

Summary of Research



Abstract: *Following the 2022 hunting season, FWP conducted a resident mule deer hunter survey to help evaluate Montana’s mule deer management relative to hunting and harvest opportunities. This survey was a near replication of a survey conducted by FWP in 2011. Although nearly 12 years have passed, results from the 2023 survey bear a striking resemblance to results from the 2011 survey. Both surveys demonstrate that mule deer hunting is very important to Montanans. Survey results from both years also show a strong majority of survey respondents favorably rate mule deer hunting opportunities in Montana. Sixty-one percent of the survey respondents prefer less restrictive mule deer hunting regulations across the state as compared to more restrictive regulations that limit opportunity. These findings are not significantly different from 2011 and continue to provide support for current mule deer management in the state where about three-quarters of the hunting districts in Montana do NOT limit buck hunting opportunity. Additionally, like 2011, a strong majority of respondents find mule deer hunting regulations to be satisfactory and support the timing of the current mule deer hunting season in Montana. Lastly, about three-quarters of the respondents from the survey conducted this past year find mule deer management in Montana to be satisfactory and place trust in FWP to manage mule deer in Montana. FWP intends to use results from this survey as an important piece of information in the consideration of future management of mule deer populations across Montana.*

Background Information

This research summary provides selected results from a resident mule deer hunter survey conducted by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) in Montana. Following the 2022 hunting season, FWP conducted this survey to help evaluate Montana’s mule deer management relative to hunting and harvest opportunities. This survey was a near replication of a survey conducted by FWP in 2011 (Lewis et. al., 2011).

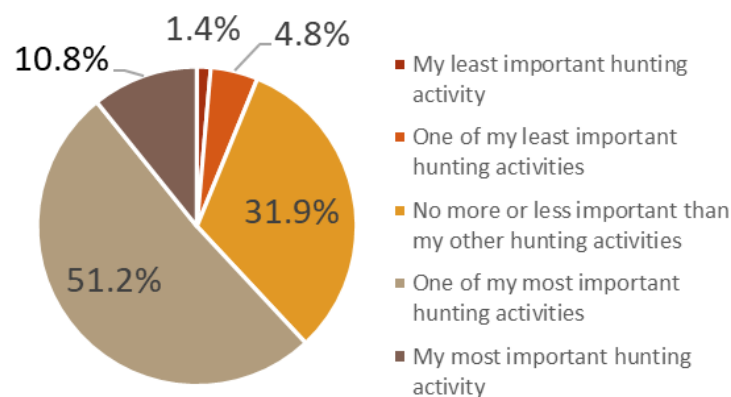
Mail back surveys were sent to a randomly selected statewide sample of 5,000 resident Montana deer license holders pulled from the pool of all resident deer license holders for the 2022 hunting season (as identified from FWP’s automated license system). Survey mailings included an initial mailing of the survey in late October 2022, followed up by a replacement mailing to non-respondents about 4-5 weeks after the initial mailing of the surveys. Surveys were successfully mailed out to a total of 4,881 resident deer license holders (119 surveys were undeliverable). A total of N=2,005 resident deer

license holders responded to the survey, resulting in an overall 41 percent response rate for the resident survey. This response rate is considered excellent for a mail back survey of this kind. Overall, 79 percent of the survey respondents reported they have hunted mule deer in Montana during the past five years. These resident mule deer hunters were the focus of this survey. In addition to this research summary, a more detailed study report is available from FWP (Lewis, 2023).

IMPORTANCE OF MULE DEER HUNTING IN MONTANA

Similar to findings from 2011, 62 percent of the survey respondents reported that mule deer hunting is “one of my most important” or is “my most important” hunting activity in Montana (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1. Response to...“How important is mule deer hunting to you in Montana?”



REASONS FOR HUNTING MULE DEER IN MONTANA

Survey participants were asked to rate the importance of ten different potential reasons for going mule deer hunting in Montana. These reasons are listed below with the percent of respondents who rated each reason as being “important” or “very important”. 2011 results are provided if they were significantly different from 2023.

- To enjoy nature and outdoors (93%)
- To get venison for eating (76%)...up from 69% in 2011
- To do something with my family (75%)
- To be with friends with similar interests (73%)
- To experience solitude (72%)...up from 67% in 2011
- To feel the exhilaration of the hunt (65%)
- To develop my skills and abilities (64%)
- To test my hunting skills (61%)
- To feel a sense of accomplishment (61%)
- To harvest a trophy buck (59%)...up from 47% in 2011

PERCEPTIONS REGARDING OPPORTUNITIES TO HUNT MULE DEER IN MONTANA

On a scale from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent), 85 percent of the survey respondents rate overall opportunities to hunt mule deer in Montana as being better than average (a score of three out of five or higher). These findings are not significantly different from 2011. Using the same scale, 64 percent of the respondents rate opportunities to hunt mature deer bucks in Montana as being better than average (a score of three out of five or higher). This is an increase from nearly 50 percent in 2011.

SATISFACTION WITH CURRENT MULE DEER HUNTING REGULATIONS IN MONTANA

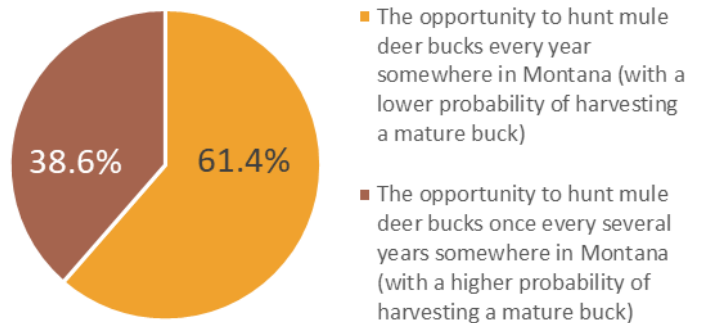
On a scale from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied), 76 percent of the survey respondents rate mule deer hunting regulations in Montana as being satisfactory (a score of three out of five or higher). Only three percent of the respondents indicated they believe mule deer hunting regulations in Montana are “very difficult to understand”. These findings are not significantly different from the 2011 findings.

OPINIONS REGARDING HOW RESTRICTIVE MULE DEER HUNTING REGULATIONS SHOULD BE IN MONTANA

Managing for higher numbers of mature mule deer bucks (e.g., typically bucks four to five years of age or older) may require implementing more restrictive mule deer

hunting regulations. For instance, in current limited permit areas in Montana the average drawing odds are once every ten years. Keeping this in mind, survey respondents were asked forced-choice questions communicating potential tradeoffs to help assess how restrictive mule deer hunting regulations should be in Montana. Results are presented in Figure 2 below. These findings are not significantly different from the 2011 findings.

Figure 2. Response to... “Given only ONE CHOICE, which of the following would be most favorable to you in Montana as a whole?”



Of note, respondents who reported that mule deer hunting isn’t very important to them were more likely to select the more restrictive option. Forty-four percent of the respondents who reported that mule deer hunting isn’t very important to them selected the “opportunity to hunt mule deer bucks once every several years” for this survey question. This compares to 36 percent of the respondents who reported that mule deer hunting is important to them.

Also of note, respondents who reported that harvesting a trophy buck is an important motivation for going mule deer hunting in Montana were more likely to select the more restrictive option. Forty-six percent of the respondents who reported that harvesting a trophy buck is important to them selected the “opportunity to hunt mule deer bucks once every several years” for this survey question. This compares to 23 percent of the respondents who reported that harvesting a trophy buck is NOT important to them.

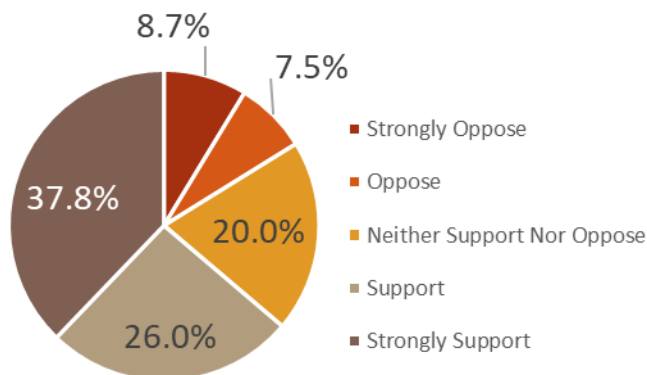


Related to the forced-choice question discussed on the previous page, respondents were also asked, “How important is it to you to be able to consistently hunt mule deer in the same place in Montana each and every year?” Sixty-five percent of the respondents indicated this was “important” or “very important” to them, up from 57 percent in 2011. Fifteen percent reported this was “unimportant” or “very unimportant”, down from 25 percent in 2011.

OPINIONS REGARDING THE TIMING OF THE MULE DEER HUNTING SEASON IN MONTANA

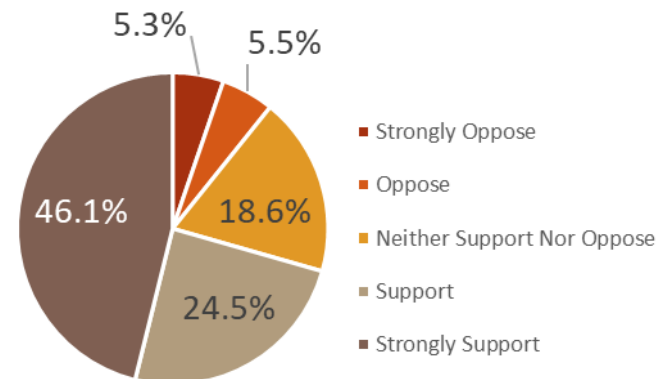
Nearly two-thirds of the survey respondents “support” or “strongly support” hunting mule deer bucks in Montana during the rut (see Figure 3 below). Sixteen percent “oppose” or “strongly oppose”. These findings are not significantly different from the 2011 findings.

Figure 3. Response to...“On a scale from 1 (strongly oppose) to 5 (strongly support), to what extent do you support or oppose the hunting of mule deer **BUCKS** in Montana during the RUT (generally after mid-November)?”



A strong majority of respondents (71 percent) “support” or “strongly support” the current timing of the five-week general rifle season for mule deer hunting in Montana (see Figure 4). This is down from 78 percent in 2011; however, the percentage of respondents that “strongly support” increased from 36 percent to 46 percent. Eleven percent “oppose” or “strongly oppose” the current timing of the five-week season.

Figure 4. Response to...“On a scale from 1 (strongly oppose) to 5 (strongly support), to what extent do you support or oppose the current timing of the five-week general rifle season for mule deer hunting in Montana which starts the third weekend in October and ends the Sunday after Thanksgiving?”



In addition to the above, 67 percent of the survey respondents believe it is “important” or “very important” that the general rifle season for mule deer hunting matches up with the timing of the general rifle season for elk hunting in Montana. Fifteen percent of the respondents think this is “unimportant” or “very unimportant”. Seventeen percent reported this is “neither important nor unimportant” to them. These findings are not significantly different from the 2011 findings.

INTEREST IN HARVESTING ANTLERLESS MULE DEER IN MONTANA

Thirty-eight percent of the survey respondents reported they are “interested” or “very interested” in harvesting antlerless mule deer in Montana. This is down from 51 percent in 2011. Forty-one percent are “disinterested” or “very disinterested”. This is up from 28 percent in 2011. Twenty-one percent were “neither interested nor disinterested” in harvesting antlerless mule deer.

SATISFACTION WITH MULE DEER MANAGEMENT IN MONTANA

On a scale from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied), 75 percent of survey respondents rate mule deer management in Montana as being satisfactory (a score of three out of five or higher). Twenty-five percent reported dissatisfaction. This was a new question asked in the 2023 mule deer hunter survey.



TRUST IN FWP TO MANAGE MULE DEER IN MONTANA

On a scale from 1 (little or no trust) to 5 (very high trust), 74 percent of survey respondents place trust in the agency to manage mule deer in Montana (a score of three out of five or higher). Twenty-six percent reported a score of two or less for this question. This is also a new question asked in the 2023 survey.

BACKGROUND CHARACTERISTICS OF RESPONDENTS

Sixty-two percent of the respondents have hunted mule deer each of the past five years in Montana. Ten percent reported hunting mule deer in the state four of the past five years, 12 percent reported three of the past five years, nine percent reported two of the past five years, and seven percent reported one of the past five years.

Eighty-five percent of respondents reported they have also hunted elk in Montana during the past five years. When these respondents were asked how often they also hunt mule deer (or would harvest a mule deer) while they are primarily elk hunting, 79 percent reported they regularly do so (a score of three out of five or higher).

Fifty-one percent of the respondents reported they have also hunted antelope in Montana during the past five years. When these respondents were asked how often they also hunt mule deer (or would harvest a mule deer) while they are primarily antelope hunting, 46 percent reported they regularly do so (a score of three out of five or higher).

The average age of respondents was 49 years (median age was 51 years).

Discussion

Although nearly 12 years have passed, results from the 2023 resident mule deer hunter survey bear a striking resemblance to results from a nearly identical survey conducted by FWP in 2011. Both surveys demonstrate that mule deer hunting is very important to Montanans. Results from both years also show that 85 percent of survey respondents favorably rate mule deer hunting opportunities in Montana. Additionally, like 2011, a strong majority of respondents find current mule deer hunting regulations to be satisfactory and support the timing of the current mule deer hunting season in Montana.

Each year, FWP hears from a segment of the mule deer hunting public that more emphasis needs to be placed on trophy mule deer hunting in the state. Of note, 64 percent of the respondents rated opportunities to hunt mature mule deer bucks in Montana as being better than average—this is up from nearly 50 percent in 2011. While important to many, trophy hunting was the least important reason expressed by survey respondents for hunting mule deer in Montana. Related, 61 percent of the survey respondents prefer less restrictive mule deer hunting regulations across the state compared to more restrictive regulations that would limit opportunity. These findings are not significantly different from 2011 findings and continue to provide support for current mule deer management in the state where about three-quarters of the hunting districts in Montana do NOT limit buck hunting opportunity.

About three-quarters of the respondent from the survey conducted this past year rate overall mule deer management in Montana as being satisfactory and place trust in FWP to manage mule deer in Montana. That is not to say that all resident mule deer hunters are content with mule deer management. As public trust managers of Montana's wildlife populations, FWP is continually challenged to meet the desires of increasingly diverse people and special interest groups. The information obtained via this survey can only help the agency in striving to understand and meet those diverse interests. FWP intends to use results from this survey as an important piece of information in the consideration of future management for this meaningful game species that is so highly prized by Montana hunters. 🌲

REFERENCES

- Lewis, Michael S., Quentin Kujala, Justin Gude, and Zoe King. 2011. *Selected Results from a 2011 Resident Mule Deer Hunter Preference Survey Conducted by FWP*. HD Program Research Summary No. 32. Helena, MT: Human Dimensions Program; Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks.
- Lewis, Michael S. 2023. *Results from a Montana 2023 Resident Mule Deer Hunter Survey, A Survey Conducted by Montana FWP*. Agency Technical Report. Helena, MT: Wildlife Division; Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks.

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