



# MONTANA FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION

## AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

**Meeting Date:** October 17, 2019

**Agenda Item:** Shoulder Seasons in HDs 210, 211, 213, 214, 216, 217 & 451

**Action Needed:** Final

**Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation:** 30 min.

**Background:** Montana Code Annotated 87-1-323 directs the Fish and Wildlife Commission to: “determine the appropriate deer, elk and antelope numbers that can be viably sustained.” And further, to “evaluate the elk, deer, and antelope populations on an annual basis and provide that information to the public.” As part of providing information to the public FWP assembles elk counts for individual hunting districts (HDs) based on input from biologists as to the best data to use. This may not be the current year if the elk count was poor. These numbers in their final form are posted on FWP’s website as required by statute and are the numbers to which FWP is bound.

Shoulder seasons are primarily designed to address overpopulations of elk. But some are designed to address problematic distributions of elk, especially in scenarios where game damage hunts have been ineffective. The *Elk Season Guidelines: Flexible season structure with performance-based shoulder seasons* adopted by the commission in 2015 includes 11 Fundamental Objectives of the seasons as well as harvest criteria. Both the harvest criteria and the 11 Fundamental Objectives are important when evaluating shoulder season performance. Three of the Fundamental Objectives are “Address problematic distributions of elk and elk harvest,” “Enhance landowner flexibility to manage elk hunting on their property,” and “Reduce game damage.” Shoulder seasons in some HDs such as HDs 101, 109, W214, 291, 293 and 311 are meant to specifically address these three Fundamental Objectives.

Managing elk on an individual HD level has proven problematic for at least three reasons: 1) some districts are too small to encompass all of a herd’s year-round seasonal ranges, 2) elk move between hunting districts, and 3) elk counts in any given year may not be accurate. Counting elk is an inexact exercise subject to a multitude of weather and timing variables and elk movements between HDs. Although counts in some individual HDs in some years, such as 2019, may not appear to be at objective, when considered at a larger landscape it gives a better picture of how to effectively manage elk. FWP does not manage elk using data known to be poor or questionable. For example, elk regularly move back and forth between HDs 212 and 213, and when combined the two HDs are over objective. Elk in little HD 217 are connected with HDs 291 and 298. Likewise, the small western portion of HD 214 where there is a shoulder season is part of the private land complex in the Philipsburg and upper Rock Creek area in portions of HDs 210, 211, 212, 214, and 216. When considered together this complex is over objective and experiences chronic game damage. Similarly, elk in HD 293 commonly move to HD 339 in winter. Elk that often winter in the small HD 451 sometimes move among adjacent HDs 315, 390, 393, 446, and 452. Continuing shoulder seasons in these HDs for the remainder of the 2019-2020 season poses no population risk and maintains an effective management tool.

There has been, however, expressed concern about continuing shoulder seasons in HDs where the 2019 counts, known to be poor counts that do not represent elk numbers, are at or below objective. The commission may choose to modify or discontinue the late shoulder seasons in these HDs.

**Public Involvement Process & Results:** Public comment will be taken at the meeting.

**FWP Recommendation:** FWP does not propose any change to current seasons in these HDs.

**Motion:** I move the Commission, using one or portions of both Alternatives described below, establish new, or confirm current closing dates, for each of the following Hunting District’s Elk Shoulder Seasons where, based



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on the most recent counts of elk numbers are at or below established population objectives. 210, 211, 213, 214, 216, 217, 291,293 & 451

Alternative 1—During this meeting and based on existing data, adjust closing date for each of the Hunting Districts where most recent counts indicate the elk population is at or below the existing population objective;

Alternative 2—Direct the Region to closely monitor elk distribution relative to harvest vulnerability this fall and winter and if a Hunting District elk population is found to be vulnerable to substantial and damaging overharvest initiate a request that the Commission, to use existing statutory authority to direct an emergency closure of the elk season.