



## MONTANA FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

**Meeting Date:** August 15, 2019

**Agenda Item:** Shoulder Season Review

**Action Needed:** Informational

**Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation:** 90 minutes

**Background:** Performance-based elk shoulder seasons are firearms seasons that occur between Aug. 15 and Feb. 15, outside the five-week general firearm season. They are intended to reduce over-objective populations as directed by statute by supplementing existing harvest and are not meant to replace or reduce harvest during the general archery and firearm seasons. Shoulder seasons are performance based with criteria for the number and timing of animals harvested to be met in a three-year evaluation for a shoulder season to continue. During 2016-2018, there were shoulder seasons in 43 hunting districts (HDs) to be evaluated; seasons in three HDs (101, 109 and 292) with complicated patchwork landownership are intended to redistribute elk and not subject to harvest criteria. In addition to evaluating shoulder seasons with harvest criteria, there are 11 fundamental objectives that address other elk considerations as well as hunter and landowner and logistical considerations. These objectives address more than just population status and offer multiple metrics for the commission to consider in their season-setting decisions. The fundamental objectives are found in the *Final Elk Season Guidelines - Flexible season structure with performance-based shoulder seasons* included in the commission packet and will be addressed during the October commission meeting. Information presented here covers only harvest criteria.

Shoulder seasons were effective in harvesting more antlerless elk. Additional shoulder season harvest during the three seasons from 2016-2018 was 4,559 cow elk above the average of the preceding five years with no shoulder seasons, an increase of 39%. Shoulder season effectiveness varied by season length. During 2016 and 2017, there were 14 HDs with 'short' seasons running until Jan. 1, and 12 with 'long' seasons until Feb. 15. Other HDs had intermediate season lengths. Sixty-seven percent of long-season HDs met their overall harvest objectives in both years, while only 33% and 40% of short-season HDs did in those two years respectively. In 2018, all HDs had long seasons and the percent of HDs meeting overall objectives was similar between HDs that previously had short seasons (60%) and those with long seasons in all years (56%). When the 14 HDs that had short seasons switched to a long season in 2018, cow harvest increased 62%; in the nine Region 5 HDs it increased 227%.

Shoulder seasons have also reduced elk numbers. Among the 40 HDs with harvest criteria, spring elk counts in 2019 were 8% lower than 2016, the benchmark year. Here again there were differences among HDs. Among the 12 long-season HDs, elk counts declined 20%, while short-season HDs declined 4%, and that only in the spring of 2019 following the long 2018 shoulder season. However, this must be interpreted with caution since counting elk is an inexact exercise subject to a multitude of weather and timing variables and elk movement between hunting districts.

While shoulder seasons are an effective, if controversial, tool for harvesting more elk, many HDs remain over objective. Hunter access remains a problem. Elk management, including shoulder seasons, will be successful in reducing numbers only if everyone – FWP, landowners and sportsmen – work together at reducing elk numbers, and shoulder seasons should only be maintained in those areas where key landowners are committed to reducing elk to the identified objective. Access in many areas such as much of Region 5, home to some of the most egregiously over-objective elk populations, is limited.

More information, including the shoulder season guidelines and the 2016 to 2018 shoulder season performance criteria evaluation tables, is in the commission packet.