



MONTANA FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

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Meeting Date: August 13, 2020

Agenda Item: Elk Shoulder Season Harvest Evaluation

Action Needed: Informational

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 30 minutes

Background:

Performance-based elk shoulder seasons are firearm seasons that occur between Aug. 15 and Feb. 15, beyond the standard dates of the five-week general firearm season. The seasons 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.

Implementation of shoulder seasons has increased annual antlerless harvest an average 45% in the hunting districts that have had shoulder seasons each year (2011–2014 average harvest of 3,569 [total harvest of 14,277] compared with 2016–2019 average harvest of 5,281 [total harvest of 21,123]). Since 2016, shoulder seasons have allowed for the harvest of 9,069 antlerless elk in addition to those harvested during general and archery seasons.

During 2016–2019, there were shoulder seasons in 42 hunting districts (HDs) to be evaluated; seasons in four HDs (101, 109-110, 121, and 292) with complicated patchwork landownership are intended to redistribute elk and are 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. Information presented here covers only harvest criteria.

As previously shared with the commission, shoulder season effectiveness varies 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. When the 14 HDs that had short seasons switched to a long season in 2018, antlerless harvest increased 62%. Shoulder seasons have reduced elk numbers. Among the 40 HDs with harvest criteria, spring elk counts in 2019 were 8% lower than 2016, the benchmark year. 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 somewhat controversial, tool for harvesting more elk, many HDs remain over objective. Hunter access remains challenging, and elk management will be successful in reducing numbers only if the department, landowners, and hunters work together. More information, including the shoulder season guidelines and the 2016 to 2019 shoulder season performance criteria evaluation tables, is in the commission packet.