

FISH & WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: October 8, 2015

Agenda Item: 2015 Elk Late Shoulder Season Pilot Project (Contingent upon commission action on shoulder season guidelines)

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Proposed

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 40 Minutes

Background

FWP's direction is to manage elk populations to objective. As a tool for managing elk populations, FWP proposes the idea of using "shoulder seasons", i.e. rifle hunting seasons before and/or after the general five-week season. Contingent on commission approval, FWP proposes a limited-scope, pilot shoulder season to begin after the 2015 general season in one or more of 10 hunting districts that are over population objective. Candidate HDs for this pilot include 312, 390, 391, 392, 393 (the Bridger Mountains and west side of the Big Belt Mountains); 445, 446, 449 and 452 (the east side of the Big Belts and the Castle Mountains); and 410 (the Missouri River Breaks). Except in HD 410, the season would run from Nov. 30 to Feb. 15, 2016; licenses would not be valid on National Forest lands or FWP WMAs; and any B-licenses or either-sex permits would be good in the hunting district for which they are valid and subject to the same restrictions. One minor change for HD 392-00 and 392-01 B-licenses is that they would be valid district-wide outside of National Forest lands or FWP WMAs instead of valid only north or south of Whites Gulch. Shoulder season hunting in HD 410 would not start until Jan. 1, 2016 to allow elk to redistribute across the landscape and would run until Feb. 15, 2016. Elk hunting in HD 410 is by drawing only and only those either-sex permits or B-licenses specific to the district would be valid for the shoulder season and they would not be valid on the CMR National Wildlife Refuge. A map the proposed seasons, a master list of the HDs potentially included and their individual justifications can be found in the commission packet.

Public Involvement Process & Results

Overall, acceptance and support of these potential shoulder seasons has been high among those with whom they have been vetted, although there are a number of landowners and sportsmen who are not so inclined. The Devil's Kitchen Working Group helped develop, and is in full support of, the proposal for HD 445 being a pilot effort this winter. HDs 446, 449 and 452 have been endorsed by a "vast majority" of landowners and the Meagher County Commission supports the concept. In HD 410 some landowners originally willing to allow access have since backed out, and FWP is committed to working with landowners and sportsmen, but overall, there is good support for HD 410 being included. In Region 3, HDs 390, 391 and 392 have been vetted with a limited number of landowners and sportsmen with support among landowners being mixed and that of the Broadwater Rod & Gun Club being either positive or at least not opposed. There has not been enough time to talk about including HDs 312 and 393 with stakeholders. If adopted, the proposal would be out for public comment from Oct. 8 until Friday, Nov. 6.

Alternatives and Analysis

If this proposal is not adopted, there would be no pilot shoulder seasons starting December 2015. Shoulder seasons could still be proposed and adopted during biennial season-setting for the 2016-2017 hunting seasons. No pilot this winter would preclude experiences that might inform the season-setting process. Management seasons and other existing tools would remain available in these hunting districts.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale

FWP recommends the commission adopt for public comment a 2015-16 late-season shoulder season pilot project for one or more of the 10 hunting districts identified by FWP.

Proposed Motion

I move that the commission adopt for public comment a 2015-16 late-season shoulder season pilot project including the following hunting district(s): (one or more hunting districts identified by commission).