

Prepared by: Jon Rachael and Sal Palazzolo

Background:

The Department's depredation program began in 1984 to provide technical assistance and materials to landowners experience damage from big game. In 1989, in response to staggering depredation losses compounded by multiple years of drought, an appropriation bill removed \$500,000 from the Department's budget to compensate farmers and ranchers for big game depredation losses to crops, fences, and equipment that occurred during 1988 and 1989. Also in 1989, the legislature established the Fish and Game Advisory Committee to make recommendations on the direction of Department's depredation program, and in 1990 legislation established a cooperative program among landowners, the Department, and Sportsmen to limit damage caused by wildlife.

The program is based on recognition of a shared responsibility of the Department and landowners. Prevention of depredations is a priority management objective of the Department, and landowners are obligated to take all reasonable steps to prevent property loss from wildlife. When damages cannot be sufficiently reduced or prevented, landowners may file a claim for compensation.

The Department's actions to prevent damage include hazing, preventing access to haystacks (panels, fencing, permanent stack yards), baiting animals away from attractants, and reducing depredating animals through a combination of harvest season tools including extra antlerless deer or elk tags, liberalization of tag numbers in capped elk zones, landowner permission hunts, greenfield hunts, depredation hunts, and when necessary, kill permits issued to landowners or implemented by Department staff.

The depredation program and laws have evolved through time, typically in response to increases in conflicts and damage costs. In the 5 year period prior to FY2017, the Department received 20 – 30 damage claims totaling about \$250,000 annually. Despite increased financial commitment and intensive efforts focused on preventing damage, depredation claims and costs have increased dramatically since then, from 58 claims totaling about \$755,000 in FY17 to a high of 89 approved claims in FY19 at a cost of \$2,400,000, including one single claim that exceeded \$1,200,000. The increase in depredation conflicts and costs is a result of multiple factors including difficult-to-resolve conflicts and high-dollar crops (e.g., elk in corn fields, organic crops), winter conditions, robust deer, elk, pronghorn populations near agriculture, and private land refuges adjacent to agricultural fields where depredations are occurring.

At the meeting, staff will present an overview of the depredation prevention and compensation program, including recent changes to the depredation law, prevention efforts, damage trends, and a case study.

Statutory Authority and/or Policy issues:

Idaho Code 36-111 created a set-aside account and mechanism to fund prevention of depredation damage caused by pronghorn, deer, and elk on private land from the portion of the sale of each pronghorn, deer, and elk tag.

Idaho Code 36-115 created a big game depredation fund to be used to pay compensation to landowners for damage caused by wildlife to agricultural crops, stored feed, livestock, bees, beehives, and honey. The statute further establishes the procedure for how the Department is to process and pay damage claims from the fund.

Idaho Code 36-1108 (damage by pronghorn, elk, deer, moose), 36-1109 (damage by black bears, non-ESA-listed grizzly bears, mountain lions), and 36-1110 (damage to private land

forage caused by grazing wildlife) establish that prevention of depredation shall be a priority management objective of the Department and that landowners are obligated to take all reasonable steps to prevent property loss or mitigate damage from wildlife. These statutes dictate the obligations and requirements of landowners to notify the Department, cooperate in resolution/prevention of further damage including allowing reasonable access to hunters, provide Department staff access to evaluate damages, and the process for landowners to file a damage claim. The statutes dictate the Department's obligations to respond, provides authority to remove depredating animals, or to make agreements with landowners to allow continued use of lands where damage has occurred, and provides the process by which the Department will pay damage claims.

Public Involvement Process:

The Department's role and obligation in preventing wildlife damage and compensating private landowners for documented losses is defined by statutes crafted and implemented through the legislative process. Private landowners and sportsmen have been represented in this process and have had opportunities to testify at bill hearings throughout the life of the program. The Department receives input from sportsmen and landowners throughout the year on concerns about wildlife damage to private land, wildlife management objectives, and hunting season proposals designed to address wildlife damage to private land.

Justification:

This agenda item is for Commission information on the Department's depredation prevention and compensation program, its history, trends, and current issues. This agenda item will enhance the Commission's understanding of the program and aid them in responding to questions and concerns raised by sportsmen and landowners.

Staff Recommendation:

N/A. This agenda item is for Commission information. No action is required.