

Meeting Date: January 17, 2018

Agenda Item No. 13

Agenda Item: Discussion of return to annual big game proclamation

Bureau Chief Approval: _____

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Background:

The Idaho Fish and Game Commission considers proposed changes for season setting annually or biennially (biological rules). The Commission has unique authority to establish seasons via proclamation, rather than through IDAPA rulemaking. Proclamations are published annually (i.e., Waterfowl) or biennially (e.g., Big game; Moose, Bighorn Sheep, and Mountain Goat; Upland Game) and include seasons, limits, size, sex, and harvestable species. Fishing seasons are now set on a 3-year cycle.

The Commission has set seasons biennially for upland game since 1986 and for moose, bighorn sheep, and mountain goats since 1991. Before 2015 when the Commission transitioned big game season setting to a 2-year cycle, big game seasons had been set annually, with the exception of 2-year seasons set for 1992 and 1993. However, the Commission did revisit season-setting during March 1993 and adopted season changes that were published in an 8-page supplement to the 1992 and 1993 Big Game Seasons booklet. Big game season setting resumed annually in 1994.

In 2015 the Department proposed to move to a biennial cycle for big game seasons. During annual season setting, Department wildlife staff throughout the state spent weeks considering season change proposals, conducting internal and public meetings to solicit input, developing and scoping proposals, and making final season recommendations, but year-to-year changes tended to be relatively minor. The 2-year season cycle was proposed to provide greater stability in seasons and to allow implemented changes to be better assessed. The cycle would provide staff more time to concentrate on other issues in off years including species management plan revisions and developing and implementing improved big game population monitoring techniques. A 2-year season cycle was expected to benefit sporting families and individuals who need to schedule vacation time well in advance by providing greater certainty on hunting season dates and allow greater time for planning.

Staff committed to monitor harvest and big game population objectives annually and provide the Fish and Game Commission status updates every year. If necessary, due to fire, bad winter weather, a disease event, or other factors, the Department could still make season changes and adjust controlled hunt tag numbers to respond to those types of emergencies should they occur in an off year. It was understood that the Commission may direct the Department to resume an annual season setting cycle if conditions merit significant changes.

The proposal was supported by 75% of sportsmen and was well-received by the Outfitting industry—outfitting businesses benefit by having stability in seasons and being able to plan further out. Additional information on proposals is provided in the attached Q&A document (see Appendix A).

Since implementation of the 2-year cycle, wildlife staff have intensified our elk monitoring program with the addition of a statewide capture, collaring, and survival monitoring program.

Statutory Authority and/or Policy Issues:

Idaho Code 36-104 grants authority to the Commission to promulgate rules for the taking of wildlife consistent with state policy. Species management plans developed by the Department and adopted by the Commission provide long-term direction for population and harvest management. Under Idaho Code 36-106(e)6(A) the Director has authority to immediately close any open season or reduce the bag limit or possession limit for any species if such species may be threatened with excessive shooting, trapping, or angling.

Public Involvement Process:

Department staff visited with sportsmen to discuss moving big game season setting during open houses for the 2014 big game season setting cycle and again in 2015. Seventy-five percent (75%) of big game hunters who responded to our online input form in 2015 supported moving to a 2-year season setting cycle.

Justification:

This agenda item is for Commission information and discussion. Commissioners have requested a briefing and an opportunity to discuss returning to an annual proclamation for big game seasons.

Staff Recommendation:

This agenda item is for information and discussion at request of the Commission.

Appendix A.

March 2015

2-year Big Game Rule Cycle Proposal

The Department is proposing to convert the big game season-setting process to a 2-year cycle for white-tailed deer, mule deer, elk, pronghorn, black bears, mountain lions, and gray wolves. The Department has been setting moose, bighorn sheep, and mountain goat seasons, and upland game seasons, on a 2-year cycle for more than 20 years, and now sets fishing seasons for a 3-year period.

The current annual season-setting process commences in December each year with development of proposals that are scoped with the public and further refined based on input received prior to final Commission action in mid-March. Year-to-year changes tend to be relatively minor. A 2-year season cycle would provide greater stability in seasons and allow staff to engage the public in a variety of forums over a longer period of time. A 2-year season cycle would benefit families and individuals who need to schedule vacation time well in advance by providing greater certainty on hunting season dates and allow greater time for planning. The change would also result in a modest reduction in regulation printing costs.

Staff would continue to monitor harvest and big game population objectives annually and provide the Commission status updates every year. In non-season setting years, staff would have more time to focus on extra monitoring and management activities. If necessary due to fire, bad winter weather, a disease event, or other factors, the Commission could still make season changes and adjust controlled hunt tag numbers to respond to those types of emergencies should they occur in an off year.

Q: How did the public respond to the proposal to set big game seasons for 2 years?

A: We provided an opportunity for the public to consider the proposal and comment via our website from February 23 – March 9 and at open houses around the state. Of the 210 opinions received online, 158 individuals (75%) supported the proposal and 52 opposed (25%).

Q: What were the primary reasons given by those who were opposed to setting seasons for 2 years?

A: The 3 primary reasons cited by those opposed to the proposal were:

1. It is important that the Department sets seasons every year so they can respond with season changes following a bad winter (or other weather factors such as drought) to reduce harvest.
2. The Department needs to evaluate harvest and population counts annually.
3. The Department needs to hear from the public and give the public an opportunity to provide input on hunting every year.

Q: How would harvest monitoring and population surveys change with a 2-year season cycle?

A: There would be no reductions to our current big game harvest monitoring and population surveys. Our mandatory hunter reporting system will remain unchanged and harvest will continue to be reported and analyzed by zone/DAU and down to the Game Management Unit level every year. The southern Idaho mule deer survival monitoring and our newly implemented statewide elk survival monitoring would continue annually

so we can closely monitor populations around the state. These tools will allow us to detect population changes and respond more quickly than in the past. Our aerial mule deer herd composition surveys and deer and elk sightability surveys will also continue at the same very intensive level annually. If anything, population monitoring will improve through our elk and deer survival monitoring efforts and the increased amount of time staff will be able to devote to population data analysis and population modeling to assess population trends and management effectiveness during non-season-setting years.

Q: How will the Department respond if a current winter deer or elk survey, or bad winter conditions, indicates a change is needed in the middle of a 2-year season cycle?

A: Idaho Code 36-104(b)(2) grants authority to the Commission to set seasons and promulgate IDAPA rules concerning take of wildlife species. Further, Idaho Code 36-104(b)3 provides the Commission authority to impose restrictions on hunting opportunity to protect wildlife resources in response to a sudden or unexpected emergency.

The Department and Commission would have a number of options to adjust seasons or tag numbers available for controlled hunts in the middle of a 2-year season setting cycle. If population surveys or winter conditions resulted in a need to reduce harvest from the levels published in the 2-year seasons booklet, the Commission has authority to release fewer tags than the number published in the booklet. For example, in response to concerns about moose numbers in 2012, the Commission made an emergency modification in the middle of a 2-year cycle to close 2 moose hunts and reduce the number of tags released in 2 other hunts. Additionally, in response to low overwinter of survival of mule deer, in May 2011 the Department requested the Commission act to reduce the number of tags to be issued for hunts that we adopted and printed in the big game seasons booklet 2 months earlier. The Commission eliminated almost 1,500 tags from 14 different hunts.

In the case of general season elk hunts, the Commission could implement or modify A or B tag quotas to cap the number of tags sold if necessary to reduce harvest between season-setting years.

The Department would notify the public of such changes through statewide news releases, posting on our website, and notices distributed to license vendors, through statewide and regional email lists, and through social media (Regional Facebook accounts, twitter, etc.). Additionally, the licensing system would be programmed to flag modified hunts so that individuals who apply for such a hunt would be notified of any changes in the number of tags available before completing their application.

If more substantive changes to seasons were warranted in mid-cycle, the Commission could direct the Department to initiate the full season setting process during the off year.

Q: How would the switch to 2-year season cycle affect public involvement?

A: The Department would continue to receive input and suggestions related to season setting from the public year-round. However, rather than conducting the same series of open houses and providing opportunity for the public to offer input on season proposals through our website annually, staff would have more time to do a more thorough job of scoping issues of concern with the public and solicit more meaningful input on key issues (such as soliciting input on hunter preferences on more significant season changes, species management planning, hunter opinion surveys, etc.). The Department will remain receptive to input from sportsmen year-round, regardless of whether it is a season-setting year or not.

Q: How much money would the Department save in printing regulations if seasons were set every other year instead of every year?

A: The Department currently prints 325,000 copies of the big game seasons proclamation booklet annually. Our contract allows the printer to sell advertising for the booklet annually to reduce our costs. During the initial year we would print the same 325,000 copies but plan to reduce printing by 20% the second year. The printer would continue to sell advertising annually, while anticipating lower print volume during the second year. Production could potentially be reduced further in subsequent cycles as we gain a better feel for annual residual as hunters learn to retain their booklets for the second year. A 20% reduction in number of booklets printed in the second year is estimated to reduce our printing costs by about \$10,000.

Q: If hunters make plans well in advance based on a 2-year rules cycle and we have to make changes to a hunting season in mid-cycle, how will the Department handle that? How will it be communicated?

A: The Department is committed to circulating information widely if we have concerns that may lead to recommendations to the Commission to alter seasons or tag levels between season-setting cycles. Changes to seasons and tag numbers will be advertised through statewide news releases, posting on our website, and notices distributed to license vendors, through statewide and regional email lists, and through social media (Regional Facebook accounts, twitter, etc.). Additionally, the licensing system would be programmed to flag modified hunts so that individuals who apply for such a hunt would be notified of any changes in the number of tags available before completing their application.

If changes alter a hunter's choice of where or when to hunt, the Department will work with the individual to suggest alternative hunts to meet their needs. In exceptional cases if we cannot adequately satisfy the hunter, refunds or rain checks would be considered on a case-by-case basis.

Obviously, the Department cannot control environmental factors, and there may be rare occasions where it is necessary to adjust seasons to protect populations. Because big game tags will still be sold on an annual basis, hunters will still generally purchase their tags months in advance of their hunts regardless of their planning window, so the occurrence of such inconveniences may not be any greater with a 2-year cycle than with our current annual cycle.

Q: What happens if legislative action results in changes to the Landowner Appreciation Program between season setting cycles?

A: Ideally, the Commission would set the seasons and tag numbers for LAP hunts on the same cycle as the big game seasons. If the LAP rules are changed, the Commission can direct the Department to initiate season-setting for the LAP mid-cycle, and then resume with a 2-year cycle concurrent with big game seasons the following year.