

**Meeting Date:** May 11, 2023

**Agenda Item No.** 11

**Agenda Item:** Response to Winter Conditions in Eastern Idaho

**Bureau Chief Approval:** JR

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**Background:**

Fish and Game captures and radio collars deer and elk throughout the state annually for research and management studies. This work involves determining causes of mortality for those individuals that die throughout the year. Elk calves, mule deer does, and mule deer fawns were collared and monitored in portions of eastern Idaho that experienced severe winter conditions. Staff will present the latest survival information for radio collared deer and elk.

The 2023 season setting process began in December 2022. Throughout the process the Department took into consideration the current winter conditions and monitored the severity and the effect on deer and elk survival. That information was used in the final formulation of the season proposals released to the public for scoping and led to further adjustments later in the process. Staff will discuss the changes made to the proposals in response to the severe winter conditions that occurred during the 2022/2023 winter in eastern Idaho. Staff will also discuss changes made to deer seasons over the last several years in response to winter conditions in eastern Idaho and how those changes influenced the Department's response this winter.

In addition to adjustments to hunting seasons, the Department took additional measures to benefit big game herds this winter. Department staff in the Southeast and Upper Snake Regions implemented baiting and supplemental winter-feeding efforts. The Department operated approximately 45 baiting and winter-feeding sites across the two regions. Supplemental feed can help some deer and elk, as well as deter animals from human conflicts, such as animals getting into livestock or agricultural fields, wandering onto roadways, or congregating in or near towns and becoming a nuisance.

Fish and Game also closed Tex Creek, Market Lake, Georgetown Summit, Montpelier, and Portneuf Wildlife Management Areas in eastern Idaho to human entry to further protect big game herds and give animals a place to avoid disturbances.

Regarding future actions the Commission may utilize, Senate Bill 1143 was signed into law during the 2023 Idaho Legislative session, providing the Fish and Game Commission authority to implement seasonal restrictions regarding collection of antlers and horns to protect wintering big game (Idaho Code 36-507; effective July 1, 2023).

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

The Idaho Fish and Game Commission administers state wildlife policy through the Department (Idaho Code 36-104). Idaho Statute 36-104 authorizes the Commission to establish rules for the taking of wildlife consistent with state policy.

Idaho Code 36-106 establishes authority of the Director to close seasons or public access to wildlife management areas in the event of an emergency.

Senate bill 1143 adds to existing law to provide for seasonal restrictions regarding antlers and horns to protect wintering big game (Idaho Code 36-507; effective July 1, 2023).

**Public Involvement Process:**

The Department receives input from the public throughout the year and actively solicited public input on big game seasons December 2022 – March 2023. The Department conducted numerous public outreach efforts through news releases, social media posts, and the Department website on winter conditions, WMA closures, and the effects of disturbance on wintering wildlife. Public input opportunities were also provided through the legislative process related to the Senate bill 1143 which provided the Commission authority in future years to set seasons for collection of horns or shed antlers on public land when needed to reduce disturbance to wintering wildlife.

**Justification:**

This agenda item is for Commission information on the status of deer and elk populations and Department management actions taken this winter.

**Staff Recommendation:**

None. This agenda item is for Commission information.