



Wildlife Division
PO Box 200701
Helena, MT 59620-0701
August 20, 2021

Dear Interested Person:

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks is requesting public review and comment on the following items. Supporting information on these items can be found on our website under “Public Comment Opportunities” at <https://fwp.mt.gov/hunt/public-comment-opportunities>.

BRUCELLOSIS REVIEW AND ANNUAL WORK PLAN

In January 2013, the commission endorsed elk management recommendations from a citizens working group for use in areas with brucellosis (the Designated Surveillance Area as described by the Montana Department of Livestock). Annual work plans describe specific management actions based upon these recommendations. The proposed 2022 annual work plan includes the same approaches used in the 2021 plan to include hazing, limited fencing, limited lethal removal of elk, habitat modifications, and other efforts to move elk away from cattle at small scales to reduce the risk of brucellosis transmission from elk to cattle. The proposed 2022 plan maintains previous landownership and date descriptions clarifying where and when elk may be lethally removed to move elk away from cattle. The proposed number of elk that may be taken is unchanged from 2021.

BIGHORN SHEEP TRANSPLANT TO WILD HORSE ISLAND

The bighorn sheep population on Wildhorse Island was started in 1939 with the release of six bighorn sheep from the Sun River and augmented with two rams from the Ural Tweed herd in 1987. The herd has grown and is a source herd for other bighorn sheep populations. A study of the genetic composition of Montana’s bighorn sheep populations revealed limited genetic diversity and some inbreeding within the Wildhorse Island population, although not an immediate concern.

The population objective for Wildhorse Island is 100–120 bighorn sheep. During surveys in 2018 and 2019, about 130–140 were observed. A survey was not completed in 2020, but to reduce the population observed in the 2018 and 2019 surveys to objective levels, 26 bighorn sheep were removed from Wildhorse Island and relocated to the Tendoy Mountains. Surveys subsequent to the translocation detected about 75 bighorn sheep on the island. Reasons for the apparent decline are unknown. Disease sampling conducted during the translocation effort in 2020 detected no pathogens of concern, although mountain lion predation may have influenced the apparent decline. Hunting is not permitted on Wildhorse Island since it lies within the Flathead Reservation boundary.

A translocation of sheep to the Wildhorse Island population may improve numbers and genetic diversity.

TURKEY TRANSPLANTS IN REGION 4

The department is proposing to translocate Merriam's turkeys from over-objective populations or from areas associated with game-damage landowner complaints, should any arise. The department's objective is to move turkeys over the next three winters to habitat within riparian and/or mountainous ecological systems of the Judith River,

Missouri River Breaks, and the Big and Little Belt, Big Snowy, Judith and Moccasin mountains. Trapping would occur during winter months. Release sites will be identified by biologists from Region 4 based on habitat evaluations of specific locations and species habitat needs. Staff will secure permission from landowners and potentially affected neighboring landowners prior to any augmentation effort on private land. The department will coordinate with public land management agencies prior to any release. Turkeys that are of the Merriam's subspecies are the only turkeys to be relocated in this effort. These translocated turkeys would supplement existing low-density populations. The proposed augmentation would provide a numerical increase to populations following severe winters in 2018–2019 and 2019–2020.

Earlier releases along the Missouri River have been successful and became a source for translocations during the past two winters; the department trapped 178 turkeys from this area and translocated them to other unoccupied portions of the Marias and Teton rivers to expand populations as part of the commission-approved augmentations.

MULE DEER ADAPTIVE HARVEST MANAGEMENT PLAN

Montana's Adaptive Harvest Management (AHM) Plan was adopted in 2001 and serves as a primary guide for recommending regulations for mule deer hunting seasons. The plan remains effective for developing recommendations for mule deer, yet several changes in approaches should be addressed in an update to the plan. The department has addressed updates in five major areas:

- changing the definition of long-term average as a metric for monitoring mule deer;
- changing how population triggers are used to move from one mule deer hunting regulation package to another;
- formally encouraging the alignment of hunting regulations among adjacent hunting districts;
- removing predictive population modelling as one of the four major components of AHM, though work on this aspect remains a priority for research and development; and
- updating correlations between this AHM document and chronic wasting disease management.

TO MAKE A COMMENT

For further clarification or additional materials, please call the Wildlife Division office at 406-444-2612 or send an email to fwpwld@mt.gov. Comments will be accepted online by using the link below, in writing sent to the address above, and by email to fwpwld@mt.gov.

EMAIL CORRESPONDENCE

If you would like to receive further public comment opportunities via email communications, please email fwpwld@mt.gov to be put on our mailing list.

COMMENT PERIOD DEADLINE & FINAL ADOPTION MEETING

Comments on the proposed items will be accepted until **Monday, Sept. 20, 2021, at 5 p.m.**, with final adoption at the **October 2021** commission meeting.

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