

Southeast Region Mule Deer Advisory Committee

Meeting Notes

7 October 2024

6:00 p.m. – 9:00 p.m.

Committee Attendees: Rick Berg, David Vedder, Justin Bergholm, Daniel McGregor, , Bracken Anderson, Travis Hobbs, Brock Maynard, Gary Peck, Max Winward, Chris Burger, Dustin Rowe. *Absent was member Jon Meyers.*

IDFG Staff: Dan Garren (Regional Supervisor), Zach Lockyer (Regional Wildlife Manager), Eric Freeman (Regional Wildlife Biologist), David Dressel (Regional Wildlife Biologist), Jess Jaeckel (Senior Depredation Technician), Quinn Kropp (Conservation Office), Commissioner Jordan Cheirrett

Meeting started at 6:00 p.m. Notes prepared by Zach Lockyer, Eric Freeman, David Dressel, and Dan Garren.

Introduction

- Reviewed meeting minutes from September 9, Berger motioned to approve, McGregor seconded. Unanimous.
- Discussed outline for the meeting and a need to focus on the task at hand – Harvest management and coming up with proposals/rules related to that topic. Other requested topics can be visited once the primary objectives are complete. Other topics include Disease Management, Winter Feeding, Predation, Antlerless Harvest, Roadkill, etc.
- Reiterated the 3 goals the committee began with, or parameters that the committee is working with.

Presentation and Discussion on the Potential Impacts of Changes

- How do we improve experiences? Reduce crowding, increase the number of bucks (the main two goals of this group so far).
- Went over a graph demonstrating what the results might be on buck numbers if success rates were reduced by 10%.
- Had a long discussion about various other things that might impact population growth rates. Changing parturition dates, changing predation regimes? Changing climate? Many of these concepts are outside of the charge of this group, which is more directly tied to potential regulations changes for the 2025-2026 hunting seasons cycle.
- Discussed the impacts of lowering harvest rates.
- Discussed the impacts of lengthening seasons as a tool to decrease crowding.
- Talked about the common thread of those things being trying to improve people's experiences, whether this be through less crowding or more mature bucks on the landscape.
- Explored examples of differing harvest rates between differing areas (e.g. Wyoming Range vs. Caribou DAU). Experiences, buck doe ratios, etc. are all a function of the proportion of the population that is getting harvested.

Review of past meeting and Discussion/Votes on proposals:

- Recap of the Ideas the group seemed to support in the September meeting. Group then went through each of those ideas and voted their support or lack of support for each as well as interjected other ideas/thoughts.
 - Member brought up the idea that maybe antler point restrictions hadn't worked in the way that they were implemented, but that they might work if it was implemented differently. Wants to reassess the benefits of short-term usage.
 - Dissent amongst the group about antler point restrictions. Most agreed that long-term usage of antler point restrictions are ineffective and reduce opportunity. However, members discussed the value they might provide short-term (1-2 years) following a harsh winter event.
 - Blanket 4 point restrictions may not be supported, but there likely would be support from this group as long as there was a defined sunset on the regulations. They may want to voice their support for suggesting this as a tool after the next severe winter.
- Most of the group would support opening the season earlier. The problem with this is that if other regions don't jump in, we might recruit hunters from other regions. Group discussed potential lack of support by the broader public, but the idea has merit if it didn't increase harvest and spread people out. Group wants to keep investigating this idea.
- Discussion about shortening seasons – the group does not support shortening seasons, as this increases crowding unless the season is so short (less than 4 days) that it impacts harvest. General agreement that shorter seasons do not benefit hunting or the experience.
- Modifying existing controlled hunt structures – Discussion was focused on adding opportunity in GMUs that are primarily controlled. When these units went from general seasons to controlled seasons many hunters were displaced, traditions were lost, and neighboring general units experienced an influx of hunters thus diminishing experiences there. Ideas such as adding a general muzzleloader opportunities or controlled limited weapon opportunities within controlled hunt units like 70 and 78 were discussed. Would the broader public support this change?
 - The “resource” that the group talked about in these discussions is big deer on the landscape. People like to have the chance to draw a tag to see and hunt big deer occasionally.
- Group discussed weapon type restrictions in general season units. A member asked how long it would take if the Department pursued a rifle season option with no scopes? Because it would require rule change and need to go through the legislature it would take 2 years at a minimum to implement. Group had differences in opinions on how accepting the public might be of this change.
 - Member asked how much weight might recommendations from this group carry on a scopeless rifle weapon class when there is also a Hunting and Technology (HAT) working group? (It's likely that the HAT working group will drive suggestions on this topic, as they are specifically tasked with addressing technology issues. Definitely some overlap here, and recommendations from this group would likely compliment the HAT group).
 - The group likes the idea of proposing a couple units with weapons restrictions (short range weapons/muzzleloader) in the short term and getting a scopeless rifle designation established as a tool the Commission could use in the future if deemed appropriate.

- The group is considering proposals and ideas that fit in three different categories (season setting, rules, and broad recommendations for Department consideration):
 - Season Setting:
 - 1. Longer Seasons in general any weapon units if other regions (R5, R6 an R7) would get on board had majority support.
 - 2. Converting one or two GMUs in the region with general any weapon hunting to general short range or muzzleloader hunting had broad support, but with some reservations. Group overall does worry about whether the public would support this. The intent would be to implement this strategy for a 4- or 6-year trial, recognizing that the Commission retains the right to alter seasons at their discretion during the normal rules process. Staff would measure what changes qualitatively and quantitatively in the deer herd, as well as measuring hunter participation and satisfaction.
 - 3. Increase capacity in Controlled Hunt Units had unanimous support. General consensus is that we need more opportunity in these areas to improve drawing odds, and let more people experience these high-quality hunting areas, and potentially spread out hunters. This could come in many forms – reduce weapons success by implementing muzzleloader/short range weapons and increasing the number of participants as an example.
 - Rule Changes:
 - Scopeless rifle rule change had unanimous support, recommend moving this suggestion to the HAT committee to consider.
 - Allow lesser weapons during muzzleloader seasons. If it's a muzzleloader hunt, also allow archery equipment (the step-down approach where its xxx weapons, and anything considered less effective would be allowed)
 - Implement a habitat stamp to increase funding for mule deer had unanimous support. Funding increases need to be specific to mule deer management, not general agency operations.
 - Require landowners participating in department programs to allow public access had unanimous support
 - Eliminated the concept of an early start for residents.
 - Clean up baiting language had unanimous support – make prohibitions on baiting easier to enforce.
 - Recommendations:
 - Implement a recommendation to implement antler point restrictions after severe winters didn't get a vote and this needs further discussion.
 - Group wants to evaluate data and information on predator management and impacts to mule deer populations that will occur at a later date.
 - Group wants to evaluate data and information related to roadkill that will occur at a later date.
- Members will begin discussing specifics (where, when) of proposed ideas and concepts at the November meeting.

- Meeting adjourned at 9 pm.