

Idaho Department of Fish & Game
Strategic Plan Update
Public, Partner and Employee Engagement Process Findings
May 22, 2025

As part of the update of the 2015 IDFG Strategic Plan, a 6-month assessment phase was conducted to determine current attitudes, concerns and recommendations from members of the general public, customers, partner agencies and employees:

- 2023 Statewide Attitudes and Awareness Survey
- 2022 and 2024 Employee Survey
- 42 interviews with Department Operations Team members and other staff
- 8 regional public engagement sessions attended by 130 individuals
- 8 regional employee engagement sessions attended by 250 employees
- 1 Online Agency Partner engagement session attended by 27 organizations
- Over 400 online public comments
- 31 online employee comments
- 10 letters submitted to IDFG from partner agencies and non-profit organizations

Over 370 pages of verbatim comments have been compiled for review. A high-level summary of these comments and findings by focus area is as follows:

User Satisfaction

Key concerns revolved around real and perceived crowding, conflicts among residents, non-residents, and non-consumptive users, and public mistrust in agencies post-COVID. Increased population and demographic shifts added strain on natural resources and user expectations. Some users felt disillusioned with complex regulations, lack of field staff presence, and erosion of traditional access due to development and private land acquisition.

Recommendations included:

- Addressing crowding via education, access management, and possibly higher fees.
- Enhancing communication and simplification of licensing/tag systems.
- Preserving the “Opportunity State” ethos while accommodating population growth.
- Incorporating non-consumptive users into planning and funding mechanisms (e.g., gear taxes).
- Expanding outreach, transparency, and modernization (e.g., E-tagging, online tools).
- Promoting youth and next-generation engagement in hunting and conservation.

Across regions, shared themes included concern over hunter density, declining big game populations (especially deer), motorized vehicle intrusion, access limitations due to land closures, and enforcement shortfalls. Participants called for more COs, adaptive season/tag strategies, better education for new hunters and non-residents, and increased habitat protection. Region-specific feedback gathered from the public and staff included:

- Region 1: Enforcement, predator concerns, ATV issues, need for spearfishing reform.
- Region 2: Landowner inclusion, timber impacts, deer pressure, access limitations
- Region 3: User ethics, funding fairness, inclusion of non-traditional users.
- Region 4: Biodiversity focus, ATV overuse, access enforcement, habitat stewardship.
- Region 5: Grazing reforms, habitat loss, access restrictions, hunting season overlaps.
- Region 6: Fee structures, digital tools, conservation officer expansion.
- Region 7: IDFG transparency, wolf reintroduction effects, tag odds fairness.

Online comments echoed concerns about hunter crowding, loss of mature game, perceived overregulation, and non-resident pressure. Many advocated for restructuring tag allocations to prioritize residents, better access to habitat and digital resources, and increasing transparency and enforcement. Some voiced strong opposition to trapping and predator hunting; others supported predator control for herd protection.

Habitat Loss

Respondents emphasized that protecting habitat should be IDFG's top priority, with many noting current development efforts inadequately consider wildlife needs.

Stakeholders cited rising concerns over wildland fires, habitat fragmentation, water rights issues, urban expansion, and legislative barriers to funding conservation. Many called for proactive land use engagement, acquisition of land/habitat leases/easements, and education initiatives targeting both the public and lawmakers. The importance of cross-agency collaboration was a key theme, with many participants urging IDFG to play a more active role in land planning and mitigation.

Public meeting feedback stressed the need to reduce highway wildlife collisions, prevent development in critical habitats, and increase public access. Suggestions included corridor protection, volunteer programs, and incentive structures for private landowners to maintain biodiversity and allow public access.

Online commenters highlighted the loss of traditional access points, encroachment of development, unchecked growth, and underfunded mitigation efforts. Many advocated for

science-based habitat management, broader public education, and stronger partnerships with federal and private entities to maintain connectivity and biodiversity.

Additional recommendations included:

Direct IDFG Influence

- Adjusting seasons and tags as habitat is reduced
- Increasing population of beaver on the landscape
- Reducing motorized access in sensitive habitats
- Improving WMAs and increasing connectivity in-between WMAs
- Expanding the current funding model to enable all people who enjoy wildlife to contribute to the conservation of their habitat through conservation tags, WMA stamps for non-game use, excise tax on consumer items for hiking, birding, etc.

Indirect IDFG Influence

- Removing cheatgrass and noxious Weeds outside of WMAS
- Encouraging conservation logging practices
- Increasing prescribed fires
- Managing grazing on public land
- Working with irrigators and recharging aquifers

Together, the feedback reflects strong public will for IDFG to lead a more visible and coordinated effort in protecting and restoring Idaho's habitats, with emphasis on communication, access, equity, and long-term ecological stewardship.

Wildlife Disease and Invasive Species

Concerns over wildlife disease and invasive species centered on Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD), Epizootic Hemorrhagic Disease (EHD), brucellosis, avian influenza, and invasive species like cheatgrass.

Public input revealed a widespread demand for greater transparency, education, and action. Many felt uninformed about IDFG's current efforts and requested clearer explanations of the science and outcomes behind surveillance, culling, and disease control. There were mixed views on approaches—some favored predator involvement to naturally reduce diseased animals, while others called for more mandatory/voluntary testing and targeted population reductions.

Across regions, specific needs included better website communication, increased coordination with agriculture and federal agencies, and more visible law enforcement and

research presence. Several regions expressed concern about captive elk farms contributing to disease spread and advocated for stronger regulation and oversight.

The online public emphasized voluntary cooperation over mandatory controls, demanded evidence-based decisions, and highlighted the need for broader education and stakeholder involvement. Concerns about federal overreach and the role of predator species were recurrent themes. Respondents favored science-led management, rapid disease detection, enhanced communication, and incentivizing public engagement rather than imposing restrictions.

Direct IDFG Influence

- Adjust season lengths as needed to combat
- Hunt more to cull herds
- Learn from other states
- Combat introduction of non-native and invasive fish species
- Shorten length of time for receiving CWD testing results
- Stop the feeding of wild herds
- Also focus on other diseases

Indirect IDFG Influence

- Monitor spread of avian disease and require vaccine of domestic flocks
- Partner with cattle industry on testing and innovative grazing strategies
- Regulate commercial elk, sheep and other domestic species by requiring vaccines, regulating sale and transportation, and providing and better fencing to reduce spread of disease between captive and wild populations
- Make habitat improvements outside of WMAs

Predator Management

Predators of concern include wolves, grizzly bears, mountain lions, coyotes, turkeys and fish predators. Wolves dominated the predator debate. Grizzly bears and mountain lions elicit mixed reactions, often tied to livestock conflicts or game population concerns.

A notable number of respondents advocated for science-based, humane management and coexistence strategies. Habitat loss and human development are also seen as key issues influencing predator interactions.

Many respondents voiced concerns about Federal and legislative overreach, conflicts between agricultural needs and wildlife presence, litigation from NGOs, and a mistrust of government. There is also concern over increasing public misunderstanding and divisive narratives around predator management.

Insights by region from the public and staff included:

- Region 1: High concern about wolves and their effects on elk behavior. Wolves are blamed for pushing elk into human spaces. Grizzly conflicts with cattle are also a major concern.
- Region 2: Concerns extend beyond traditional predators to include turkeys and fish predators. There's recognition of natural predator roles, though some want sportsmen funding directed away from ag mediation.
- Region 3: Emphasis on human development as a key predator. Calls for better predator-prey balance and more use of ethical, sustainable methods. Diverse views on wolves, grizzlies, and trapping rights.
- Region 4: Request for IDFG to use science, not politics, in predator decisions. Support for non-lethal tools and concerns over fairness and ethics in hunting practices.
- Region 5: Calls for coyote bounties and better partnerships with agriculture. Observations of wildlife declines tied to predator presence and desire for localized strategies.
- Region 6: High concern about wolves and grizzlies. Advocated for more data sharing and sportsman-based predator management. Messaging around respect for wildlife urged.
- Region 7: Most vocal group against wolves and grizzlies, calling for eradication. Some noted IDFG limitations due to federal laws. Opinions are sharply divided.
- Online Portal (309 comments): Average concern level: 4.3 out of 5. Wolves are the most frequently cited concern, viewed by many as damaging to elk and deer herds. Others advocate for wolf protection, citing their ecological value. Grizzlies, mountain lions, and coyotes are also frequently discussed, with opinions split between control and conservation.

Predator Management Recommendations included:

- Improve stakeholder education to bridge divides and address misinformation.
- Promote transparency and public engagement using science-based messaging.
- Foster collaborative management with agriculture and conservation groups.
- Explore diverse management tools, including non-lethal options and compensation programs.

Agency Culture, Recruitment and Retention

IDFG's employees shared notably positive descriptions of current agency culture. Improvements to culture were recommended in areas including collaboration and communication; courage, creativity and innovation; diversity of gender and philosophy; awareness of differences in generational work cultures and needs; continued improvement in leadership; need for vision and trust; and work-life balance

Barriers to recruitment include pay, lack of affordable housing, educational requirements, lack of advancement without relocation, lack of diversity, and lack of trust and respect in political climate. Recommendations to improve recruitment included:

- Addressing pay and housing challenges
- Creating a stronger pipeline of applicants starting in high school
- Reassessing validity of education requirements
- Considering alternative training methods

Current employees are more likely to stay with IDFG with increases in compensation that accurately address housing costs in the State, more promotional opportunities, increased recognition and feeling of value and a realized commitment to work-life balance

Communication and collaboration between bureaus and regions can be improved with clearer clarity of direction, consistent communication pathways and better communication tools for those working in the field.

Public Engagement, Outreach and Education

Feedback on Idaho Fish and Game's public engagement, outreach, and education strategies emphasized the need for increased transparency, clearer communication of decision-making processes, and stronger efforts to engage a more diverse public, including non-consumptive users and new residents.

There was widespread support for conservation education, particularly targeting youth, newcomers, and underserved populations.

Recommendations included:

- Reinvesting in school-based and community programs
- Using storytelling as a medium
- Leveraging social media
- Training volunteers and vendors

- Improving internal communication.

A common thread was the need to show how public input shapes policy and to build long-term trust through consistent, visible, and science-based outreach.

Fiscal Sustainability

Comments regarding the fiscal sustainability of IDFG included concern about funding stability, adequacy, and the sustainability of existing revenue streams. Stakeholders, including staff and agency partners, expressed unease over the Department's increasing reliance on non-resident fees, shrinking federal funds, and lack of legislative support for fee increases and fund reauthorization.

Staff emphasized challenges such as inadequate infrastructure maintenance, overextended employees, and outdated pricing structures for resident fees.

Suggestions included:

- Diversifying revenue through non-consumptive user fees
- Improving funding transparency
- Increasing enforcement resources
- Strategically planning for economic downturns.

There is also significant support for educating the public and legislature about IDFG's fiscal needs and aligning expenditures with conservation priorities.

Relationship with the Legislature

Feedback related to IDFG's relationship with the Idaho Legislature outlines both improvements and persistent challenges. Staff and partners acknowledged progress in legislative communication but also expressed growing concern over legislative engagement in issues typically handled by the commission.

Respondents indicated concerns around tension around public land management and science skepticism.

Contributors recommended:

- Proactive relationship building
- Engaging legislators in field experiences
- Improving science communication
- Reinforcing IDFG's public trust mission.

Many emphasized that sustaining conservation goals requires depoliticized, science-informed governance and respectful legislative partnerships.

NEXT STEPS

Interdepartmental working groups have been established for each of the 8 focus areas.

Working groups will meet 2-3 times in facilitated sessions this summer to consider all assessment findings and recommendations.

Action plans to address priorities in each area will be developed, which will inform the overall strategies for each of the goals and objectives currently in the IDFG Strategic Plan.

Preliminary Action Plans will be shared with the public, partner agencies and employees this fall for review and additional comments.