

## Problem Statement – Final

Mule deer (MD) are a hallmark species in Montana that are important ecologically and for wildlife watching, hunting traditions, and outfitting. Local communities gain significant economic benefits from hunters. The Montana public has broad agreement on the need to manage MD at healthy population levels with a distribution that maintains opportunities for hunting mule deer now and for future generations, and that maintains their ecological roles across the landscape.

FWP and the Commission need to revise the MD Management plan in time for the 2026-2027 season setting process. The MD Citizens Advisory Council (MDCAC) is tasked with determining and striving for consensus on guiding principles that identify collective expectations for plan development and public engagement, identify important issues in MD management, and provide statewide guidance for management. The MDCAC believes the plan needs to focus on declining MD populations and distribution problems, while minimizing impacts on resident general license and youth hunting opportunities. The MDCAC values having diverse age structure and composition in mule deer populations.

The likely causes of declines in MD populations in Montana are multifaceted and varied around the state. Concerns identified by the MDCAC include the following, in alphabetical order:

- Advancing technology
- Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) effects and management
- Declining habitat quality and availability, and habitat loss for MD in some areas of Montana
- Effects of predation on MD populations, particularly fawns
- Effects of weather and climate
- Enforcement of regulations
- Existing general MD season structure
- Increased non-resident hunting pressure in certain areas
- Inter-species competition
- Non-resident and resident hunter pressure and distribution, particularly on public lands and accessible private lands
- Quantity and location of antlerless licenses
- Vehicle collisions and barrier effects

Many of these concerns could benefit from further research, increased precision of monitoring, and incorporation of results into management actions. A lack of data could result in management decisions being driven by public opinion rather than by science. FWP needs to commit to and fund research priorities and management actions to achieve the MD plan objectives, while maintaining transparency.

The MDCAC is also interested in increasing the buck age structure in the mule deer population. The MDCAC believes that drivers of buck age structure and composition (i.e., the proportion of each age class in a population) include rut hunting and season dates on a general license, advancing

technology that increases harvest success, CWD, and predation. There will be tradeoffs between managing to reduce the prevalence and distribution of CWD and managing to increase the buck age structure.

There is a need for more active input and cooperation among landowners and private land hunters, and between landowners and FWP. Game damage to private land should be a consideration where and when it is a factor. The plan should include an overarching MD management framework across Montana while allowing for local management strategies within regions and hunting districts. Geographically specific management strategies may be needed to help address these concerns and challenges, and these strategies should include consideration for how local solutions may create consequences for other regions and hunting districts.