

**Meeting Date:** November 16, 2023

**Agenda Item No.** 5I

**Agenda Item:** Antler Gathering Closure Proposals

**Bureau Chief Approval:** SR

**Prepared by:** Toby Boudreau, Deer and Elk Program Coordinator

**Background:**

The gathering of shed antlers and that recreational activity's potential impact on wintering big game has been a point of conversation for several decades in Idaho. In 1994, the Commission instituted a shed antler gathering season in a portion of the Upper Snake Region and subsequently expanded that area to include the Southeast Region in 1998. That rule was rescinded in 2002 because the Commission's authority over wildlife parts was not clearly defined. During subsequent severe winters in southern Idaho, the Department has occasionally closed human access to Wildlife Management Areas to protect wintering big game.

In reaction to the Idaho Commission action of 1994, the state of Wyoming instituted a shed antler gathering season in the western portion of the state in 1997 and subsequently expanded that area in 2020. In 2023, the Wyoming legislature also added a 7-day delay for nonresidents to gather sheds and the requirement that antler gatherers must possess a conservation stamp. Since 1997, Nevada and Colorado have created annual shed antler gathering closures in portions of each state. Utah DWR imposed shed antler gathering closures during the severe winters of 2017 and 2023.

During the concurrent legislative session and severe winter of 2023, the Idaho Legislature passed Senate Bill 1143 which gave the Commission authority to seasonally restrict the possession, transportation, and collection (including searching for, locating, and gathering) of naturally shed antlers and horns and antlers and horns from animals that died from natural causes for the protection of wintering big game.

Department staff presented draft antler closure alternatives for public scoping to the Commission at the July 2023 meeting and subsequently collected 21 days of public input during late September through early October on an overall emergency shed antler closure framework and two alternatives for 2024 antler closures in response to the effects of the severe winter of 2022-2023 on eastern Idaho mule deer populations.

The online scoping asked:

1. Do you support the establishment of Emergency Shed Antler Closures to decrease disturbance to wintering big game during and after severe winters?
2. The Department is considering two options for Emergency Shed Antler Gathering Closures in 2024. If you answered "Support" to the question above, which of the following options do you think the Department should implement for 2024?
  - Option 1: A single season, Shed Antler Gathering Closure in the Southeast Region only, closed January 1, 2024 - April 14, 2024.
  - Option 2: A single season, Shed Antler Gathering Closure in the Southeast Region and Upper Snake Region, closed January 1, 2024 - April 14, 2024.

A summary of public input on both the framework and alternatives will be provided to the Commission.

**Statutory Authority and/or Policy Issues:**

The 2023 Idaho Legislature passed SB 1143 which then became Idaho Statute 36-507, giving the Commission authority to implement seasonal restrictions on the possession, transportation, and collection of antlers and horns and antlers and horns from animals that died from natural causes to protect wintering big game.

**Public Involvement Process:**

The Department solicited public input through the Department website for 21 days, concluding on October 6, 2023. The Department received over 1,900 individual comments submitted through the online webform, email, or letter from the public and interested groups. Staff reviewed and considered all comments received to inform their staff recommendation and will provide a summary of that public input to the Commission.

**Justification:**

Commission action is necessary to establish seasonal antler and horn gathering closures.

**Staff Recommendations:**

Staff recommend the Commission establish an emergency antler gathering closure in the Southeast and Upper Snake Regions from January 1 - April 14<sup>th</sup>, 2024 in response to the severe winter of 2022-2023.

Suggested Motion: I move the Commission establish an emergency closure on the possession, transportation, and collection (including searching for, locating, and gathering) of naturally shed antlers and antlers from animals that died from natural causes in the Southeast and Upper Snake Regions from January 1 - April 14, 2024.