

## **DEER MANAGEMENT POLICY**

### **MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS COMMISSION DEER MANAGEMENT POLICY FEBRUARY 5, 1998**

THIS DEER MANAGEMENT POLICY is adopted by the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Commission to serve as the basis for establishment of deer hunting regulations, including season frameworks and license quotas.

*It is the policy of the commission to manage for the long-term welfare of Montana's deer resource and provide a range of recreational opportunities reflecting public expectations, consistent with the ability of the resource to support a sustainable harvest, considering landowner tolerance, and recognizing the dynamic nature of deer populations. In addition, it is the policy of the Commission to emphasize protection and enhancement of mule deer habitats.*

There are three components to this deer management policy – management of population numbers, management of the antlered buck segment, and habitat protection and enhancement.

#### **MANAGEMENT OF DEER POPULATION NUMBERS**

The Commission recognizes that many factors affect the dynamics of deer populations, and that hunting is just one of those factors. A consistent statewide monitoring program to provide current information on deer population numbers, trends, recruitment and harvest is a critical component of this management policy.

This policy recognizes management must be tailored to the specific needs of mule deer and white-tailed deer.

It is the policy of the Commission that deer hunting seasons be designed to harvest a sustainable surplus of animals of both sexes when fawn production, recruitment, adult mortality and population numbers are within target ranges. This will include either sex hunting opportunity where consistent with population dynamics and additional antlerless deer tags where appropriate and necessary to harvest sufficient number of animals.

It is the policy of the Commission to restrict harvest of antlerless deer when monitoring data show low reproduction or recruitment, and when populations are below target ranges, in order to facilitate recovery of population numbers. Where necessary to achieve population objectives, harvest of antlerless deer may be more restrictive on public land than private land.

When populations exceed normal ranges and are so high as to risk damage to habitat or exceed

landowner tolerance, harvest of antlerless deer will be designed to control population numbers within the target range.

## **MANAGEMENT OF THE ANTLERED BUCK SEGMENT**

The majority of hunting districts are to have seasons designed to provide maximum hunting opportunity and harvest of mule deer and white-tailed deer bucks consistent with the long-term welfare of the deer resource. In most cases this will be the standard five-week antlered buck (including either sex as appropriate) season ending the Sunday after Thanksgiving.

White-tailed deer are not as vulnerable to harvest as mule deer due to behavioral characteristics, preference for thickly vegetated habitat, and prevalence in river bottoms where property ownership is predominantly private. Therefore, it is unlikely that there will be a need to restrict further the harvest of white-tailed deer bucks.

Mule deer prefer more open habitats and are more vulnerable to harvest than white-tailed deer. The Commission believes that because habitat pressures and numbers of hunters are increasing, there is a danger in some hunting districts of harvesting such a high percentage of bucks that age structure of the buck segment is minimal and consequently reproductive potential and genetic quality of the herd are at risk. It is the policy of the Commission, therefore, to implement season types designed to restrict the harvest of mule deer bucks where harvest during the unrestricted five-week season results in a survival of less than 30 percent of the bucks. Where possible, the preferred five-week season will be combined with validation or unlimited permits to increase survival to more than 30 percent in the least restrictive way. Where it is necessary to implement limited entry permits by drawing the objective will be to achieve a survival rate of 40 to 60 percent for bucks. Other season types, such as a shortened season or four-point season, may be continued where already in place or implemented where special circumstances make alternative season types viable.

The Commission considers an annual survival objective of 50% mule deer bucks to provide a reasonable balance between hunting opportunity and quality of the hunting experience, and in regions or deer management units where the survival objective is 50% or more, there is no need for season types designed to restrict further the harvest of bucks.

In some areas of Montana there is a minimal opportunity to harvest an older age mule deer buck due to high harvest rates and minimal survival of bucks to older age classes. Where this is the case, selected hunting districts (or deer management units comprised of several hunting districts) are to be managed for age structure of bucks which will allow an opportunity to harvest an older buck, with a survival objective of no less than 60 percent of the bucks each year. The preferred season type is a standard five-week season with limited entry permits by drawing. Establishment of such special management districts will consider hunter demand,

support by landowners, and the existing opportunity to harvest an older age buck in the region

under the general season framework.

## **HABITAT PROTECTION AND ENHANCEMENT**

There are several concerns with respect to mule deer habitat – subdivision of private land (particularly foothill and sagebrush/grassland winter ranges), habitat security on public lands, and some land management practices such as the conversion of sagebrush/grassland. The Habitat Montana program emphasizes “important habitats that are seriously threatened.” Mule deer habitats which are primarily the shrub-grassland type, continue to be a priority under this program. In addition, the Commission directs that the department identify opportunities for improving habitat security for mule deer by working with land management agencies, particularly the US Forest Service, Montana Department of Natural Resources & Conservation, and U.S. Bureau of Land Management to develop, with public involvement, timber management plans, and travel plans with appropriate restrictions, including road closures and limitations on the use of off-road vehicles during the hunting season.

## **BACKGROUND**

The Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Commission has considered the following factors in the formulation and establishment of this statewide deer management policy:

- ! Management of deer, particularly mule deer, has been the subject of increasing controversy in the adoption of hunting regulations in recent years.
- ! Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks has conducted a survey of deer hunters to compile information on what deer hunters in Montana seek and expect in their deer hunting experience.
- ! Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks and the Commission in 1996 conducted a series of “Deer Summits” around the state to review biological data and receive public comment on the issue of deer management.
- ! Survey results and public comment indicate that for a majority of deer hunters the opportunity to harvest an older age buck is secondary to the opportunity to enjoy the hunting experience and harvest a deer for meat.
- ! There is strong support among the hunting public to retain the present five-week season framework for the general deer season.
- ! Public comment indicates that a significant and possibly increasing minority of deer hunters, perhaps 25%, place high value on the opportunity to harvest an older age buck.
- ! Mule deer numbers are at a low point in the population cycle due to factors of weather

and predation which have limited recruitment for several successive years.

- ! In some areas of the state, environmental changes may work against recovery of mule deer populations to historic levels; these include subdivision of winter ranges, loss or conversion of shrub habitats, and predation.
- ! In some hunting districts harvest of mule deer bucks has been so high that survival beyond 2.5 years is minimal and age structure is, therefore, limited.
- ! Factors contributing to harvest of high percentage of available bucks include lack of habitat security, ease of access in areas of predominantly public land, and increasing number of hunters.

## **DISCUSSION**

The Commission recognizes that the current downturn in mule deer numbers is the result of poor recruitment for several consecutive years, and that historically mule deer populations have experienced similar cycles. Past experience indicates that mule deer numbers will recover when environmental factors are conducive to higher recruitment rates, and that populations will recover to normal levels in a few years.

The Commission is concerned, however, that changing habitat factors may in the longer term work to the detriment of mule deer. High numbers of elk may limit use of some habitats by mule deer. Conversion of shrub lands to grass favors elk over deer. Agricultural development in valley bottoms has favored white-tailed deer, which show increasing population trends but has not favored mule deer. Subdivision of winter ranges in western Montana is a major concern.

Predation also is a factor. Although mule deer have evolved with predators and under conditions of normal population levels and rates of reproduction, it is unlikely that predators have a controlling effect. Still, coyotes can have a significant impact on both fawns and adults, particularly during harsh winters, and can inhibit recovery when populations are low. Mountain lions prey heavily on deer, and lion populations are at an all time high despite the downturn in deer numbers and increasing lion quotes. Another significant concern related to predators and their role in limiting mule deer numbers in the western two-thirds of Montana is wolf recovery. Wolf numbers are expected to increase rapidly as introduced populations fill new habitat, and until delisting there is no option for management of wolves.

Neighboring states have experienced long-term declines in mule deer not yet observed in Montana. Recognizing the habitat pressures working against mule deer, there is reason to

anticipate a long-term decline that may not be able to support traditional levels of hunting pressure in at least some areas.

The Commission is also concerned that in some hunting districts, harvest of mule deer bucks is high year after year, with few bucks surviving to 2.5 years and virtually none reaching 3.5 years. Although the biological implications of such high harvest rates on a continuing basis are arguable, the commission feels that it would be irresponsible to allow the rate of harvest to continue to increase, and that prudence dictates a goal of limiting the harvest percentage to a maximum designed to result in at least minimal age structure. At a survival rate of 30 percent, just one buck in ten will achieve an age of 3.5 years, and less than one in 100 will reach 5.5 years.

There are also signs that hunter expectations are changing as well. Although the majority of deer hunters in Montana consider the opportunity to take an older age buck to be of less importance, there is a significant and presumably growing element that places a high value on age structure and the opportunity to harvest an older age buck. In 1997, there were 3,446 applicants for 825 available permits in limited entry mule deer buck areas.

The management policy is designed to provide the flexibility to deal with changing conditions over both the short and the long term, and to provide a rational basis for deer management recognizing the health of the resource first and foremost, the range of public expectations for recreational opportunities and concerns of landowners.