more days to hunt, or allow a combination spring and fall hunt with the same permit tag, or offer an annual permit tag.*

To the extent possible, the Department tries to balance season length (opportunity for those that get drawn) with multiple season structures (opportunity for less hunter crowding during a hunt). In an attempt to balance harvest, season length plays an important role for archery, general, HAM, and juniors-only javelina hunters. Extending some seasons would result in an overlap with other javelina hunts and complicate standard or stratified season structures essential to accomplishing harvest objectives. The Department is recommending the extension of general and HAM hunts for an additional day when a state or federal holiday immediately follows that of a standard season closure. The current hunt guidelines allow for flexibility and increased opportunity by extending specific archery hunts for spring and fall, 7 or 10 day general seasons, and general non-permit tags that may be open yearlong. In efforts to increase hunter opportunity and management objectives, the Commission authorized a bag limit of two javelina per calendar year as well. The Department does not recommend any other changes in response to this comment.

SUMMARY OF SUBSTANTIVE RECOMMENDED CHANGES TO BIGHORN SHEEP

- No substantive changes recommended.

PUBLIC COMMENTS AND DEPARTMENT RESPONSES REGARDING BIGHORN SHEEP

No comments received.

SUMMARY OF SUBSTANTIVE RECOMMENDED CHANGES TO BUFFALO

- Removes limitations on the use of population management hunts to address buffalo in Units 12A, 12B, and 13A.

PUBLIC COMMENTS AND DEPARTMENT RESPONSES REGARDING BUFFALO

No comments received.

SUMMARY OF SUBSTANTIVE RECOMMENDED CHANGES TO BEAR

- Includes specific provisions for condition under which a "restricted" season may be implemented for bear.

PUBLIC COMMENTS AND DEPARTMENT RESPONSES REGARDING BEAR

No comments received.

SUMMARY OF SUBSTANTIVE RECOMMENDED CHANGES TO MOUNTAIN LION

- Includes specific provisions for condition under which a "restricted" season may be implemented for mountain lion.

PUBLIC COMMENTS AND DEPARTMENT RESPONSES REGARDING MOUNTAIN LION

No comments received.

SUMMARY OF SUBSTANTIVE RECOMMENDED CHANGES TO SMALL GAME

- Small game possession limit is recommended at triple the daily bag.

PUBLIC COMMENTS AND DEPARTMENT RESPONSES REGARDING SMALL GAME

1. *Quail season should start later in the year. The season should run longer into February. I disagree – don't shorten the quail season – I like it the way it is.*

Public opinion is somewhat mixed on this topic. Most of the correspondence the Department received on this topic was essentially form mail, although there were some individual perspectives presented.

Two years ago, the Department surveyed hunters and the majority favored no change to the current season for Gambel's and scaled quail. Hunters can choose to delay their hunts until later in the season hunt if temperatures are too high.

Extending the closing date of the season to a later time frame is biologically problematic. Mortality of mature quail taken later in the season is likely to additive in nature and reduce the breeding potential. Hence, this harvest has a greater probability of influencing populations in subsequent years. Pairing behavior is often observed toward the end of the current season. For these reasons, the Department does not support extending the quail season longer in February

Biologically, there is no effect on quail populations by having the season open on Friday of week 40 as it currently does. In 2008, the quail season was changed from the historical opener of week 41 to the current week 40. In analyzing the 4 years prior to and after the season change, the average number of days a quail hunter spent in the field increased by 0.8 after the change.

While the Department does not believe any change is needed regarding season dates for quail, should the Commission choose to start the quail season later in the year, the Department would suggest selecting the Friday of week 42. Friday of week 42 would avoid overlapping the start date of quail with the start date of a deer hunt.

2. *Pheasant season should start later in the year.*

Pheasant hunts in Arizona occur almost entirely on private lands managed for vegetable production. The current hunt guidelines specify that the season structure will be coordinated with local producers so as to avoid conflicts with their growing schedule. Season dates are carefully coordinated to provide hunters with the best possible experience under the challenging circumstances presented. The Department recommends no change to the hunt guidelines in response to this comment.

3. *Grouse season should extend to the end of chukar season.*

Grouse are relatively rare game birds in Arizona, and the season for this species currently runs from September 7 through November 11 (2013 season dates). Harvest of birds later in the season is more likely to provide additive mortality that may reduce overwinter abundance. The Department does not recommend changes to hunt guidelines in response to this comment.

SUMMARY OF SUBSTANTIVE RECOMMENDED CHANGES TO MIGRATORY BIRDS

- No substantive changes recommended.

PUBLIC COMMENTS AND DEPARTMENT RESPONSES REGARDING MIGRATORY BIRDS

No comments received.

SUMMARY OF SUBSTANTIVE RECOMMENDED CHANGES TO PREDATORY AND FURBEARING MAMMALS AND TRAPPING

- Provides for a nonresident bag limit for bobcats that is the equivalent of the previous 3-year average harvest for residents; and
- Provides guidance on implementation of daylong seasons for coyote hunting.

PUBLIC COMMENTS AND DEPARTMENT RESPONSES REGARDING PREDATORY AND FURBEARING MAMMALS AND TRAPPING

No comments received.

Recommendation:

The Department recommends that the Commission **VOTE TO APPROVE THE HUNT GUIDELINES FOR 2014–2015 AND 2015–2016 HUNTING SEASONS AS PROPOSED.**

LR:BFW:bw

Attachments