

Meeting Date: May 6, 2021

Agenda Item No. 9

Agenda Item: Technical Assistance and Big Game
Movement & Migration Programs

Bureau Chief Approval: JF

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Background:

Technical Assistance

The Department provides technical assistance to further the mission of preserving, protecting, perpetuating, and managing Idaho's fish and wildlife for the benefit of the people of Idaho by ensuring continued fishing, hunting, and trapping opportunities. The Department is routinely requested to provide technical assistance on a wide variety of projects, planning efforts, and other proposals that potentially affect fish, wildlife, and associated recreation. Requests come from a diversity of entities including for example local, state, and federal regulatory agencies; public and private land and resource managers; real estate developers; transportation agencies; energy and mineral companies; and private property owners. Technical assistance may be provided in many forms, including formal written correspondence, emails, phone calls, project meetings, site visits, and participation in collaborative processes.

As an executive agency, the Department also has responsibilities to ensure that effective stewardship of the state's fish and wildlife resources occurs in a manner that is compatible with other business of the State to promote the safety, health, and welfare of Idaho citizens. In doing so, the Department implements a solution-oriented approach to technical assistance that is also compatible with policymaking roles of the Fish and Game Commission, other executive branch agencies, and the Legislative and Judicial branches of state government. Accordingly, the Department extensively coordinates technical assistance activities with the Governor's Office and other State agencies including for example the Office of Energy and Minerals, Office of Species Conservation, Department of Water Resources, Department of Environmental Quality, Department of Lands, and Transportation Department.

The Department's Technical Assistance Program (TAP) operates within the Director's Office and has nine dedicated full-time staff members consisting of a Program Manager and Program Coordinator based in Headquarters and an Environmental Staff Biologist (ESB) based in each of the seven Regional Offices. Working in concert with the Director's Office, Regional Supervisors are responsible for TAP oversight and supervision within Regions. The ESB is the primary TAP point-of-contact for each Region. Regional Supervisors, coordinating with ESBs, may assign other staff as appropriate to assist technical assistance workloads and responsibilities. Regional Supervisors are also responsible for reviewing technical assistance comments and recommendations developed at the regional level and for identifying the appropriate Department signatory for communications, comment letters, and other documents. Where technical assistance requests span multiple regions or are of a nature more appropriately handled at the Bureau or Director's Office level, the Director's Office will identify the lead region/bureau or staff responsible for coordinating comments.

Technical assistance comments and recommendations are based on the best available data and information within the context of the Department’s mission and corresponding management plans. Technical assistance is therefore provided in a fact-based manner that effectively informs decision-makers of expected fish and wildlife and associated recreation outcomes from the action and alternatives being considered, including for example potential positive or negative effects and recommendations to offset adverse effects (e.g., avoid, minimize, or mitigate).

The following are examples of priority projects for which the TAP team is currently engaged providing requested fish and wildlife technical assistance:

- Kootenai River Selenium (R1)
- Nez Perce-Clearwater Forest Plan Revision (R2)
- Stibnite Mine NEPA Process (R3)
- Cat Creek Energy Water Rights and Hydroelectric Project (R3 & R4)
- Lava Ridge Wind Project (R4)
- American Falls Hydroelectric Relicensing (R5)
- Arco Wind and Solar Project (R5 & R6)
- Felt Hydroelectric Project Relicensing (R6)
- Rexburg Airport Relocation (R6)
- Lemhi River Water User Settlement Process (R7)

Big Game Movement & Migration

The Department’s Big Game Movement & Migration (M&M) Program works with a diversity of partners to conserve big game habitats across the State including migration habitat. Partners include state and federal agencies, non-governmental organizations, and private landowners. Habitat conservation efforts focus on management, monitoring, and technical assistance for partners.

For decades, the Department has invested significant research and monitoring resources to obtain data necessary to assist public and private land managers with conserving big game habitats. Since 2018, the Department’s management and studies of big game seasonal habitats and migration routes have been augmented through the Department of Interior’s (DOI) Secretarial Order No. 3362 (SO3362). SO3362 directs DOI agencies to assist western tribes, private landowners, state fish and wildlife agencies, and state highway departments with conserving and managing priority big game winter ranges and migration routes.

In 2018, the Department and DOI jointly developed the “Idaho Action Plan” for SO3362, which establishes a framework for conserving priority big game winter range and migration habitats within five Priority Areas as informed by Commission approved management plans. Priority Areas consider the presence of key big game populations, corresponding winter ranges and migration routes, and potential habitat and population risks. Idaho’s action plan also facilitated detailed analyses of nearly two decades of radiotelemetry data to map mule deer, elk, and pronghorn migration routes and stopover locations. Recent technological advancements in Global Positioning System (GPS) radiotelemetry and innovations in statistical analyses (e.g.,

Brownian bridge movement models) have greatly improved the quality of migration data and information available to inform big game management decisions and habitat investment.

Combining these modern technologies and SO3362 funding, 18 mule deer, 15 elk, and 5 pronghorn migrations have been mapped to-date. These maps are the culmination of 18 years of data collection that resulted in over four million GPS locations from nearly 2,000 individual radio-collared big game animals. Idaho's big game migration maps are digitally available through the Department's Idaho Fish and Wildlife Information System (IFWIS). These maps are already being used by the Department and partners to improve big game management per the following examples:

- Design of transportation infrastructure to reduce wildlife-vehicle conflicts.
- Technical assistance to assess potential effects of proposed energy development on big game migrations.
- Habitat improvement projects including retrofitting livestock fences to wildlife-friendly specifications along migration routes.
- Land use planning.

The Department's M&M Program is led by the Director's Office and implemented by staff from the Bureau of Wildlife and Regions. In addition, a dedicated Mule Deer Foundation staff member is funded by a 3-year National Fish and Wildlife Foundation grant to provide the Department with staffing capacity for implementing the following action plan priorities: (1) coordinating and participating in habitat management projects; (2) providing technical assistance; (3) continuing big game radiotelemetry studies; and (4) improving the mapping of big game winter ranges, movement routes, and stopover locations.

The following are examples of ongoing and near-term M&M Program priority efforts:

- Continued monitoring of the more than 2,000 big game animals currently fitted with GPS radio-collars.
- Continued improvement of migration maps and information to inform future big game management and conservation.
- Refinement of elk migration maps in targeted areas of north-central Idaho.
- Mapping of additional mule deer migrations in southern Idaho.
- Participation in designing new big game crossing structures on State Highways 21 and 30 in collaboration with the Idaho Transportation Department and Federal Highway Administration.
- Monitoring big game movements and roadkill associated with improvements to highway bridges and big game fencing on State Highway 28.
- Participation with partners in multiple collaborative habitat improvement and wildlife-friendly fencing projects.
- Statewide coordination of big game movement and migration projects.
- Rollout of a new mobile application for recording roadkill big game.

Statutory Authority and/or Policy issues:

Per Idaho Code § 36-103, the Commission administers the State's policy to preserve, protect, perpetuate, and manage fish and wildlife resources to be available to the citizens of Idaho for continued supplies for hunting, fishing and trapping.

Public Involvement Process:

Technical Assistance – The Department provides technical input as requested to assist entities conducting public decision-making processes about resource management planning, projects, and actions (including efforts and projects to conserve priority big game movement and migration routes) that might affect fish and wildlife resources, and associated recreation.

Justification:

The Commission requested an update regarding the Department's Technical Assistance and Big Game Movement & Migration programs to stay abreast of the current priority efforts and provide policy and position direction as may be warranted.

Staff Recommendation:

This update is provided for Commission information.

Suggested Motion:

No Commission action is required.