

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION
Mule Deer 2022
Combine HDs 102 and 103

Hunting Districts: 102, 103

1. Describe the proposed season / quotas changes and provide a summary of prior history (i.e., prior history of permits, season types, etc.).

This proposal would combine HDs 102 and 103, and adjust the northern boundaries of both HDs, creating a new HD 103. The adjusted boundary is created by using well-known landmarks. To our knowledge, there has never been a history of these 2 HDs being combined, and the regulations across both HDs are relatively quite similar.

2. What is the objective of this proposed change? This could be a specific harvest amount or resulting population level or number of game damage complaints, etc.

Regulations simplification.

3. How will the success of this proposal be measured? This could be annual game or harvest surveys, game damage complaints, etc.

Success would be measured by a reduction in the number of complaints received regarding the difficulty of FWP's regulations.

4. What is the current population's status in relation to the management objectives? (i.e., state management objectives from management plan if applicable; provide current and prior years of population survey, harvest, or other pertinent information).

The population status of deer should not decline as a result of combining these 2 HDs.

5. Provide information related to any weather/habitat factors, public or private land use or resident and nonresident hunting opportunity that have relevance to this change (i.e., habitat security, hunter access, vegetation surveys, weather index, snow conditions, and temperature / precipitation information).

Because the regulations and habitat conditions are similar across both of these HDs, we do not anticipate much difference in hunting pressure if the HDs are combined. This proposal should only change how the deer and elk regulations appear by reducing the total number of HDs in Region 1.

6. Briefly describe the contacts you have made with individual sportsmen or landowners, public groups or organizations regarding this proposal and indicate their comments (both pro and con).

Region 1 received a number of comments during the 2021 scoping period ending on 20 October. Few comments were received regarding this proposal, however the majority were in favor of combining HDs 102 and 103. Relative to this proposal, there most to comment were either in support or neutral on the proposal, as long as it didn't affect the special mule deer management area in HD 103.

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION
Mule Deer 2022
Justification for Combining HD 101 and 109

Hunting Districts: 101,109

1. Describe the proposed season / quotas changes and provide a summary of prior history (i.e., prior history of permits, season types, etc.).

This proposal would combine HDs 101 and 109 for elk, mule deer, and white-tailed deer. Mule deer season structure is not consistent between HDs 101 and 109. Opportunity using a General License in HD 101 is limited to antlered buck during the six-week archery season and five-week general season. Opportunity using a General License in HD 109 is limited to antlered buck during the six-week archery season and the first three weeks of the general season. Limited draw permits (n = 10) are issued for antlered buck during the last two weeks of the season in HD 109. The 109-mule deer season structure was adopted by the commission prior to the 2012 hunting season, and was put in place due to hunter interest in maintaining a mature age-class of antlered mule deer by restricting harvest during the last two weeks when deer are more vulnerable to harvest due to migratory and breeding behavior. If this proposal is adopted, the reformed HD 101 would adopt the HD 109 season structure where opportunity using a General License would be limited to the six-week archery season and the first three weeks of the general season, with the last two weeks of the season restricted to limited draw permit holders. The number of permits issued will need to be adjusted pending commission decision.

Elk season structure is consistent between HDs. Opportunity using a General License is limited to either a brow-tined bull or antlerless elk during the six-week archery season, and brow-tined bull only during the five-week general hunting season. An additional 50 private-land only antlerless elk permits are issued to address game damage issues during an established shoulder season, Aug 15 – Feb 15. Permits are already valid in both HDs. HD 109 was created prior to the 2002 hunting season, primarily as means of effectively addressing elk game damage in the North Tobacco Valley. The establishment of the shoulder season permits has largely resolved the game damage issues that prompted HD 109 establishment. However, adopting this proposal would split HD 101 between two elk management units (EMUs) identified in the 2005 elk management plan.

White-tailed deer season structure is consistent between HDs. Opportunity using a General License is limited to either-sex during the six-week archery season, the first week of the general season and the last week of the general season on private land. Exceptions include youth hunters (ages 10-15), and those with a permit to hunt from a vehicle (PTHFV), who can harvest either-sex white-tailed deer on a General License throughout the general season. Each HD offers limited-draw antlerless licenses, valid on private land, to help address concentrations of deer on private agricultural ground. If the proposal is adopted, the number of 101-00 antlerless licenses issued would increase to 200 and the maximum quota range would be set at 800 to reflect the combined districts.

2. What is the objective of this proposed change? This could be a specific harvest amount or resulting population level or number of game damage complaints, etc.

The objective of this proposal is to simplify the hunting regulations by reducing the number of HDs. There is no biological justification for this proposal.

3. How will the success of this proposal be measured? This could be annual game or harvest surveys, game damage complaints, etc.

NA

4. What is the current population's status in relation to the management objectives? (i.e., state management objectives from management plan if applicable; provide current and prior years of population survey, harvest, or other pertinent information).

Mule Deer

Dense timber precludes effective aerial surveys for mule deer in HDs 101 and 109. Limited ground surveys are conducted during spring green-up in HD 109, and buck harvest derived from hunter phone survey data is used to estimate population trends. Across Region 1, mule deer populations have declined since the early 1990s. Prior to 1996, Region 1's mule deer general season structure consisted of two weeks either-sex, followed by three weeks antlered only harvest. In 1997, an antlered buck only regulation was adopted for the general five-week season, though antlerless opportunity was allowed during the six-week archery season. Between 1997 and 2012 limited antlerless harvest opportunities were available within the region, and all antlerless mule deer harvest opportunity was discontinued prior to the 2012 season. Based on harvest survey data, mule deer populations in HD 101 and 109 appear to have been relatively stable for the past ten years, albeit at much lower densities than those observed prior to 1996 (Figure 1) (Figure 2) . This proposal will not affect overall population trend.

Elk

Dense timber precludes effective aerial surveys for elk in HDs 101 and 109. Generally, elk populations occur at low densities throughout Salish and Whitefish Mountain Ranges in small (<50) localized groups. The Tobacco Valley, which occupies the northern portion of HD 101 and the western portion of HD 109 comprises the largest low-elevation winter range for some resident elk populations as well as migratory populations from British Columbia. The size of the migratory population varies according to winter severity and can result in numerous game damage issues within the predominately privately owned valley. Existing elk season structure is consistent between HD 101 and 109 and this proposal is not expected to have a biological impact on elk populations.

White-tailed Deer

Dense timber precludes effective aerial surveys for white-tailed deer in HDs 101 and 109. Ground based recruitment surveys are conducted annually during spring green-up, and buck harvest estimated from hunter phone survey data is used to track changes in population trend. In HD 101 and 109, recruitment has been steadily increasing since 2016 and has been estimated above 40 fawns per 100 adults for the past two years in HD 101, and this past year (2020) in HD 109. Antlered harvest has remained relatively stable during the last three years (Figure 3 & 4). The white-tailed deer population is stable to increasing within both HDs. Existing deer season structure is consistent between HD 101 and 109, and this proposal is not expected to have a biological impact on white-tailed deer populations, though may result in a limited compensatory increase in antlered buck harvest if a limited mule-deer season structure is adopted as proposed.

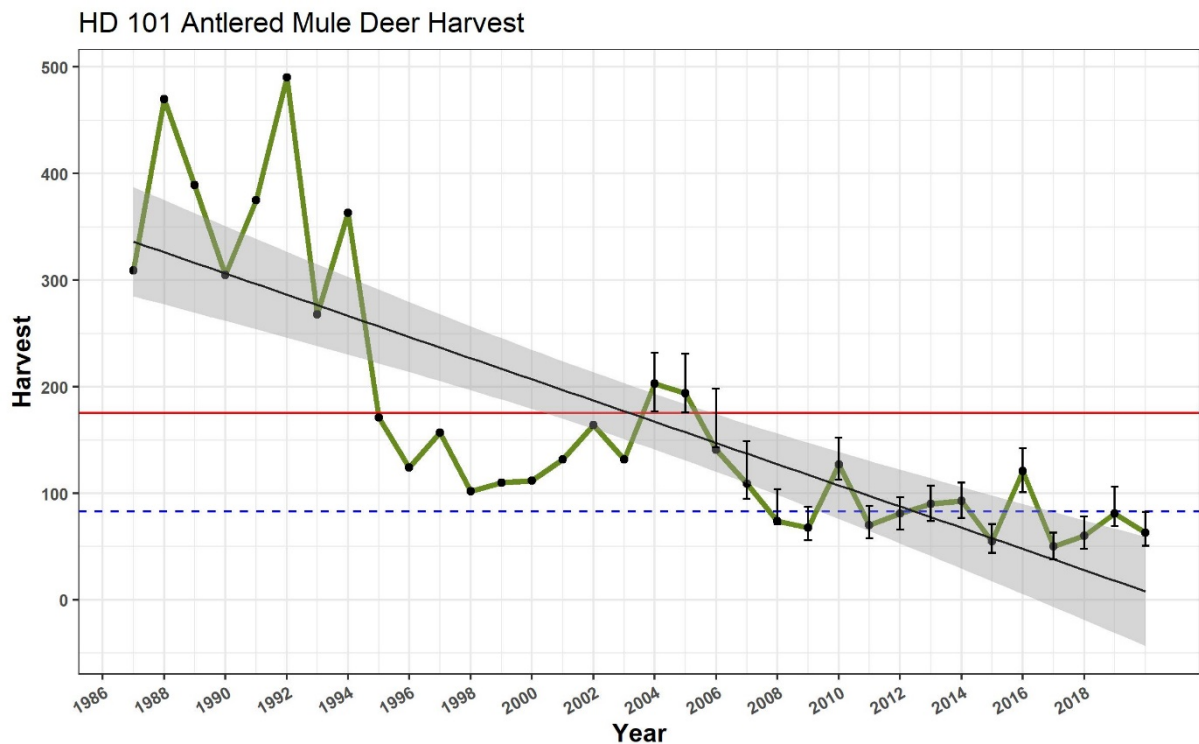


Figure 1: HD101 antlered mule deer harvest. Red line indicates long-term average harvest. Blue line indicates most recent 10 year average harvest.

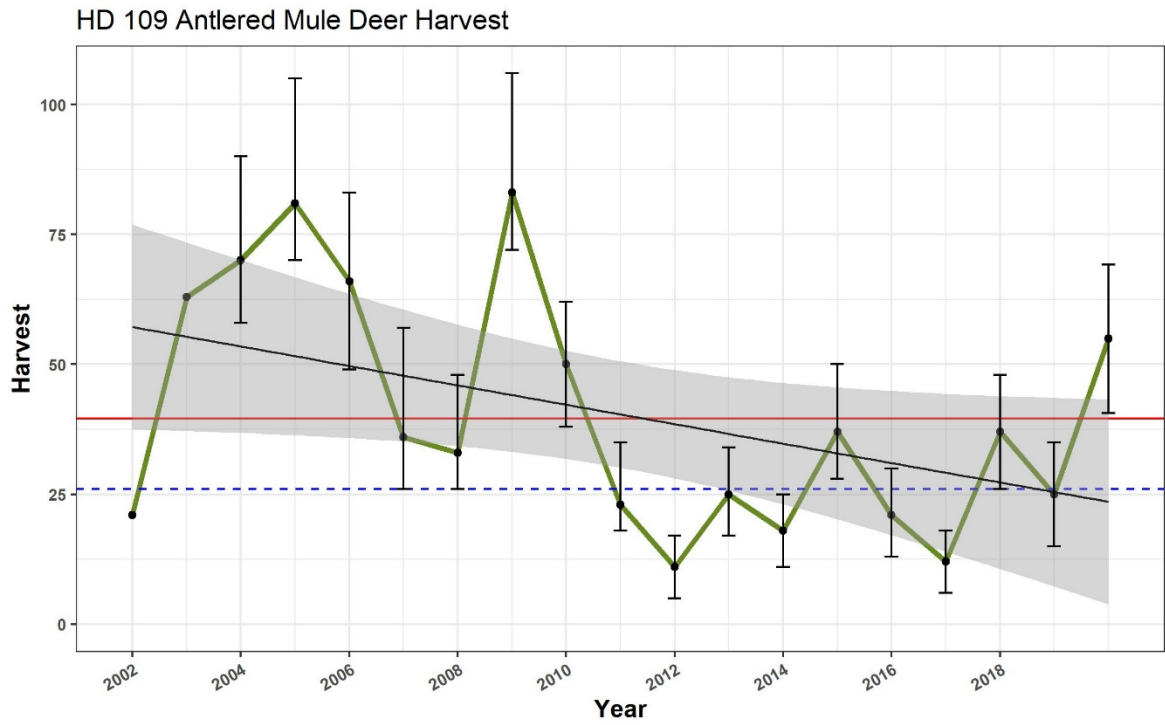


Figure 2: HD 109 antlered mule deer harvest. Red line indicates long-term average harvest. Blue line indicates most recent 10 year average harvest.

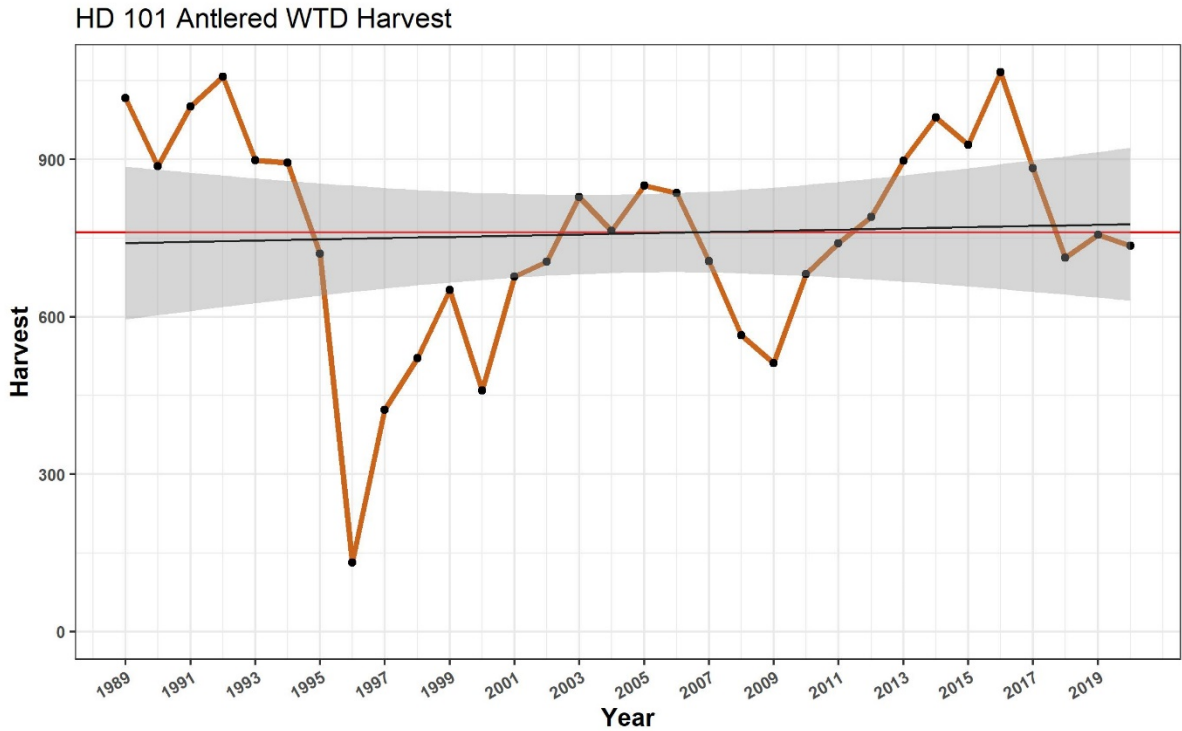


Figure 3: HD101 WTD antlered harvest (1989-2020).

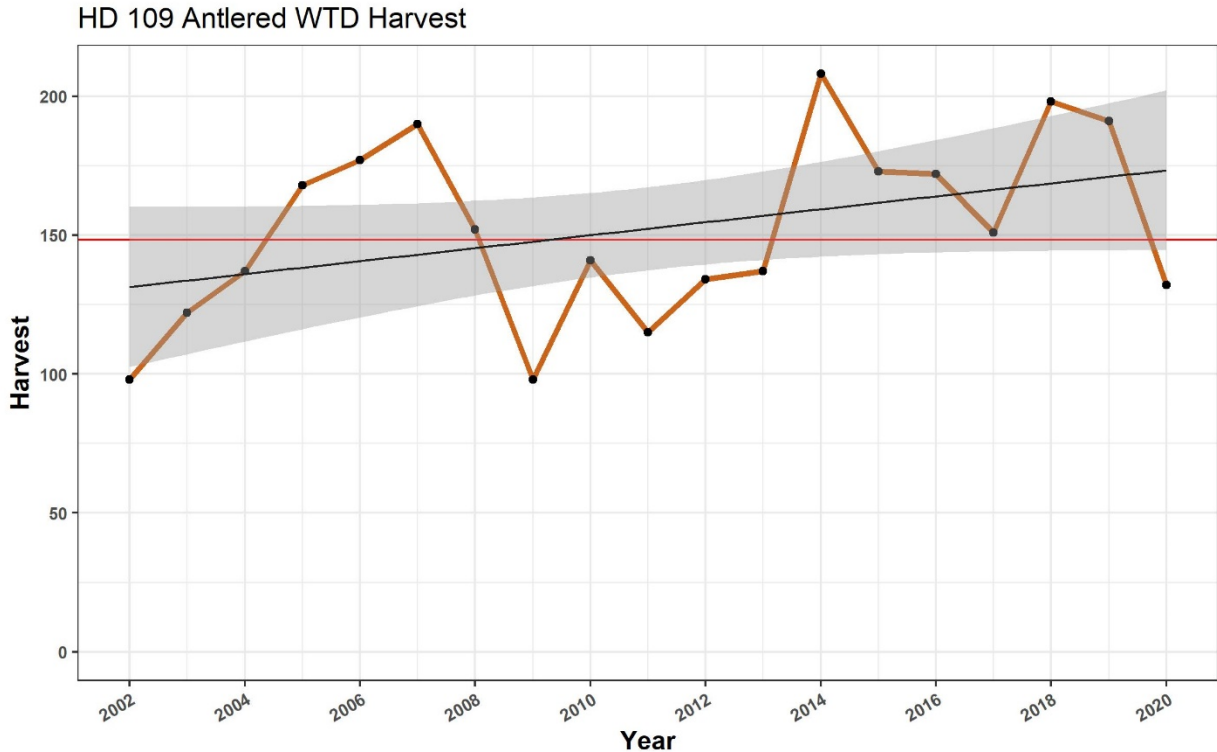


Figure 4: HD109 WTD antlered harvest (2002-2020).

5. Provide information related to any weather/habitat factors, public or private land use or resident and nonresident hunting opportunity that have relevance to this change (i.e., habitat security, hunter access, vegetation surveys, weather index, snow conditions, and temperature / precipitation information).

Mule deer populations in HD 101 and 109 are behaviorally distinct, though there is likely some interchange of individuals between populations. Mule deer in HD 109 are predominantly migratory, moving east into the remote and mountainous conditions of the Whitefish Range and British Columbia during the summer and transitioning to the lower elevation foothills of the Whitefish Range (east HD 109) during the late fall. Mule deer within HD 109 are most vulnerable to harvest while on winter range where hunter access is improved, and habitat offers improved visibility. No movement studies have been conducted on mule deer within HD 101, though observation and movement data from adjacent HDs suggests that both resident and migratory populations occur. Most resident populations occur within the Tobacco Valley and along Kooconusa Reservoir (east HD 101). Unlike HD 109, there is extensive road access throughout HD 101, though densely timbered conditions still provide some measure of security throughout the hunting season.

6. Briefly describe the contacts you have made with individual sportsmen or landowners, public groups or organizations regarding this proposal and indicate their comments (both pro and con).

Public comment was collected online September 21 – October 20, 2021. A virtual open-house public meeting occurred October 14. A total of 19 comments were received specific to the proposed changes, with 9 generally supportive of the proposal and 8 opposed. While in person discussions and public forums were limited by COVID-19 restrictions, discussions with local hunters suggests that division over this proposal is evenly split due to strong contention over what mule deer season structure will be applied to the much larger and combined HD 101. Overall, there is support or neutrality towards the district combination, as it relates to elk and white-tailed deer season structures.

Supporters of the proposal are generally in favor of restricting mule-deer buck harvest within the combined HD during the last two weeks of the season when bucks are perceived to be more vulnerable to harvest due to breeding behavior or late-season spatial distribution. The season structure in HD 109 is popular with hunters, who perceive an increase in older age-class deer within the HD, and value the season structure as a compromise

between a limited permit season structure, and an open opportunity season structure (6 week archery, 5 week general).

Opponents of the proposal are not in favor of restricting opportunity for mule deer bucks during the last two weeks of the season and cite differences in geographic characteristics, road densities mule deer distributions as justification to maintain an open opportunity season structure within 101. Some indicated general support for the HD 109 season structure within its current boundary but were not supportive of extending the season structure to a combined HD 101.

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION
Mule Deer 2022
HD 170 MD change

Hunting Districts: 170

1. Describe the proposed season / quotas changes and provide a summary of prior history (i.e., prior history of permits, season types, etc.).

This proposal would change the opportunity to hunt an either-sex mule deer in HD 170 with a General Deer License to only an antlered buck mule deer.

2. What is the objective of this proposed change? This could be a specific harvest amount or resulting population level or number of game damage complaints, etc.

The objective of this proposed change is to limit hunting opportunity in HD 170 to mule deer bucks only. This proposal would correct a regulatory oversight created when portions of HD 170 were combined with HD 132, unintentionally allowing the harvest of either sex mule deer in the new and larger HD 170.

3. How will the success of this proposal be measured? This could be annual game or harvest surveys, game damage complaints, etc.

Only antlered mule deer bucks will be harvested in HD 170.

4. What is the current population's status in relation to the management objectives? (i.e., state management objectives from management plan if applicable; provide current and prior years of population survey, harvest, or other pertinent information).

Currently, only antlered mule deer bucks can be harvested in Region 1, except for HD 170. Prior to 1996, Region 1's mule deer general season structure consisted of two weeks either-sex, followed by three weeks antlered only harvest. In 1997, an antlered buck only regulation was adopted for the general five-week season, though antlerless opportunity was allowed during the six-week archery season. Between 1997 and 2012 limited antlerless harvest opportunities were available within the region, and all antlerless mule deer harvest opportunity was discontinued prior to the 2012 season, except for in HD 170. This restrictive regulation was adopted in response to declining mule deer harvest and population trend data. At the time, HD 170 remained open for either sex mule deer on a general deer license, largely because there were no mule deer in HD 170, and therefore was not a biological concern.

In 2019, the boundary for HD 170 was adjusted to include the private lands in HD 132 on the east side of Flathead Valley. This boundary change resulted in the inclusion of a small and dwindling population of mule deer; however, the opportunity to hunt an either sex mule deer in HD 170 was overlooked during the 2019 season setting process. As an oversight, it became legal to harvest an either sex mule deer with a general deer license in an area where there is a concern for the mule deer population (the revised HD 170).

This proposal aims to correct the oversight from 2019 and restrict all mule deer harvest in HD 170 to antlered bucks only. The small population of mule deer in the revised HD 170 cannot support antlerless harvest.

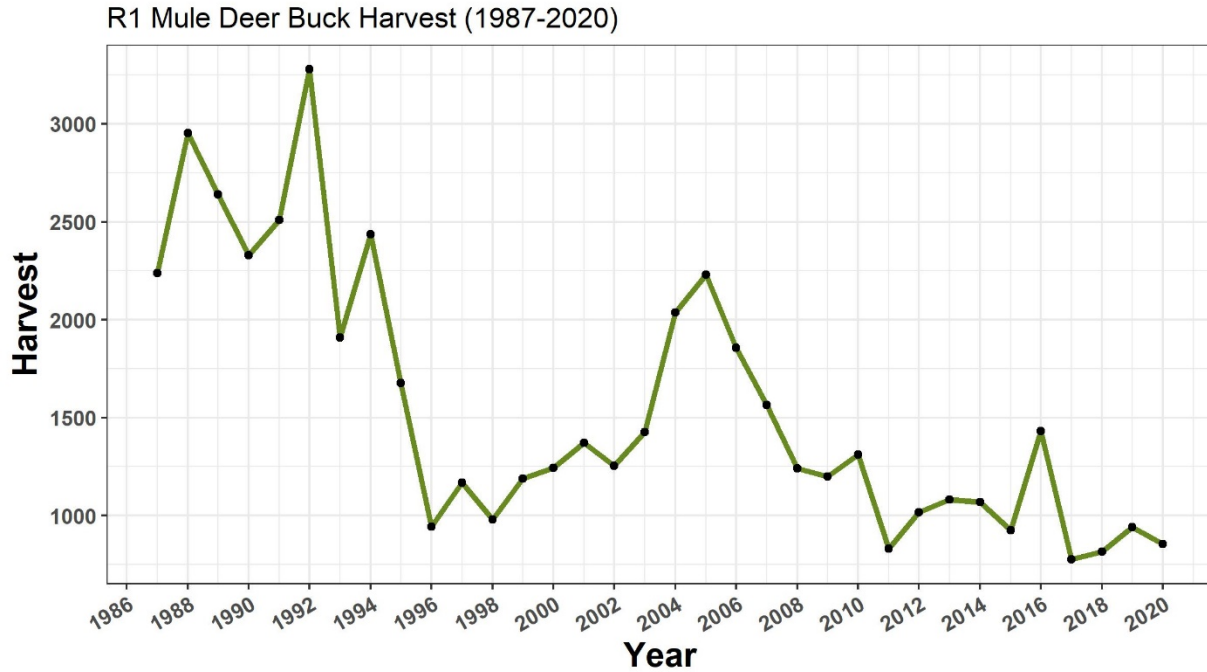


Figure 1: R1 Mule Deer Harvest.

5. Provide information related to any weather/habitat factors, public or private land use or resident and nonresident hunting opportunity that have relevance to this change (i.e., habitat security, hunter access, vegetation surveys, weather index, snow conditions, and temperature / precipitation information).

The majority of HD 170 is private land, and mule deer are easily harvestable in this district. Therefore, maintaining an either sex opportunity on a General License could result in significant negative impacts on the mule deer population in this district.

6. Briefly describe the contacts you have made with individual sportsmen or landowners, public groups or organizations regarding this proposal and indicate their comments (both pro and con).

We have not discussed this specific proposal as it is cleaning up an error or oversight in the regulations. In 2019, HD 170 was expanded and HD 132 was eliminated. At that time the regulations were to reflect the rest of Region 1 where antlerless mule deer were not legal to harvest. The current regulations allow for either sex mule deer harvest in HD 170. There is broad general support for eliminating antlerless mule deer harvest in Region 1 due to historic declines in mule deer numbers.

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION
Mule Deer 2022
HD240 mule deer

Hunting Districts: 240

1. Describe the proposed season / quotas changes and provide a summary of prior history (i.e., prior history of permits, season types, etc.).

Change existing unlimited buck permits to General License antlered buck opportunity, maintaining the shortened season (first 3 weeks of rifle season).

Currently, this HDs utilizes unlimited buck permits where the holder may not hunt antlered mule deer bucks in any other HD, with a 3-week season.

Also, remove the 240-50 wilderness mule deer permit, valid for an extended season inside the Bitterroot Wilderness.

2. What is the objective of this proposed change? This could be a specific harvest amount or resulting population level or number of game damage complaints, etc.

The objective of this proposed change is to remove a license restriction that does not appear to be improving mule deer populations or buck:doe ratios, and instead implement a restriction that is less complex and may also achieve the desired goal of improving overall deer numbers and buck survival (according to Newell and Meredith 2014). The buck permits have also created an enforcement problem, with wardens reporting that many hunters still do not realize a permit is required.

The removal of the 240-50 permit is for regulations simplification purposes only.

Newell, J. and E. Meredith. 2018. The effects of special mule deer buck regulations on mule deer populations and harvest. Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks report.

3. How will the success of this proposal be measured? This could be annual game or harvest surveys, game damage complaints, etc.

The success of this proposal will be measured by evaluating changes in buck harvest and hunter effort from the annual hunter harvest phone survey, as well as a reduction in enforcement issues due to hunters hunting mule deer without the currently required unlimited permit.

4. What is the current population's status in relation to the management objectives? (i.e., state management objectives from management plan if applicable; provide current and prior years of population survey, harvest, or other pertinent information).

Because this HD is not regularly surveyed (due to logistical constraints and habitats with low detectability), mule deer populations are difficult to estimate; thus, harvest trends have been the primary means of evaluating population trends. FWP uses buck harvest to estimate populations, but permits complicate this formula and are believed to skew population estimates downward. Thus, mule deer population estimates in HDs with permits are imperfect at best, and are typically supplemented with anecdotal observations, hunter impressions, and possibly check station data (Figure 1).

An evaluation of harvest in HDs 204 and 240, which have undergone multiple regulation changes over the last 3+ decades, show that while instituting a 3-week season may have led to reductions in buck harvest, the application of unlimited permits resulted in only short-term reductions (see Figure 1). The analyses of Newell and Meredith (2018) also suggest that shortened seasons may result in decreases in hunter numbers and increases in mule deer populations, fawn:adult, and buck:doe ratios, compared to unlimited permits which did decrease hunter

numbers but had no effect on mule deer populations or buck ratios (and may actually have decreased mule deer populations in some areas). However, results from this study were mixed and some results appeared contradictory (e.g. unlimited permits yielding higher immediate buck:doe ratios but long-term decreases in buck:doe ratio and overall population).

It is difficult to tease apart the impacts of regulations changes amid long-term, landscape-wide population declines due to landscape use changes, competition with growing elk herds, predation, and habitat degradation/fragmentation, as suggested by aerial surveys elsewhere in western Montana (and indeed across the western United States). In general, hunters in these HDs have expressed concern about decreasing mule deer populations and lack of age class structure among bucks in the herd, resulting in the need for FWP to consider changes. It is our belief that the unlimited permits may not just be ineffective but may actually *increase* hunting pressure, due to the inability of permit holders to hunt elsewhere and a psychological distaste for “eating” a special draw tag (even though it is unlimited).

Changing these HDs back to General License opportunity gives hunters more destination options, with the expectation that they will hunt where deer are more abundant, choose a white-tail buck over a mule deer, and/or be less likely to mine mule deer bucks out of struggling herds, while the shortened season should protect some bucks by preventing harvest during the peak of the rut.

The next logical step to reduce buck harvest will be limited permits, which have been shown to produce higher buck:doe ratios and increase the proportion of older bucks. However, fawn:doe ratios and overall population trends may actually decrease under this restriction, in addition to the obvious reduction in hunter opportunity and increases in CWD transmission risk.

Specific to the 240-50 wilderness permit: harvest on this permit is usually low and likely has little influence on mule deer population trends.

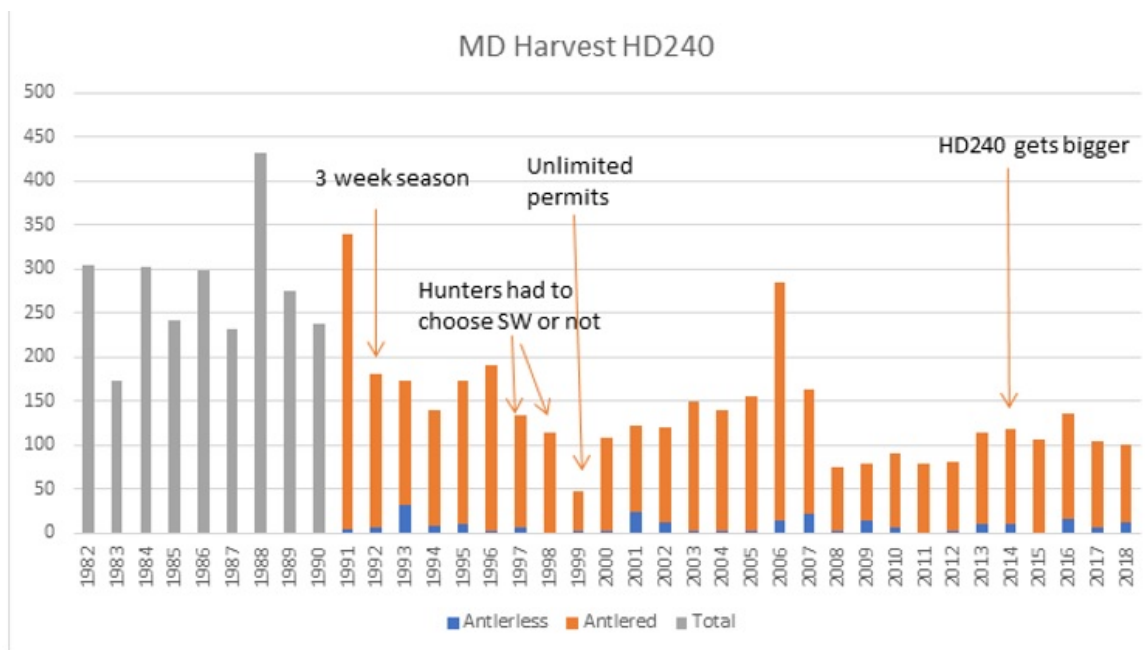


Figure 1: Figure 1. Mule deer harvest trends in HDs 204 (top) and 240 (bottom), 1982-2018, with important buck regulations changes. In the 1980s, antlered vs. antlerless mule deer harvest was not tabulated. Unlimited permits included “permit holder may not hunt antlered buck in any other HD” restriction.

5. Provide information related to any weather/habitat factors, public or private land use or resident and nonresident hunting opportunity that have relevance to this change (i.e., habitat security, hunter access, vegetation surveys, weather index, snow conditions, and temperature / precipitation information).

Changes in landscape use (decreased logging, increased development in the wildland-urban interface) and wildfire regimes have likely reduced and fragmented mule deer habitat, resulting in decreasing population trends.

Antlerless opportunity in these HDs is conservative to nonexistent (usually by limited B License and/or private land only).

6. Briefly describe the contacts you have made with individual sportsmen or landowners, public groups or organizations regarding this proposal and indicate their comments (both pro and con).

As previously mentioned, many hunters have expressed concern over the mule deer herds in these HDs, but there remains a great deal of uncertainty about the usefulness of restrictive regulations. Some hunters were uneasy about going back to General License antlered buck opportunity, but few alternatives have been offered. However, most hunters agreed that a shortened season should provide some security for bucks during the rut when they are most vulnerable. This proposal was open for comment in September/October 2021; the majority of commenters supported, although some would rather see a change to limited permits to further protect bucks.

Related to the 240-50 permit: Although harvest is low, many commenters said that they appreciate the special opportunity to hunt early and for the entire general rifle season. They requested we keep this permit.

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION
Mule Deer 2022
mule deer 262

Hunting Districts: 262

1. Describe the proposed season / quotas changes and provide a summary of prior history (i.e., prior history of permits, season types, etc.).

There are multiple opportunities to harvest mule deer in HD262 to manage game damage concerns. For many years, these opportunities have had different season-ending dates (sometimes January 1, sometimes January 15). We're not sure why these discrepancies exist but for regulations simplification, we propose changing all of these dates to January 15.

Applies to:

- 262-00 antlerless mule deer license
- General License antlerless mule deer (archery only opportunity)
- a WTD license, described in a separate proposal.

2. What is the objective of this proposed change? This could be a specific harvest amount or resulting population level or number of game damage complaints, etc.

Regulations simplification.

3. How will the success of this proposal be measured? This could be annual game or harvest surveys, game damage complaints, etc.

Reduced hunter confusion and likely nominally increased deer harvest.

4. What is the current population's status in relation to the management objectives? (i.e., state management objectives from management plan if applicable; provide current and prior years of population survey, harvest, or other pertinent information).

HD262 is almost entirely private land, with dense mule deer (and elk) populations that frequently cause damage to crops, pastures, and suburban landscaping. Regulations in this HD generally aim to provide ample tools for landowners to address problematic game densities and reduce damage.

5. Provide information related to any weather/habitat factors, public or private land use or resident and nonresident hunting opportunity that have relevance to this change (i.e., habitat security, hunter access, vegetation surveys, weather index, snow conditions, and temperature / precipitation information).

HD262 is almost exclusively private land. Access is difficult, but a suite of harvest tools for landowners provides opportunity for reducing deer populations.

6. Briefly describe the contacts you have made with individual sportsmen or landowners, public groups or organizations regarding this proposal and indicate their comments (both pro and con).

Specifically, the proposed date changes did not draw public comment during the September/October 2021 public comment period. There were larger issues with weapons changes in the proposed combined 260/262 district, which is no longer being proposed.

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION
Mule Deer 2022
Removing unlimited buck permits

Hunting Districts: 212-213-214-215-217

1. Describe the proposed season / quotas changes and provide a summary of prior history (i.e., prior history of permits, season types, etc.).

Change existing unlimited buck permits to General License antlered buck opportunity, with a shortened season (first 3 weeks of rifle season).

Currently, these HDs utilize unlimited buck permits where the holder may not hunt antlered mule deer bucks in any other HD.

2. What is the objective of this proposed change? This could be a specific harvest amount or resulting population level or number of game damage complaints, etc.

The objective of this proposed change is to remove a license restriction that does not appear to be improving mule deer populations or buck:doe ratios, and instead implement a restriction that is less complex and may also achieve the desired goal of improving overall deer numbers and buck survival (according to Newell and Meredith 2014). The buck permits have also created an enforcement problem, with wardens reporting that many hunters still do not realize a permit is required.

Newell, J. and E. Meredith. 2018. The effects of special mule deer buck regulations on mule deer populations and harvest. Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks report.

3. How will the success of this proposal be measured? This could be annual game or harvest surveys, game damage complaints, etc.

The success of this proposal will be measured by evaluating changes in buck harvest and hunter effort from the annual hunter harvest phone survey, as well as a reduction in enforcement issues due to hunters hunting mule deer without the currently required unlimited permit.

4. What is the current population's status in relation to the management objectives? (i.e., state management objectives from management plan if applicable; provide current and prior years of population survey, harvest, or other pertinent information).

Because these HDs are not regularly surveyed (due to logistical constraints), mule deer populations are difficult to estimate; thus, harvest trends have been the primary means of evaluating population trends. FWP uses buck harvest to estimate populations, but permits complicate this formula and are believed to skew population estimates downward. Thus, mule deer population estimates in HDs with permits are imperfect at best, and are typically supplemented with anecdotal observations, hunter impressions, and possibly check station data.

An evaluation of harvest in HDs 204 and 240, which currently have the same unlimited permit regulation and undergone multiple regulation changes over the last 3+ decades, show that while instituting a 3-week season may have led to reductions in buck harvest, the application of unlimited permits resulted in only short-term reductions (see Figure 1). The analyses of Newell and Meredith (2018) also suggest that shortened seasons may result in decreases in hunter numbers and increases in mule deer populations, fawn:adult, and buck:doe ratios, compared to unlimited permits which did decrease hunter numbers but had no effect on mule deer populations or buck ratios (and may actually have decreased mule deer populations in some areas). However, results from this study were mixed and some results appeared contradictory (e.g. unlimited permits yielding higher immediate buck:doe ratios but long-term decreases in buck:doe ratio and overall population).

It is difficult to tease apart the impacts of regulations changes amid long-term, landscape-wide population declines due to landscape use changes, competition with growing elk herds, predation, and habitat degradation/fragmentation, as suggested by aerial surveys elsewhere in western Montana (and indeed across the western United States). In general, hunters in these HDs have expressed concern about decreasing mule deer populations and lack of age class structure among bucks in the herd, resulting in the need for FWP to consider changes. It is our belief that the unlimited permits may not just be ineffective but may actually *increase* hunting pressure, due to the inability of permit holders to hunt elsewhere and a psychological distaste for “eating” a special draw tag (even though it is unlimited). Changing these HDs back to General License opportunity gives hunters more destination options, with the expectation that they will hunt where deer are more abundant, choose a white-tail buck over a mule deer, and/or be less likely to mine mule deer bucks out of struggling herds, while the shortened season should protect some bucks by preventing harvest during the peak of the rut.

The next logical step to reduce buck harvest will be limited permits, which have been shown to produce higher buck:doe ratios and increase the proportion of older bucks. However, fawn:doe ratios and overall population trends may actually decrease under this restriction, in addition to the obvious reduction in hunter opportunity and increases in CWD transmission risk.

5. Provide information related to any weather/habitat factors, public or private land use or resident and nonresident hunting opportunity that have relevance to this change (i.e., habitat security, hunter access, vegetation surveys, weather index, snow conditions, and temperature / precipitation information).

Changes in landscape use (decreased logging, increased development in the wildland-urban interface) and wildfire regimes have likely reduced and fragmented mule deer habitat, resulting in decreasing population trends. Antlerless opportunity in these HDs is conservative to nonexistent (usually by limited B License and/or private land only).

6. Briefly describe the contacts you have made with individual sportsmen or landowners, public groups or organizations regarding this proposal and indicate their comments (both pro and con).

As previously mentioned, many hunters have expressed concern over the mule deer herds across western Montana, but there remains a great deal of uncertainty about the usefulness of restrictive regulations. Some hunters were uneasy about going back to General License antlered buck opportunity, but few alternatives have been offered. However, most hunters agreed that a shortened season should provide some security for bucks during the rut when they are most vulnerable. A similar proposal for HDs 204, 240, and 285 was open for comment in September/October 2021; the majority of commenters supported, although some would rather see a change to limited permits to further protect bucks.

This regulation, specific to these HDs, was not proposed for the September/October public comment period.

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION
Mule Deer 2022
217-00 private land only

Hunting Districts: 217

1. Describe the proposed season / quotas changes and provide a summary of prior history (i.e., prior history of permits, season types, etc.).

Restrict the 217-00 B License for antlerless mule deer to PRIVATE LAND ONLY.
In 2020 and 2021, the 65 of these B Licenses were offered district-wide.

2. What is the objective of this proposed change? This could be a specific harvest amount or resulting population level or number of game damage complaints, etc.

The objective of this proposed change is to direct harvest to the properties where game damage caused by mule deer is an issue.

3. How will the success of this proposal be measured? This could be annual game or harvest surveys, game damage complaints, etc.

Success will be measured by noting an increase in mule deer population trend overall and a low level of game damage complaints due to mule deer.

4. What is the current population's status in relation to the management objectives? (i.e., state management objectives from management plan if applicable; provide current and prior years of population survey, harvest, or other pertinent information).

Mule deer buck harvest—an index of population trend—is trending down in HD 217.

5. Provide information related to any weather/habitat factors, public or private land use or resident and nonresident hunting opportunity that have relevance to this change (i.e., habitat security, hunter access, vegetation surveys, weather index, snow conditions, and temperature / precipitation information).

Mule deer numbers across Region 2 generally are lower than in past decades, which likely reflects a broad environmental effect on mule deer, including habitat fragmentation, competition with other ungulates and predation. The harvest of antlerless mule deer has been reduced to negligible levels over time.

6. Briefly describe the contacts you have made with individual sportsmen or landowners, public groups or organizations regarding this proposal and indicate their comments (both pro and con).

The public has expressed support for harvesting mule deer conservatively. This is tempered by interest expressed for increased hunting opportunity in general and a feeling of lost opportunities on public land.

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION
Mule Deer 2022
Combine HD 281 and 293

Hunting Districts: HD 281, 284, and 293

1. Describe the proposed season / quotas changes and provide a summary of prior history (i.e., prior history of permits, season types, etc.).

The unlimited mule deer buck permit will be eliminated and replaced with a general deer license opportunity for the first 3 weeks of the general rifle hunting season. White-tailed deer opportunity will be a general deer license opportunity, either-sex during archery season, and with limited antlerless B Licenses.

2. What is the objective of this proposed change? This could be a specific harvest amount or resulting population level or number of game damage complaints, etc.

The Blackfoot area has maintained more consistent harvest with the General License opportunity, albeit flat or declining, than districts with the unlimited buck permit. Eliminating the unlimited mule deer buck permit and replacing it with a first 3 week season during the general rifle season should result in less harvest and potentially allow for more mature age bucks.

3. How will the success of this proposal be measured? This could be annual game or harvest surveys, game damage complaints, etc.

Success will be measured by a reduction in mule deer harvest and potentially better age class among mule deer bucks.

4. What is the current population's status in relation to the management objectives? (i.e., state management objectives from management plan if applicable; provide current and prior years of population survey, harvest, or other pertinent information).

Mule Deer buck harvest: HD 281=28 (LTA=53), HD 284=5 (LTA=9), HD 293=54 (LTA=109).

5. Provide information related to any weather/habitat factors, public or private land use or resident and nonresident hunting opportunity that have relevance to this change (i.e., habitat security, hunter access, vegetation surveys, weather index, snow conditions, and temperature / precipitation information).

This district is predominantly summer range with limited, but marginal pockets of winter range for deer and elk. During most years, winter conditions are harsh to severe with an average annual snowfall near 100 inches and cold, often times sub-zero temperatures. Spring and summer vegetation quality can be very good, with a delayed spring green up because of relatively high elevations.

6. Briefly describe the contacts you have made with individual sportsmen or landowners, public groups or organizations regarding this proposal and indicate their comments (both pro and con).

This proposal was part of the regulations simplification process that was subject to a long public comment period. I have fielded multiple calls, emails, and reviewed numerous public comments. In addition, R2 hosted two public meetings with the R2 CAC. Comment has been both supportive and opposing. Generally, the public was not supportive of the first iteration of this proposal and preferred smaller expansion of hunting districts so biologists could maintain control of local issues and have a better understanding of where harvest was occurring in relation to expanded opportunity. This proposal represents consideration of public concern, specifically, safety concerns about the removal of the archery-only HD 284. We addressed this important issue by converting HD 284 into an archery-only weapons restriction area that functions almost identically to its previous designation as a hunting district. We feel this change should do well to meet the objective of simplifying regulations and allowing appropriate opportunity without compromising deer and elk populations.

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION
Mule Deer 2022
HD204 mule deer

Hunting Districts: 204

1. Describe the proposed season / quotas changes and provide a summary of prior history (i.e., prior history of permits, season types, etc.).

Change existing unlimited buck permits to General License antlered buck opportunity, maintaining the shortened season (first 3 weeks of rifle season).

Currently, this HDs utilizes unlimited buck permits where the holder may not hunt antlered mule deer bucks in any other HD, with a 3-week season.

2. What is the objective of this proposed change? This could be a specific harvest amount or resulting population level or number of game damage complaints, etc.

The objective of this proposed change is to remove a license restriction that does not appear to be improving mule deer populations or buck:doe ratios, and instead implement a restriction that is less complex and may also achieve the desired goal of improving overall deer numbers and buck survival (according to Newell and Meredith 2014). The buck permits have also created an enforcement problem, with wardens reporting that many hunters still do not realize a permit is required.

3. How will the success of this proposal be measured? This could be annual game or harvest surveys, game damage complaints, etc.

The success of this proposal will be measured by evaluating changes in buck harvest and hunter effort from the annual hunter harvest phone survey, as well as a reduction in enforcement issues due to hunters hunting mule deer without the currently required unlimited permit.

4. What is the current population's status in relation to the management objectives? (i.e., state management objectives from management plan if applicable; provide current and prior years of population survey, harvest, or other pertinent information).

Because this HD is not regularly surveyed (due to logistical constraints and habitats with low detectability), mule deer populations are difficult to estimate; thus, harvest trends have been the primary means of evaluating population trends. FWP uses buck harvest to estimate populations, but permits complicate this formula and are believed to skew population estimates downward. Thus, mule deer population estimates in HDs with permits are imperfect at best, and are typically supplemented with anecdotal observations, hunter impressions, and possibly check station data.

An evaluation of harvest in HDs 204 and 240, which have undergone multiple regulation changes over the last 3+ decades, show that while instituting a 3-week season may have led to reductions in buck harvest, the application of unlimited permits resulted in only short-term reductions (see Figure 1). The analyses of Newell and Meredith (2018) also suggest that shortened seasons may result in decreases in hunter numbers and increases in mule deer populations, fawn:adult, and buck:doe ratios, compared to unlimited permits which did decrease hunter numbers but had no effect on mule deer populations or buck ratios (and may actually have decreased mule deer populations in some areas). However, results from this study were mixed and some results appeared contradictory (e.g. unlimited permits yielding higher immediate buck:doe ratios but long-term decreases in buck:doe ratio and overall population).

It is difficult to tease apart the impacts of regulations changes amid long-term, landscape-wide population declines due to landscape use changes, competition with growing elk herds, predation, and habitat degradation/fragmentation, as suggested by aerial surveys elsewhere in western Montana (and indeed across the western United States). In general, hunters in these HDs have expressed concern about decreasing mule deer populations and lack of age class structure among bucks in the herd, resulting in the need for FWP to

consider changes. It is our belief that the unlimited permits may not just be ineffective but may actually *increase* hunting pressure, due to the inability of permit holders to hunt elsewhere and a psychological distaste for “eating” a special draw tag (even though it is unlimited). Changing these HDs back to General License opportunity gives hunters more destination options, with the expectation that they will hunt where deer are more abundant, choose a white-tail buck over a mule deer, and/or be less likely to mine mule deer bucks out of struggling herds, while the shortened season should protect some bucks by preventing harvest during the peak of the rut.

The next logical step to reduce buck harvest will be limited permits, which have been shown to produce higher buck:doe ratios and increase the proportion of older bucks. However, fawn:doe ratios and overall population trends may actually decrease under this restriction, in addition to the obvious reduction in hunter opportunity and increases in CWD transmission risk.

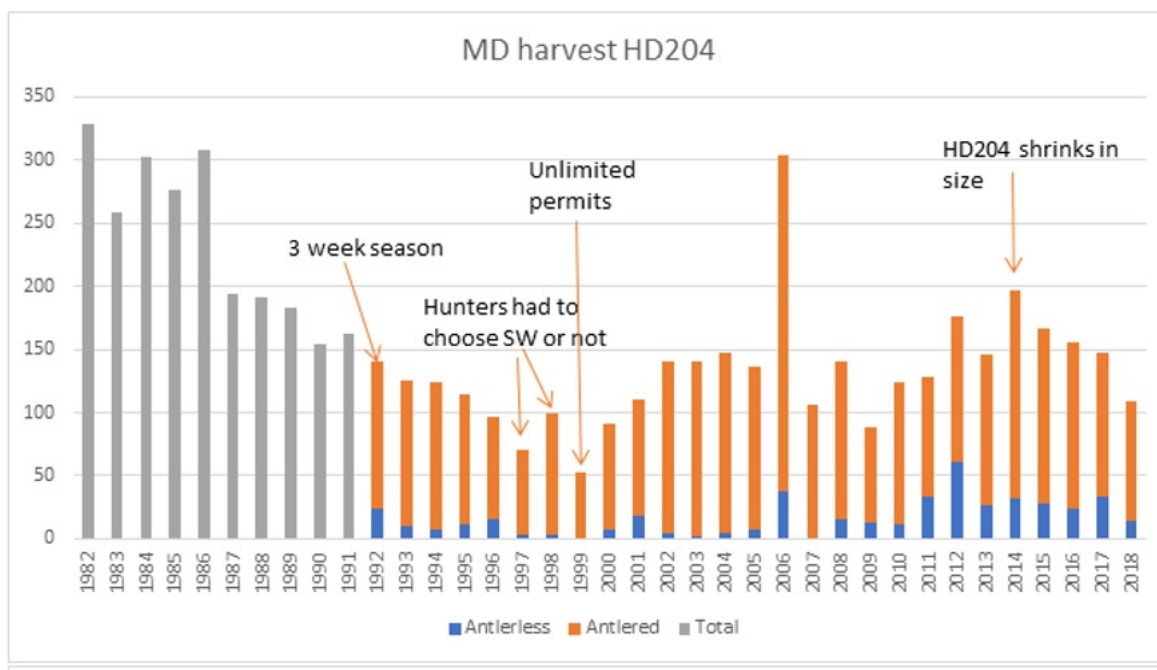


Figure 1: Mule deer harvest trends in HDs 204 (top) and 240 (bottom), 1982-2018, with important buck regulations changes. In the 1980s, antlered vs. antlerless mule deer harvest was not tabulated. Unlimited permits included “permit holder may not hunt antlered buck in any other HD” restriction.

5. Provide information related to any weather/habitat factors, public or private land use or resident and nonresident hunting opportunity that have relevance to this change (i.e., habitat security, hunter access, vegetation surveys, weather index, snow conditions, and temperature / precipitation information).

Changes in landscape use (decreased logging, increased development in the wildland-urban interface) and wildfire regimes have likely reduced and fragmented mule deer habitat, resulting in decreasing population trends. Antlerless opportunity in these HDs is conservative to nonexistent (usually by limited B License and/or private land only).

6. Briefly describe the contacts you have made with individual sportsmen or landowners, public groups or organizations regarding this proposal and indicate their comments (both pro and con).

As previously mentioned, many hunters have expressed concern over the mule deer herds in these HDs, but there remains a great deal of uncertainty about the usefulness of restrictive regulations. Some hunters were uneasy about going back to General License antlered buck opportunity, but few alternatives have been offered. However, most hunters agreed that a shortened season should provide some security for bucks during the rut when they are most vulnerable. This proposal was open for comment in September/October 2021; the majority of commenters supported, although some would rather see a change to limited permits to further protect bucks.

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION
Mule Deer 2022
Add Antlerless Mule Deer B License valid in HDs 339 and 343

Hunting Districts: HDs 339 and 343

1. Describe the proposed season / quotas changes and provide a summary of prior history (i.e., prior history of permits, season types, etc.).

Proposed Change:

Add an antlerless mule deer B License valid in HDs 339 and 343, and make it only valid east of the continental divide in HD 343. This is being recommended for regulations simplification and is proposed to be applied as broadly as possible statewide. There is no biological justification to make this change for these districts. See "Contact Summary" below for social aspects and comments relevant to this change.

Use an administrative number such as 396-01.

Quota in each HD is 25; goal is to eliminate quotas of less than 50. By combining districts, the quota may be set at 50 (range 25-500).

Eliminate 339-01 and 343-01.

Prior History:

HD	Year	Num. Licenses
		Issued
339	2001	50
	2002	150
	2003	150
	2004	149
	2005	150
	2006	250
	2007	351
	2008	350
	2009	350
	2010	200
	2011	200
	2012	200
	2013	100
	2014	0
	2015	0
	2016	100
	2017	100
	2018	100
	2019	25
	2020	25
	2021	25
343	2001	50
	2002	150
	2003	150
	2004	150
	2005	150
	2006	250
	2007	300
	2008	300
	2009	300
	2010	200
	2011	200
	2012	200
	2013	101
	2014	0
	2015	0
	2016	100
	2017	100
	2018	100
	2019	25
	2020	25
	2021	25

Figure 2: Number of antlerless mule deer licenses issued in HDs 339, and 343, Lewis and Clark Counties, Montana, 2001 – 2021.

2. What is the objective of this proposed change? This could be a specific harvest amount or resulting population level or number of game damage complaints, etc.

Objective is to eliminate LPTs when fewer than 50 offered.

3. How will the success of this proposal be measured? This could be annual game or harvest surveys, game damage complaints, etc.

4. What is the current population’s status in relation to the management objectives? (i.e., state management objectives from management plan if applicable; provide current and prior years of population survey, harvest, or other pertinent information).

Mule deer trend counts are more than 25% below long-term average. Recruitment was poor in 2018 and 2019 but was high in 2021.

5. Provide information related to any weather/habitat factors, public or private land use or resident and nonresident hunting opportunity that have relevance to this change (i.e., habitat security, hunter access, vegetation surveys, weather index, snow conditions, and temperature / precipitation information).

Bundling these districts under one LPT would retain some antlerless mule deer opportunity, and it would allow flexibility to increase licenses as mule deer numbers rebound or address game damage complaints should they arise.

6. Briefly describe the contacts you have made with individual sportsmen or landowners, public groups or organizations regarding this proposal and indicate their comments (both pro and con).

Due to the short timeline, and late receipt of comments emailed to the agency at large, only those comments submitted through the online survey portal for Region 3 or received directly (email, other pers. comm.) and those inclusive of Helena area HDs (deer/elk HDs 318, 335, 339, 343, and 388 [also pronghorn]) were able to be reviewed and included in this proposal by the deadline. Additionally, comments that were not specific to a proposed change may not be captured in the list below, but they were considered, particularly when making adjustments to initial recommendations for the Helena area. All comments submitted during the Sept/Oct comment period are to be considered along with comments that will be submitted during the traditional comment period in December and January.

Sept/Oct comment included:

General

3 Opposed to process: take input from hunters and landowners before proposals are put together, not after; pause and engage public first; use traditional process for changes.

6 Opposed to any combining of HDs [3 may be opposed to any of the proposed changes, including combining, unclear from comment], and/or reducing opportunities for any of the Region 3 HDs as proposed in Sept.

293/339/343 MD

2 Support making antlerless mule deer licenses valid in both HDs 339 and 343.

2 Opposed to any mule deer licenses in HD 339 or HDs 339 and 343. (Note: 25 are now offered in each.)

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION
Mule Deer 2022
HD 393 Portion Removal

Hunting Districts: 393

1. Describe the proposed season / quotas changes and provide a summary of prior history (i.e., prior history of permits, season types, etc.).

This proposal strives towards regulation simplification by removing hunting district portions. This portion was established to address game damage issues in the southern end of HD 393 by allowing either-sex mule deer harvest with the General License. The removal of this portion means that all of HD 393 will now allow only antlered buck mule deer harvest.

2. What is the objective of this proposed change? This could be a specific harvest amount or resulting population level or number of game damage complaints, etc.

There is no biological justification for this change.

3. How will the success of this proposal be measured? This could be annual game or harvest surveys, game damage complaints, etc.

Success is implied by the removal of the portion. It will be more difficult to determine if this is viewed publicly as a simplification. If the number of game damage complaints increases, that will indicate that this proposal was not successful.

4. What is the current population's status in relation to the management objectives? (i.e., state management objectives from management plan if applicable; provide current and prior years of population survey, harvest, or other pertinent information).

Mule deer congregate on some agricultural areas in southern HD 393 and are more abundant there than in the rest of the unit. This change may result in more game damage complaints.

5. Provide information related to any weather/habitat factors, public or private land use or resident and nonresident hunting opportunity that have relevance to this change (i.e., habitat security, hunter access, vegetation surveys, weather index, snow conditions, and temperature / precipitation information).

6. Briefly describe the contacts you have made with individual sportsmen or landowners, public groups or organizations regarding this proposal and indicate their comments (both pro and con).

Due to the accelerated timeline for this season setting process, outreach and comment has been somewhat limited. There has been no comment on this specific proposal to remove this portion, but many comments related to overall mule deer management in HD 393, primarily associated with buck management. More comments are expected as proposals become more widely known.

**MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION
Mule Deer 2022
AMENDED HD 392_Unlimited md buck permits to limit**

Hunting Districts: 392

1. Describe the proposed season / quotas changes and provide a summary of prior history (i.e., prior history of permits, season types, etc.).

Originally HDs 391 and 392 were being proposed to be combined for the 2022-23 biennial with HD 392 being proposed to go from unlimited mule deer buck permits to a general antlered buck season to match the current mule deer regulation in HD 391. An unlimited mule deer buck permit has been required to hunt antlered mule deer in the HD since 2000. However, after further consideration, it was decided that the biological impacts to the mule deer buck population in HD 392 would likely be too great to support that recommendation.

As such, the amended proposal mule deer proposal for HD 392 is to eliminate the current unlimited mule deer permit in HD 392 and replace it with a limited draw permit. The proposed quota (500) for the new drawn permit quota is similar (down a little) to the number of unlimited permits that have been issued in recent years. It was decided to make the quota a little less than the existing number of unlimited permits as some hunters are concerned about buck numbers and buck quality in the HD. The number of antlerless mule deer B Licenses (392-01) is also being proposed to be increased from 75 to 100 as based on personal and hunter observations, overall mule deer numbers do appear to have increased in at least some areas of the HD in recent years.

See Figure 1 for past license and harvest information for HD 392.

HD 392 Mule deer harvest summary

Year	Total Harvest	M	F	Fawns	# Unlimit Permits	Unlimit Perm Harvest	% Mgmt Success	HD 392 B-Licenses	B-License Harvest	% Mgmt Success	Antl- Harv General
2021					519						
2020	196	155	41	0	532	129	24.2	75	29	38.4	10
2019%	184	139	45	0	516	130	25.2	75	30	40	3
2018*	216	178	38	0	583	151	25.9	50	9	17.6	19
2017	195	177	18	0	522	165	31.6				9
2016#	249	243	6	0	674	210	31.2				6
2015	333	330	3	0	882	301	34.2				3
2014	264	264	0	0	785	228	29				0
2013	254	220	34	0	834	212	25.4	50	15	29.2	8
2012	233	216	18	0	905	205	22.6	50	12	24.2	3
2011	291	252	39	0	809	239	29.6	50	27	53.4	8
2010	263	221	41	0	736	202	27.4	5	30	60	6
2009	305	249	56	0	780	229	29.3	100	44	43.7	3
2008	430	350	80	0	853	340	39.9	100	50	50	18
2007	417	339	78	0	798	301	37.8	100	51	51.2	8
2006*	492	428	61	0	786	350	44.5	50	29	57	22
2005	371	336	35	0	777	315	40.5	50	20	39.4	10
2004*	396	341	51	0	711	290	40.7	50	24	48.8	27
2003	365	326	39	0	717	294	41	50	21	42	6
2002	314	281	33	0	588	250	42.5	50	18	36	3
2001*	285	256	27	1	519	201	38.7	509	19	38	0
Ave	308	271	37	0	725	243	33.5	89	27	42.0	9

%-Doesn't include 38 antlerless mule deer reported harvested on pre-season game damage hunt - number not in agreement with what was reported in harvest statistics, so GD B-license harvest estimate not included in totals

* Considerable amount of illegal buck harvest reported on general license

#Major boundary change implemented in 2016, so numbers not comparable to previous years

Figure 1: Mule deer HD 392 harvest summary.

2. What is the objective of this proposed change? This could be a specific harvest amount or resulting population level or number of game damage complaints, etc.

The objective of the proposed change is to eliminate unlimited mule deer buck permits to simplify regulations. The objective of the increase in antlerless mule deer B Licenses is to increase antlerless mule deer harvest in the HD to some degree. There is a limited amount of private land in the HD and increasing the number of antlerless mule deer B Licenses in the HD will allow those private landowners that feel they have too many mule deer a means to address the situation during the hunting season. Given the limited amount of private land in the HD, it is not really feasible to limit the antlerless mule deer B Licenses to off National Forest land as is the case with many other districts. The limited amount of private land in the HD is typically surrounded by National Forest land, so allowing additional antlerless mule deer harvest on National Forest land may help address mule deer numbers on adjacent private lands in some areas depending upon where the licenses get used.

3. How will the success of this proposal be measured? This could be annual game or harvest surveys, game damage complaints, etc.

Success of the regulation simplification portion is implied. Success of the B License portion of the proposal will be measured by the number of future mule deer game damage complaints or just general complaints about too many mule deer on private land in the HD that we receive in the future.

4. What is the current population's status in relation to the management objectives? (i.e., state management objectives from management plan if applicable; provide current and prior years of population survey, harvest, or other pertinent information).

HD 392 is part of the Mountain Foothills PMU under MFWP's AHM Mule Deer Plan. Since 2000 an unlimited mule deer buck permit has been required to hunt antlered mule deer bucks in the HD. Prior to 2000 the post-season bucks to does ratios in the old HD 392 trend area (because of a major boundary change implemented in 2016 most of the trend area is now in 391) were in the low single digits. Since unlimited permits were implemented in 2002, the post-season bucks per 100 does ratio has averaged 15.8 in the trend area. However, there has been a growing concern that the trend area may not be reflective of the overall area, as most of the private land in the trend area has little to no public hunting access and the public land behind that private land is very difficult to access. As such, the trend area bucks per 100 does ratio is likely higher than the rest of the district. In addition, as mentioned, the trend area is now largely in HD 391 which went to a general antlered buck license for the 2020 hunting season.

HD 391 is also only about 40% public land while HD 392 is well over 90% public land. HD 392 currently has very low habitat security with lots of roads with an increasing loss of cover. The USFS is in the process of initiating a large-scale vegetation project in HD 392 that will reduce the amount of cover and does not include seasonal road closures. Given the combination of likely high hunting pressure, since the HD is in close proximity to Helena, and the current poor habitat security, it is felt opening the district to buck hunting on a General License would decimate the buck population. If a general antlered buck regulation was implemented in the HD, it is highly likely that we would be back to low single digit bucks per 100 does ratios in the HD in a matter of years.

Table 1. Mule deer population parameters for Big Belts mule deer trend area.

YEAR	POST-SEASON (Total Deer)	FAWNS:100 ADULTS (Post-Season)	SPRING (Total Deer)	FAWNS:100 ADULTS (Spring Recruitment)	BUCKS:100 DOES
2020/21	153	31.7	272	32.8	18.8
2019/20 - NSprS	166	24.6			17.5
2018/19	118	25.5	340	18.5	19
2017/18	198	42.6	473	15.4	16.2
2016/17	176	53	309	25.6	19.8
2015/16	152	39.8	534	23.2	5.1*
2014/15	82	41.4	308	32.8	13.7
2013/14 - NS					
2012/13 - NS					
2011/12	177	29.3	413	27.5	14.6
2010/11	193	28.2	744	21	10.4
2009/10	282	22.3	298	31.2	14.5
2008/09	283	20.3	602	24.9	12.7
2007/08	241	36.7	814	18.7	23.7
2006/07	578	23.7	647	22.7	20.7
2005/06	263	43.8	296	24.6	8.7
2004/05					
2003/04	346	24.1	910	22.7	14.4
2002/03	627	36.3	977	32.3	15.3
2001/02	558	31.2	761	24.5	14.4
2000/01	420	29.4	1332	22.7	13.6
Average ('00 - '20/21)	279	32	590	24.8	15.8
1999/00	346	35.5	992	31.6	3.3
1998/99	505	37.3	1248	33.7	2.3
1997/98	302	18.4	723	14.6	4.1
1996/97	414	38.6	943	23.4	7
Average ('96 - '19/20)	305	32.5	679	24.6	13.4

NS - No surveys flown, no spring survey flown in 2020

*Survey flown very late, bucks probably had already started to shed antlers, complete survey area

Note: Unlimited permits were adopted with the 2000 hunting season.

HD 391 went back to general antlered buck starting with 2020 hunting season.

Figure 1: Big Belts trend area survey results.

5. Provide information related to any weather/habitat factors, public or private land use or resident and nonresident hunting opportunity that have relevance to this change (i.e., habitat security, hunter access, vegetation surveys, weather index, snow conditions, and temperature / precipitation information).

Given that the quota number of limited (drawn) permits will be similar to the number of unlimited mule deer buck permits that have been issued, there should be limited impacts on the hunting opportunity for residents. Since the permits will now be limited (drawn), the 10% nonresident cap kicks in so nonresident hunting opportunity may be impacted to some degree; although, based on the number of unlimited permits that have been issued to nonresidents in recent years, the impact is expected to be minor. There is no desire to significantly reduce the number of limited permits in this HD to turn it into a 'trophy' management area. Significantly limiting the number of

permits would result in significant hunter displacement which would result in increased hunting pressure in surrounding General License areas.

Weather this past winter (2020/21) was extremely mild, so mule deer survival and in particular fawn survival should have been quite good last year. However, the area has been impacted by extreme/exceptional drought conditions this summer and fall, so forage conditions on native range were likely negatively impacted in at least some areas which could lead to issues this winter. Mule deer found in the area of the single irrigated alfalfa pivot in the HD have access to a lot higher quality of forage and have a higher plane of nutrition than deer found on native range, so will likely be in better shape going into the winter. As mentioned previously, the vast majority of the HD is public land (mostly national forest land), so access is in the HD is good overall.

6. Briefly describe the contacts you have made with individual sportsmen or landowners, public groups or organizations regarding this proposal and indicate their comments (both pro and con).

As mentioned, originally HDs 391 and 392 were being proposed to be combined for 2022-23 with HD 392 proposed to go from unlimited mule deer buck permits to a general antlered buck season to match the current mule deer regulation in HD 391. The public comments that were received related to that proposal during the initial public comment period were overwhelming opposed to the idea of combining the two HDs and in particular changing HD 392 to a general antlered mule deer buck regulation. Those who expressed comments were likewise concerned about the impacts that a general antlered buck regulation would have on the HD's mule deer buck population given the low habitat security and what would likely be a significant increase in hunting pressure.

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION
Mule Deer 2022
Combine Gravely Deer/elk HDs

Hunting Districts: 322, 323, 324, 325, 326, 327, 330

1. Describe the proposed season / quotas changes and provide a summary of prior history (i.e., prior history of permits, season types, etc.).

Combine HDs 322, 323, 324, 325, 326, 327, and 330 into one HD. The new HD would be numbered 322. The portion of HD 323 known as the Wall Creek Special Hunt Area would be maintained.

Proposed regulations:

General Deer License: Either-sex mule deer; Either-sex white-tailed deer;

2. What is the objective of this proposed change? This could be a specific harvest amount or resulting population level or number of game damage complaints, etc.

Statewide regulations simplification.

From a biological perspective, the HD combination expands the HD to the scale that mule deer use the landscape. Three mule deer regulations currently exist across the seven existing HDs. Those are limited permit buck-only (HD 324), General License buck-only (HD 323 and 327), and General License either-sex (HDs 322, 325, 326, and 330). Because Chronic Wasting Disease is present in HDs 322, 324, 326, and 330 and will soon be present in HDs 323, 325, and 327, General License either-sex is the most biologically-appropriate harvest regulation for the long-term health of mule deer, elk, and moose across the landscape.

**MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION
Mule Deer 2022
HD 321 MD liberalize season+ eliminate B lic**

Hunting Districts: 321, 334

1. Describe the proposed season / quotas changes and provide a summary of prior history (i.e., prior history of permits, season types, etc.).

1. Mule Deer in both HDs 321 and 334 migrate into the Big Hole Valley to summer from ID (321) and East Fork Bitterroot (334). Movement data suggests that the majority of the herd migrates back out of the valley to their respective winter ranges by the start of MT's General Season or shortly thereafter.

2. The Big Hole valley does not contain prime mule deer habitat and therefore supports modest populations at best.

3. The majority of mule deer harvest that occurs in these HDs is incidental to elk hunting. The 11-year average total harvest in these 2 HDs combined is 46 (antlerless harvest averages 13 of these). For these reasons it is believed that these HDs can support an ES opportunity for MD on the General License.

2. What is the objective of this proposed change? This could be a specific harvest amount or resulting population level or number of game damage complaints, etc.

To provide maximum hunter opportunity while also sustaining the MD populations in current HDs 321 and 334.

3. How will the success of this proposal be measured? This could be annual game or harvest surveys, game damage complaints, etc.

Success will be measured is harvest trends under this liberal regulation with no B Licenses do not divert from long-term trends under the standard regulation with B Licenses.

4. What is the current population's status in relation to the management objectives? (i.e., state management objectives from management plan if applicable; provide current and prior years of population survey, harvest, or other pertinent information).

The 2 populations of MD that summer in the Big Hole Valley appear stable, as measured by harvest trends and adult survival measured by collared MD maintained by IDFG. There is no formal population survey of MD in HDs 321 or 334.

5. Provide information related to any weather/habitat factors, public or private land use or resident and nonresident hunting opportunity that have relevance to this change (i.e., habitat security, hunter access, vegetation surveys, weather index, snow conditions, and temperature / precipitation information).

Given the timing of migration of both MD populations out of the valley, it is believed that few animals will actually be available for harvest during the General Season much past the first week.

6. Briefly describe the contacts you have made with individual sportsmen or landowners, public groups or organizations regarding this proposal and indicate their comments (both pro and con).

This proposal has been vetted widely through FWP social media and website, R3 open house and circulation amongst wildlife and enforcement staff, along Butte biologist email distribution list, with IDFG biologists that share these populations with FWP, and at several local sportsmen clubs.

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION
Mule Deer 2022
Standardize MD season in HD 340

Hunting Districts: 340

1. Describe the proposed season / quotas changes and provide a summary of prior history (i.e., prior history of permits, season types, etc.).

Change season structure for MULE DEER in HD 340 from either-sex on the General License to buck only on the General License. Add limited number of MD Antlerless B Licenses valid through the drawing.

The Either-sex season for mule deer that has been in place for the past 3 years has failed to meet the management objectives:

Objective 1: Improve game harvest opportunity by providing a sustainable harvest opportunity.

Objective 2: Provide private landowners with an unlimited tool to manage populations, on their lands, within their tolerances.

Objective 3: Improve mature buck harvest opportunity by use antlerless harvests to reduce harvest pressure on bucks, especially young bucks.

2. What is the objective of this proposed change? This could be a specific harvest amount or resulting population level or number of game damage complaints, etc.

To manage the MD population in HD 340 in such a way that the following objectives will be met:

Objective 1: Improve harvest opportunity by providing a sustainable population.

Objective 2: Maintain a means for private landowners to manage populations, on their lands, within their tolerances.

3. How will the success of this proposal be measured? This could be annual game or harvest surveys, game damage complaints, etc.

Success will be measured by the number of game damage complaints and the trends in MD population and harvest in HD 340.

4. What is the current population's status in relation to the management objectives? (i.e., state management objectives from management plan if applicable; provide current and prior years of population survey, harvest, or other pertinent information).

Following is the assessment of how the MD population in HD 340 has responded to each management objective:

Objective 1: Improve game harvest opportunity by providing a sustainable harvest opportunity.

Metric: Population count and recruitment trends using data from spring aerial surveys. Looking for a stable trend in both.

Assessment: Unfortunately, we were not able to gather good quality population data this spring since we missed the green-up period and mule deer had already dispersed from winter range. Looking to last year's data, 299 deer were observed. This was 10% less than the 332 mule deer observed in 2019, which was the first count since the liberal season for mule deer went into effect in HD 340 in the fall of 2018. The 2019 count, in turn, was 32% lower than the 2018 spring count of 486 mule deer, suggesting a downward trend in the population since the liberal regulation was put in place. Prior to this the trend appeared to be slightly upward. The average mule deer

population in HD 340 from 2006-2018 was 351. Since the liberal season the population has decreased by 10% to 316 deer.

A possible driver in this downward trend is likely caused by the increased harvest that has occurred since the mule deer regulation in HD 340 was liberalized. From 2006-2017, an average of 313 mule deer were harvested. Since the season was liberalized, that average has increased 47% to 461 mule deer harvested.

Fawn recruitment since the liberal season has been in place has averaged 30 fawns:100 adults. Prior to this (2006-2018) fawn recruitment had been 40 fawns:100 adults, suggesting a 25% decrease in recruitment since the liberal season has been in effect.

Given this assessment, it is questionable whether Objective 1 is being met, i.e. whether mule deer harvest opportunity is sustainable under continued either-sex structure on the General License in HD 340.

Objective 2: Provide private landowners with an unlimited tool to manage populations, on their lands, within their tolerances.

Metric: Game Damage Complaints.

Assessment: Several landowners in HD 340 have historically experienced chronic game damage from concentrations of mule deer. No complaints have been received since this season structure went into effect. Objective 2 is being met under the either-sex mule deer structure on the General License.

Objective 3: Improve mature buck harvest opportunity by using antlerless harvest to reduce harvest pressure on bucks, especially young bucks.

Metric: Trends in harvest data (# does, # bucks, # bucks < 4 points, # bucks >= 4 points).

Assessment: Total mule deer harvest in HD 340 increased 47% under the either-sex structure on the General License, from an average of 313 deer prior to the liberal season to 461 deer since the season has been liberalized. Harvest increased on both antlered and antlerless segment of the mule deer population. The majority of the increase has been on does. These results are in contrast to the expected outcome of no increase in total harvest or antlerless harvest and antlerless harvest on the General License replacing a portion of the total buck harvest.

Looking closer at the quality of mule deer bucks harvested before and after the implementation of the liberal season structure in HD 340, results once again are in contrast to expected outcome. The expectation was that doe harvest would replace harvest on younger bucks, i.e. bucks with less than 4 points on at least one of their antlers, therefore easing the pressure on the buck population in general and allowing for mature bucks to grow in HD 340. However, data shows that harvest pressure has increased 18% on younger bucks and remained the same on bucks with 4 or more points on at least one antler.

5. Provide information related to any weather/habitat factors, public or private land use or resident and nonresident hunting opportunity that have relevance to this change (i.e., habitat security, hunter access, vegetation surveys, weather index, snow conditions, and temperature / precipitation information).

HD 340 has a significant amount of access to public and private lands. In addition, there is an increasing amount of illegal user-created ATV trails being created on public land. This road density lowers the security for mule deer, which then must be provided for in the regulations.

6. Briefly describe the contacts you have made with individual sportsmen or landowners, public groups or organizations regarding this proposal and indicate their comments (both pro and con).

This proposal has been vetted widely via FWP website and social channels, R3 Open House, R3 wildlife and enforcement staff, Butte biologist's distribution list, and several local sportsmen clubs.

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION
Mule Deer 2022
Combine Deer/Elk Hunting Districts 320 and 333

Hunting Districts: 320 and 333

1. Describe the proposed season / quotas changes and provide a summary of prior history (i.e., prior history of permits, season types, etc.).

Remove the northeast portion of HD 333 that sits east of State Highway 359, south of Interstate 90, and west of U. S. Highway 287. Combine the remainder of HD 333 and HD 320 into one HD. The new HD would be numbered 320.

Proposed regulations:

ELK General License: Brow-tine bull or antlerless elk;

Elk B License: 320-01: Antlerless Elk. Not valid on National Forest land; Quota 200; Quota Range 100-500;

General Deer License: Either-sex mule deer; Either-sex white-tailed deer;

Deer B License: 003-00: Antlerless white-tailed deer. One per hunter and valid across all Region 3 HDs;

Deer B License: 399-00: Antlerless white-tailed deer. One to five per hunter per year based on harvest need and valid across HDs 302, 320, 322, 329, 340, and 360;

2. What is the objective of this proposed change? This could be a specific harvest amount or resulting population level or number of game damage complaints, etc.

Regulations Simplification.

From a biological perspective, the HD combination expands the HD to the Tobacco Root Elk Management Unit scale, which is the scale that elk and mule deer use the landscape. Removal of the northeast portion of the HD will focus the HD on the Tobacco Root Mountain Range. Elk and mule deer regulations have been common across the two hunting districts for many years.

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION
Mule Deer 2022
Combine HD 331 and HD 332

Hunting Districts: HD 332

1. Describe the proposed season / quotas changes and provide a summary of prior history (i.e., prior history of permits, season types, etc.).

Combine HD 331 East Pioneer and HD 332 West Pioneer into one district named HD 331 Pioneer Mountains. Extend mule deer either-sex management throughout the new district. This proposal has been put forward to simplify hunting regulations and reduce the number of hunting districts.

Mule deer in HD 331 have been managed with either-sex general season harvest since 2016. Mule deer management in HD 332 has been buck only during the general season with no antlerless opportunity since 2009.

2. What is the objective of this proposed change? This could be a specific harvest amount or resulting population level or number of game damage complaints, etc.

The objective of the proposal is to simplify regulations and consolidate hunting districts.

3. How will the success of this proposal be measured? This could be annual game or harvest surveys, game damage complaints, etc.

Success is implied as it combines hunting districts. Its success in meeting larger goals of regulations simplification is qualitative and subjective based on the experiences of individuals.

Mule deer populations will continue to be monitored via surveys and hunter interviews to determine if changes have resulted in negative population consequences.

4. What is the current population's status in relation to the management objectives? (i.e., state management objectives from management plan if applicable; provide current and prior years of population survey, harvest, or other pertinent information).

The Pioneer Mountains fall within the **MOUNTAIN FOOTHILL POPULATION MANAGEMENT** for mule deer management. The primary objective is: **Maintain the total number of deer observed on trend areas within 25% of the Long-Term Average.** Long-term (since 1986) spring green up surveys averaged 558 mule deer. Average spring counts over the past 10-years have averaged 335 deer which is less than 25% of the long-term average. In 2016, this district went to an either-sex mule deer general season. It has been monitored closely for potential population consequences. To date no negative population effects have been observed since implementing either-sex harvest and the population has grown by an estimated 1.2% annually. Buck harvest in this district has shown a corresponding growth in this district.

No population surveys are conducted in the West Pioneers (HD 332) however, buck harvest has declined since 1986. The following depicts the long-term and 10-year averages in buck harvest in HD 332 decline in buck harvest has been evident since the 1980's.

Average Since 1986: 59 Bucks (Standard deviation: 29.9)

25%below avg: 44

25%above avg: 73

Average Since 2012: 41 Bucks (Standard deviation: 11.7)

Mule deer management in West Pioneers has been strictly buck only since 2010 and has shown no signs of improvement in buck harvest.

Initiating an either-sex general season is not expected to have negative population consequences because: 1. Monitoring of neighboring districts have shown no negative population consequences for either-sex management

to date (Southwest Montana Mule Deer Either-sex Management Area Summary – Year 5); 2. The West Pioneers is not a prominent mule deer hunting area and receives only limited hunting pressure; 3. Most mule deer migrate out of the West Pioneers relatively early in the Fall and are subject to little hunting pressure during the general season.

5. Provide information related to any weather/habitat factors, public or private land use or resident and nonresident hunting opportunity that have relevance to this change (i.e., habitat security, hunter access, vegetation surveys, weather index, snow conditions, and temperature / precipitation information).

Mule deer migrate seasonally into the central Pioneers to summer. The low elevation margins of the Eastern Pioneers provide winter range for mule deer. Mule deer in the West Pioneers largely leave for winter range into the East Pioneers or Idaho. GPS data from mule deer from Idaho has shown that mule deer summering in the West Pioneers migrate out of this area early in the Fall, typically before rifle season or early in the season. Thus, mule deer in the West Pioneer are subject to very limited hunting pressure.

A small number of mule deer will winter in the north-west corner of the district. These deer also likely move between HD 331 and HD 319 occasionally.

Initiating an either-sex general season is not expected to have negative population consequences because: 1. Monitoring of neighboring districts have shown no negative population consequences for either-sex management to date (Southwest Montana Mule Deer Either-sex Management Area Summary – Year 5); 2. The West Pioneers is not a prominent mule deer hunting area and mule deer receive only limited hunting pressure. This situation is similar to district HD 328 which has received very limited antlerless harvest (~5 antlerless/year) since becoming an either-sex district.; 3. Most mule deer migrate out of the West Pioneers relatively early in the Fall and are subject to little hunting pressure during the general season.

6. Briefly describe the contacts you have made with individual sportsmen or landowners, public groups or organizations regarding this proposal and indicate their comments (both pro and con).

The current proposal is a modification of an earlier proposal that included combining HD 329, 331, 332 into a single district. The accelerated time likely limited public comment. This proposal was posted on the FWP website. In addition, the local biologist Jesse Newby distributed this proposal to contacts he maintains on a list serve. The biologist also engaged in conversations with a diverse group of sportsmen and landowners, including the Beaverhead Chapter of the Mule Deer Foundation.

Over 80% of online comments were opposed to combining all three districts. Comments made directly to the biologist were similarly opposed. Opposition was primarily centered on combining the Pioneer Mountain districts (HD 331, 332) with the Big Hole/Horse Prairie district (HD 329). However, the majority of those opposed to the larger consolidation were supportive of combining HD 331 and HD 332 into one district.

However, there was concern from 4 individuals that extending the either-sex harvest to HD 332 would negatively impact local mule deer populations.

**MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION
Mule Deer 2022
AMENDED HD 380 mule deer changes**

Hunting Districts: 380

1. Describe the proposed season / quotas changes and provide a summary of prior history (i.e., prior history of permits, season types, etc.).

The proposal is to eliminate the current unlimited mule deer permit in HD 392 and replace it with a limited draw permit. Since 2000 an unlimited mule deer buck permit has been required to hunt antlered mule deer in the HD. The proposed quota (1,200) for the new drawn permit quota is similar (down a little) to the number of unlimited permits that have been issued in recent years. It was decided to make the quota a little less than the existing number of unlimited permits, as mule deer numbers in HD 380 have been down for a number of years based on trend survey results.

The proposal will also change the wording of the restriction on where the 380-02 antlerless mule deer B- licenses are valid from the current – Only valid on private land outside of the National Forest Boundary and on DNRC (State School Trust) land to Not valid on National Forest lands. This recommendation amends the original proposal 2022-23 biennial proposal which called for making those licenses valid on private lands only.

See Figure 1 for past license and harvest information in the HD.

HD 380 Mule deer harvest summary

Year	Total Harvest	M	F	Fawns	# Unlimit Permits	Unlimit Perm Harvest	% Mgmt Success	HD 380 B-Licenses	B-License Harvest	% Mgmt Success	Anti- Harv General
					1268						
2020	401	301	96	5	1153	260	22.5	250	83	33.2	7
2019	352	260	91	0	1307	224	17.1	250	79	31.7	0
2018*	431	332	98	0	1388	267	19.2	250	79	31.4	19
2017	402	295	105	3	1277	243	19	150	60	39.7	15
2016	445	382	63	0	1338	329	24.6	50	19	38.4	24
2015	422	389	29	5	1455	355	24.4	28^	12	42.9	14
2014	310	296	14	0	1269	263	20.7	0	-	-	11
2013	322	280	42	0	1426	255	17.9	150	36	24.0	3
2012	391	308	83	0	1610	275	17.1	150	69	46.3	3
2011	441	384	57	0	1484	367	24.7	150	52	34.7	0
2010	465	400	66	0	1484	358	24.2	150	53	35.1	6
2009	539	400	135	3	1343	365	27.2	300	109	36.2	18
2008	614	506	107	0	1347	472	35	197	68	34.4	12
2007	644	541	95	8	1302	477	36.6	200	75	37.5	16
2006*	811	642	167	3	1247	517	41.5	200	110	54.9	34
2005*	751	575	174	3	1227	496	40.4	100	49	48.6	24
2004*	674	499	174	2	1097	438	39.9	100	46	45.7	23
2003	645	532	111	2	1252	464	36.8	150	75	50.0	14
2002	585	515	69	0	1064	430	40.4	100	40	40.0	12
2001	428	381	42	0	925	322	34.8	50	24	48.0	6
2000	561	546	15	0	850	288	33.9	-	-	-	0
Ave	506	417	87	2	1278	355	28	155	60	39.6	12

'00-'20

*Tremendous amount of illegal buck harvest on general license reported - correct?

Large amount of illegal buck harvest on a general license reported every year

^2015 B-licenses were for game damage hunt (small portion of district only), use of Deer A for antlerless also allowed

Figure 1: HD 380 mule deer harvest summary.

2. What is the objective of this proposed change? This could be a specific harvest amount or resulting population level or number of game damage complaints, etc.

The objective of the proposed changes is to simplify regulations. Changing the antlerless mule deer B License restriction on where the licenses are valid will also make it easier for the public to understand, reduce enforcement concerns, and improve population management of mule deer related to private land in the HD by allowing harvest on adjacent and often intermingled areas of BLM and DNRC land. The area restriction (Not valid on National Forest lands) is the same as the mule deer B License restriction that is in place in other nearby hunting districts. Using a standard restriction should make it easier on hunters.

3. How will the success of this proposal be measured? This could be annual game or harvest surveys, game damage complaints, etc.

Success of the regulation simplification portion of the proposal is implied. Success of the antlerless mule deer B License portion of the proposal will be measured by the number of future mule deer game damage complaints or just general complaints about too many mule deer on private land that we receive in the future. While there is a mule deer trend area in the HD, this area is believed to mostly monitor deer that migrate to and from national forest land. If these deer are still on national forest land during the hunting season, they would legally not be available to be harvested with the proposed B Licenses (Not valid on National Forest Lands). Harvest success on the mule deer B- license will be monitored via the Department's annual telephone harvest survey.

4. What is the current population's status in relation to the management objectives? (i.e., state management objectives from management plan if applicable; provide current and prior years of population survey, harvest, or other pertinent information).

Mule deer numbers associated with national forest land in the HD appear to still be potentially well down based on the HD's Limestone Hills trend area which monitors mostly migratory deer (Table 2). It should be noted that the trend area is only representative of a portion of HD 380. However, using mule deer buck harvest in the HD as a surrogate for survey trend information would also indicate that overall mule deer numbers are still down in the HD (but maybe not to the degree indicated by the trend survey information) as the mule deer buck harvest was approximately 21% below the long-term average (see Figure 1).

HD 380 is part of the Mountain Foothills PMU under MFWP's AHM Mule Deer Plan. Trend survey information in relation to the long-term average (> 25% below the LT average) would put HD 380 into a Restrictive Regulation package. If buck harvest information is used (< 25% below the LT Average), then a Standard Regulation Package would be called for. Under a Restrictive Regulation package, a limited number of antlerless mule deer B Licenses are allowed for specific portions of the HD to help address localized game damage complaints, while the Standard Package allows for more antlerless mule deer B Licenses. Regardless, while mule deer numbers associated with national forest land in the HD appear to still be down, mule deer numbers associated with more productive private agricultural lands appear to be increasing. Limiting the use of the mule deer B Licenses to areas off National Forest will hopefully help focus harvest pressure on and around those private lands where landowners feel they have too many mule deer.

Mule Deer Population Parameters for HD 380 trend area.

YEAR	POST-SEASON (Total Deer)	FAWNS:100 ADULTS (Post-Season)	SPRING (Total Deer)	FAWNS:100 ADULTS (Spring Recruitment)	BUCKS: 100 DOES (Post-Season)
2020/21	236	21.6	117	39.3	14.8
2019/20*	269	29.3			5.6
2018/19	100	17.6	317	16.1	18.1
2017/18	330	34.7	367	19.5	22.5
2016/17	335	43.2	254	31.6	15.8
2015/16	138	40.8	107	35.4	12.6
2014/15	123	36.7	-	-	7.1
2013/14			166	25.0	
2012/13					
2011/12		-	236	20.0	-
2010/11	394	22.6	116	30.3	11
2009/10	464	24.6	166	26.7	6.7
2008/09	437	29.3	375	30.2	8.4
2007/08	556	28.3	514	26.5	11.5
2006/07	786	24.7	463	21.6	18.8
2005/06	593	44.9	177	37.6	14.9
2004/05	787	25.7	233	26.9	11.1
2003/04	461	30.3	366	33.6	15.5
2002/03	422	33.1	381	34.3	7.8
2001/02	556	31	456	23.7	9.9
2000/01	520	31.3	420	23	10.8
Ave ('00-'20)	417	31	291	27.9	12.4
1999/00	476	22.1	204	29.9	3.9
1998/99	518	30.9	298	30.1	4
1997/98	395	20.9	215	14.4	1.7
1996/97	679	33.9	306	17.2	5.6
Ave.	443	30.3	292	26.4	10.7
('96-'19/20)					

- 2015 Spring survey flown but no deer observed (timing), not indicative of trend

* No spring survey flown

Figure 1: HD 380 survey summary.

5. Provide information related to any weather/habitat factors, public or private land use or resident and nonresident hunting opportunity that have relevance to this change (i.e., habitat security, hunter access, vegetation surveys, weather index, snow conditions, and temperature / precipitation information).

Given that the quota number of limited (drawn) permits will be similar to the number of unlimited mule deer buck permits that have been issued, there should be limited impacts on the hunting opportunity for residents. Since the permits will now be limited (drawn), the 10% nonresident cap kicks in so nonresident hunting opportunity may be impacted to some degree; although, based on the number of unlimited permits that have been issued to nonresidents in recent years (well below 10%), there may be no impact to nonresident opportunity. There is no desire to significantly reduce the number of limited permits in this HD to turn it into a 'trophy' management area. Significantly limiting the number of permits would result in significant hunter displacement which would result in

increased hunting pressure in surrounding General License areas. The change in where the B Licenses are valid will improve both resident and nonresident opportunity as more areas will not be open for antlerless mule deer harvest.

Weather this past winter (2020/21) was extremely mild, so mule deer survival and in particular fawn survival should have been quite good last year. However, the area has been impacted by extreme/exceptional drought conditions this summer and fall, so forage conditions/quality on native range, and their impact on animal body conditions going into the breeding season and the winter is of a potential concern. However, mule deer found in primarily private land areas in the HD are often found in association with irrigated alfalfa fields. As a result, those deer have access to a lot higher quality of forage and have a higher plane of nutrition than deer found on native range. In addition to having lots of BLM and DNRC land available in the HD, hunting access to private land in the HD is generally good throughout the HD with 20+ FWP Block Management areas. In addition, many private landowners in the HD who aren't in Block Management also allow at least some level of public hunting access.

6. Briefly describe the contacts you have made with individual sportsmen or landowners, public groups or organizations regarding this proposal and indicate their comments (both pro and con).

As mentioned, the original proposal for the 2022-23 biennia called for changing the unlimited permits to limited (drawn) permits and changing the current mule deer B License restriction wording to private lands only. We only received a couple of comments related to the mule deer proposals in HD 380. One was in opposition to doing away with the unlimited permits and the other was against going to private lands only for the mule deer B Licenses.

Given the relative lack of public comment, the amended proposed change to make the mule deer B- licenses valid for everywhere except on National Forest lands was based primarily on further consideration of the original proposal by the area wildlife biologist. Upon further consideration, it was decided that changing the antlerless mule deer B License restriction on where the licenses are valid would, in addition to improving opportunity, make it easier for the public to understand (regulation simplification), since the restriction – Not valid on National Forest lands is a somewhat standard restriction that is used in many hunting districts for B Licenses. Further, it was felt, given the complex landownership pattern in HD 380, that the amended change would reduce enforcement concerns and improve population management of mule deer related to private lands in the HD by allowing harvest on adjacent and often intermingled areas of BLM and DNRC lands.

**MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION
Mule Deer 2022
Eliminate Antlerless B License opportunity in HDs 318 and 335**

Hunting Districts: HDs 318 and 335

1. Describe the proposed season / quotas changes and provide a summary of prior history (i.e., prior history of permits, season types, etc.).

Eliminate the Antlerless Mule Deer B License opportunity in HDs 318 and 335.

The quota is at 25 in each HD. The statewide goal to eliminate quotas of less than 50.

This is being recommended for regulations simplification and is proposed to be applied as broadly as possible statewide. There is no biological justification to make this change for these districts. See "Contact Summary" below for social aspects and comments relevant to this change.

2. What is the objective of this proposed change? This could be a specific harvest amount or resulting population level or number of game damage complaints, etc.

Statewide goal to eliminate LPTs when fewer than 50 offered.

3. How will the success of this proposal be measured? This could be annual game or harvest surveys, game damage complaints, etc.

4. What is the current population's status in relation to the management objectives? (i.e., state management objectives from management plan if applicable; provide current and prior years of population survey, harvest, or other pertinent information).

Mule deer trend counts are more than 25% below long-term average. Recruitment was poor in 2018 and 2019 but was high in 2021.

5. Provide information related to any weather/habitat factors, public or private land use or resident and nonresident hunting opportunity that have relevance to this change (i.e., habitat security, hunter access, vegetation surveys, weather index, snow conditions, and temperature / precipitation information).

Retaining these district specific antlerless mule deer licenses would retain some antlerless mule deer opportunity, and it would allow flexibility to increase licenses as mule deer numbers rebound or address game damage complaints should they arise.

6. Briefly describe the contacts you have made with individual sportsmen or landowners, public groups or organizations regarding this proposal and indicate their comments (both pro and con).

Due to the short timeline, and late receipt of comments emailed to the agency at large, only those comments submitted through the online survey portal for Region 3 or received directly (email, other pers. comm.) and those inclusive of Helena area HDs (deer/elk HDs 318, 335, 339, 343, and 388 [also pronghorn]) were able to be reviewed and included in this proposal by the deadline. Additionally, comments that were not specific to a proposed change may not be captured in the list below, but they were considered, particularly when making adjustments to initial recommendations for the Helena area. All comments submitted during the Sept/Oct comment period are to be considered along with comments that will be submitted during the traditional comment period in December and January. Sept/Oct comment included:

General

3 Opposed to process: take input from hunters and landowners before proposals are put together, not after; pause and engage public first; use traditional process for changes.

6 Opposed to any combining of HDs [3 may be opposed to any of the proposed changes, including combining, unclear from comment], and/or reducing opportunities for any of the Region 3 HDs as proposed in Sept.

318/335 MD

1 Eliminate antlerless mule deer harvest in HD 335.

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION
Mule Deer 2022

Hunting Districts: 447

1. Describe the proposed season / quotas changes and provide a summary of prior history (i.e., prior history of permits, season types, etc.).

The proposed change is to change the opportunity on the General License for mule deer from 'either-sex' to 'antlered buck only'. The regulations for mule deer currently allow either male or female mule deer to be harvested in HD 447. Presently there are 50 mule deer B Licenses available in HD 445. This change would eliminate those B Licenses to further reduce antlerless harvest.

2. What is the objective of this proposed change? This could be a specific harvest amount or resulting population level or number of game damage complaints, etc.

The objective of this proposed change is to allow the mule deer population to recover to long-term average levels. A secondary objective is to simplify the regulations. Many districts in the area with similar habitat are experiencing below average mule deer numbers. Making the mule deer regulations consistent with surrounding hunting districts which are presently at or switching to 'Antlered Buck Only' may shift antlerless harvest to areas with above average numbers. Maintaining similar harvest opportunities in adjacent hunting districts after switching to 'Antlered Buck Only' may reduce hunting confusion initially and allow harvest opportunities to maximize management objectives.

3. How will the success of this proposal be measured? This could be annual game or harvest surveys, game damage complaints, etc.

Success could be measured by comparing new harvest data to the old harvest data. Success could also be measured by comparing the number of new game damage complaints to the number of game damage complaints in the past. The stability of deer populations overtime may shed light on the consequences of the change. Public comment in future biennial season setting processes could reflect landowner/sportsmen satisfaction. Ideally, mule deer numbers would more quickly recover to long-term averages as monitored through survey and harvest data.

4. What is the current population's status in relation to the management objectives? (i.e., state management objectives from management plan if applicable; provide current and prior years of population survey, harvest, or other pertinent information).

Survey and harvest data suggest mule deer numbers in HD 447 are below the long-term average. Buck harvest data since Year 1983 suggests mule deer numbers are near 18% below the long-term average. Survey data from the North Little Belts Trend Area (HD 413) suggest mule deer are between 48% and 21% below long-term average (the 2021 survey efforts may not have been optimal). Survey data from the Little Belts Front Trend Area (east portions of HD 432) suggest mule deer on the east end of the Little Belts are around 17% below the long-term average. Both districts are managed under the same criteria described in the Mule Deer Adaptive Harvest Management Plan, i.e. a Prairie/Mountain Foothill population. Both trend areas contain similar habitat as the Highwoods.

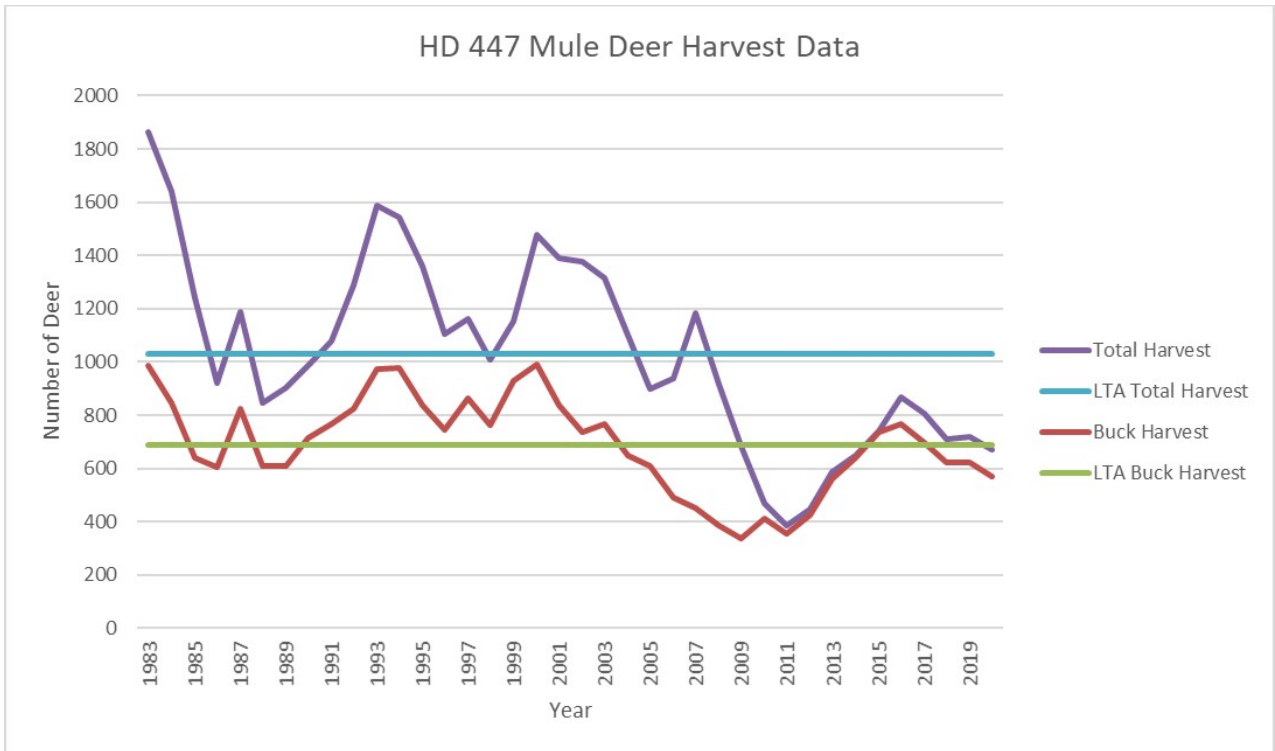


Figure 1: HD 447 Mule Deer Harvest Data.

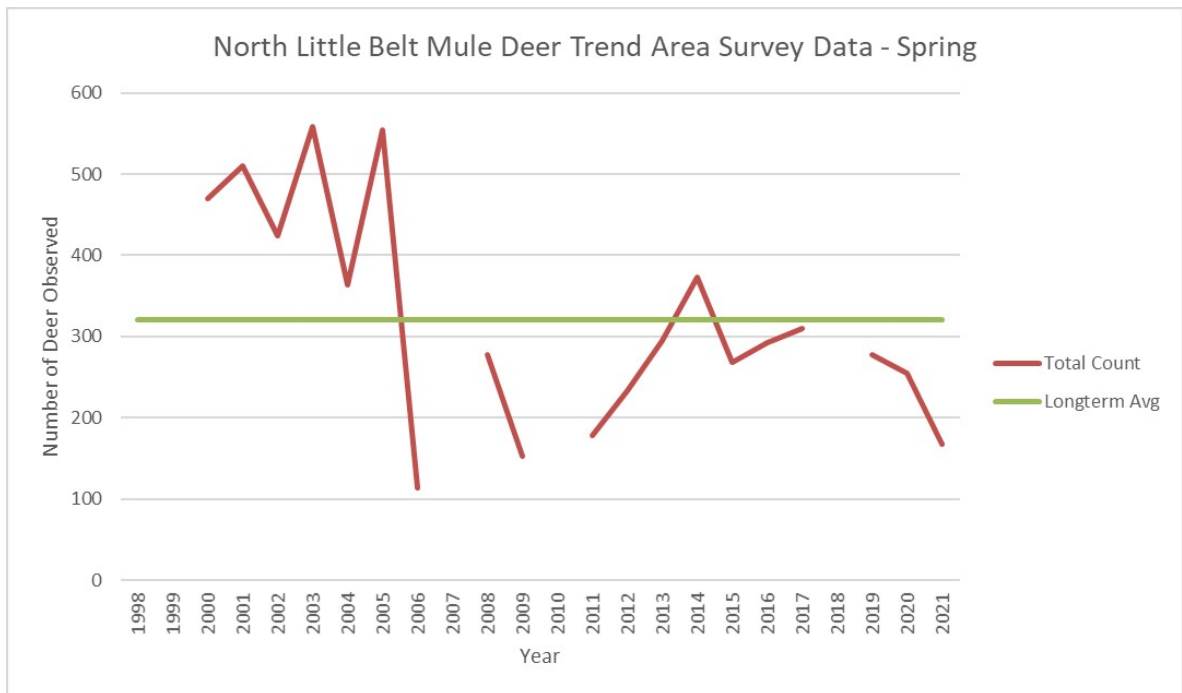


Figure 2: North Little Belt Mule Deer Trend Area Data.

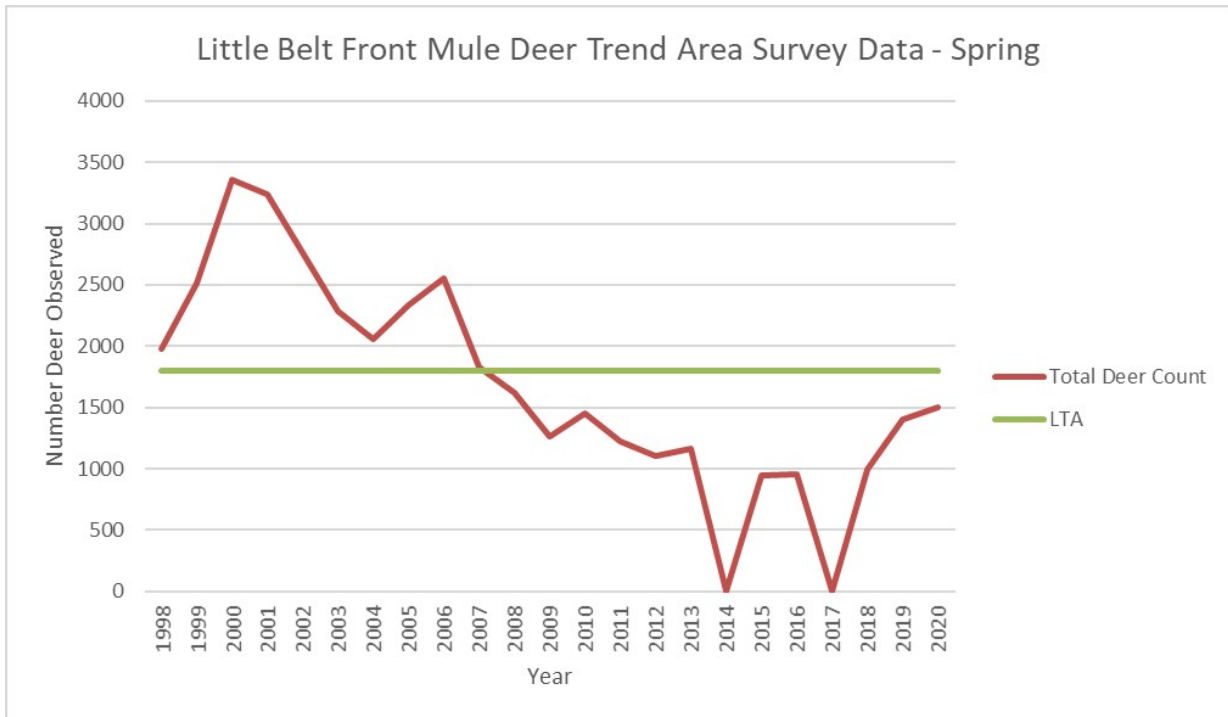


Figure 3: Little Belt Front Mule Deer Trend Area Data.

5. Provide information related to any weather/habitat factors, public or private land use or resident and nonresident hunting opportunity that have relevance to this change (i.e., habitat security, hunter access, vegetation surveys, weather index, snow conditions, and temperature / precipitation information).

Overall, weather since 2017 has made it difficult for mule deer populations to recover in this area. Hot dry summers, extreme cold spells, and heavy snowstorms have likely slowed annual recruitment for mule deer. While fawn:doe ratios observed in both trend areas suggest recovery potential is present, only slow recovery is being observed in most areas. Hot dry summers which have the potential to limit nutrition available across the landscape, in particularly mountainous and native rangeland areas is thought to be a major driver affecting annual survival for mule deer in this area. Limiting the harvest of does to maximize production effort is recommended to speed up recovery. The summer of 2021 was particularly hot and dry; such a change may seem timely if the 2021/2022 winter is particularly harsh.

HD 447 is unique in that the Highwood Mountains are an island mountain range with a relatively small/large portion of the mountainous terrain being public land/national forest (approximately 55,000 acres). Much of the best mule deer habitat occurs on private land surrounding the Forest, albeit good deer hunting opportunities occur on the Forest as well. Much of the mule deer winter range in HD 447 is privately owned, however an abundance of State School Trust Lands in the district provides good opportunity. While a reasonably good number of farm and ranch operations exist around the Highwoods and a good number of those landowners grant excellent public deer hunting opportunities; some hunters find gaining access to private land difficult, especially when hunting bucks. Some outfitting occurs, some leasing occurs, some properties simply do not allow hunting while others do. The district presently has two Block Management Area and one Conservation Easement that provide mule deer hunting opportunities. Public hunters are encouraged to explore the National Forest, visit with private landowners, build relationships and ask politely to hunt on private land in HD 447.

6. Briefly describe the contacts you have made with individual sportsmen or landowners, public groups or organizations regarding this proposal and indicate their comments (both pro and con).

Given the nature of this year’s season setting process, little local outreach has been made to fully collect feedback from landowners and sportsmen. With that being said, surprisingly very little comment was received during this year’s scoping comment period. Albeit poor outreach and minimal comment during scoping; regional biologists feel this proposal would be accepted by the landowners and sportsmen who use the area.

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION
Mule Deer 2022
HD 444 MD B License

Hunting Districts: HD 444

1. Describe the proposed season / quotas changes and provide a summary of prior history (i.e., prior history of permits, season types, etc.).

Create HD specific antlerless mule deer licenses (n=50, quota range 50-300). The 1990-91 hunting seasons allowed for antlered mule deer buck hunting only during the general season. Beginning in 1992 and through 2000, an additional 50 antlerless mule deer licenses were allocated. From 2001 – 2003, antlerless license levels were increased to 150. From 2004 – 2006, antlerless license numbers were further increased to 250. From 2006-2010, antlerless license levels were increased again to 400 in response to concerns of growing numbers of deer in at least portions of this HD. From 2011-2013, antlerless licenses were reduced to 150 in response to declining numbers. In 2014 and 2015 and by Director's office recommendation, antlerless licenses were eliminated (along with many HDs) and buck only mule deer General License season type was put in place. In 2016 (to date), either-sex mule deer seasons on a General License were once again reinstated with no antlerless licenses. The archery hunting season for mule deer was an either-sex season type from at least 1990 through 1997. From 1997 - 2015, mule deer archery hunting only season was limited to antlered buck only. From 2016 to present, the general archery only season was changed to either-sex mule deer, coinciding with the general rifle season regulation type.

2. What is the objective of this proposed change? This could be a specific harvest amount or resulting population level or number of game damage complaints, etc.

While no formal population/production level surveys are completed in this area, mule deer numbers and harvest in comparison to recent levels have increased to levels in which this proposed renewal of a limited number of antlerless licenses is warranted (Table 1). This proposal looks to provide some limited level of antlerless specific harvest where necessary within this HD (i.e., localized game damage complaints). This proposed antlerless license level was last allocated in 2000. This proposal in line with deer performance criteria outlined in the statewide mule deer Adaptive Harvest Management Plan (AHM) to include a standard hunting season regulation package (either-sex General License with limited additional antlerless licenses).

3. How will the success of this proposal be measured? This could be annual game or harvest surveys, game damage complaints, etc.

The success of this proposal will be determined by first and foremost acceptance from the FW Commission and public. Additional antlerless license opportunity will also aid in allowing license holders to focus such harvest in areas where there is interest in increased harvest, thereby reducing, on a limited scale, potential landowner game damage complaints and providing public hunting opportunity. Mule deer demographic data (harvest estimates) will also be measured in time as outlined in AHM to confirm this additional harvest is not detrimental to the local deer population and/or necessary needs to increase antlerless license levels.

4. What is the current population's status in relation to the management objectives? (i.e., state management objectives from management plan if applicable; provide current and prior years of population survey, harvest, or other pertinent information).

In the absence of survey data specific to this HD, the primary specific management objectives for mule deer in this population management unit (as outlined by AHM) are to maintain total estimated annual buck harvest within 25% of the long-term average. Available long-term harvest estimates for this HD indicate most recent buck harvest (2020 hunting season) to be 31% above LTA and 88% above 2019 estimates. Since buck production and subsequent harvest is a direct indicator of overall population production, current indications are portraying general good production for mule deer in this HD. Other anecdotal observations of mule deer in places also indicate generally good production of mule deer compared to nearly a decade ago. Although limited harvest of mule deer from this HD comes through the Augusta check station, 2020 harvest records also indicate a slightly above

harvest compared to LTA. Population status and trend can also be estimated or gauged by landowner/hunter comments and incidental observations, both of which, in places, indicate mule deer numbers having increased from recent lower numbers observed 8-10 years ago.

5. Provide information related to any weather/habitat factors, public or private land use or resident and nonresident hunting opportunity that have relevance to this change (i.e., habitat security, hunter access, vegetation surveys, weather index, snow conditions, and temperature / precipitation information).

Most deer in this hunting district are best considered “resident” in nature and take advantage of agricultural standing/stored crops as well as traditional mule deer prairie habitat types. Hunter access to deer this HD can be limited due to limited accessible public lands along with varying opportunity on private lands. There is limited block management located within this HD with opportunity for mule deer harvest. The proposed license opportunity in this HD will likely be tolerable given the low levels of licenses being proposed. This area does continue to see strong white-tailed deer production and subsequently there is some concern from some locals of white-tails out competing mule deer in at least portions of this area, although there is no evidence to back these claims.

6. Briefly describe the contacts you have made with individual sportsmen or landowners, public groups or organizations regarding this proposal and indicate their comments (both pro and con).

Contacts to date have been limited. This proposal was submitted through the initial ‘scoping’ phase of the 2021/22 season setting process and available for the 30-day public comment period. Only one comment specific to this HD was submitted and advocated for more antlerless mule deer license availability.

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION
Mule Deer 2022

Hunting Districts: 445

1. Describe the proposed season / quotas changes and provide a summary of prior history (i.e., prior history of permits, season types, etc.).

The proposed change is to change the opportunity on the General License for mule deer from 'either-sex' to 'antlered buck only'. The regulations for mule deer currently allow either male or female mule deer to be harvested in HD 445. Presently there are 5 mule deer B Licenses available in HD 445. This change would eliminate those B Licenses as well as clean up the regulations and further reduce antlerless harvest. Another underlying intent is to make the mule deer regulations consistent with other surrounding hunting districts many of which are already 'Antlered Buck Only'.

2. What is the objective of this proposed change? This could be a specific harvest amount or resulting population level or number of game damage complaints, etc.

The objective of this proposed change is to allow the mule deer population to recover to long-term average levels. A secondary objective is to simplify the regulations. Many districts in the area with similar habitat are experiencing below average mule deer numbers. Making the mule deer regulations consistent with surrounding hunting districts which are presently at or switching to 'Antlered Buck Only' may shift antlerless harvest to areas with above average numbers. Maintaining similar harvest opportunities in adjacent hunting districts after switching to 'Antlered Buck Only' may reduce hunting confusion initially and allow harvest opportunities to maximize management objectives.

3. How will the success of this proposal be measured? This could be annual game or harvest surveys, game damage complaints, etc.

Success could be measured by comparing new harvest data to the old harvest data. Success could also be measured by comparing the number of new game damage complaints to the number of game damage complaints in the past. The stability of deer populations over time may shed light on the consequences of the change. Public comment in future biennial season setting processes could reflect landowner/sportsmen satisfaction. Ideally, mule deer numbers would more quickly recover to long-term averages as monitored through survey and harvest data.

4. What is the current population's status in relation to the management objectives? (i.e., state management objectives from management plan if applicable; provide current and prior years of population survey, harvest, or other pertinent information).

Survey and harvest data suggest mule deer numbers in HD 445 are below the long-term average. Buck harvest data since Year 1983 suggests mule deer numbers are near 62% below the long-term average. Survey data from the Devil's Kitchen Trend Area suggest mule deer are 31% below the long-term average. Survey data from the North Little Belts Trend Area (HD 413) suggest mule deer are between 48% and 21% below long-term average (the 2021 survey efforts may not have been optimal). Both districts are managed under the same criteria described in the Mule Deer Adaptive Harvest Management Plan, i.e. a Prairie/Mountain Foothill population.

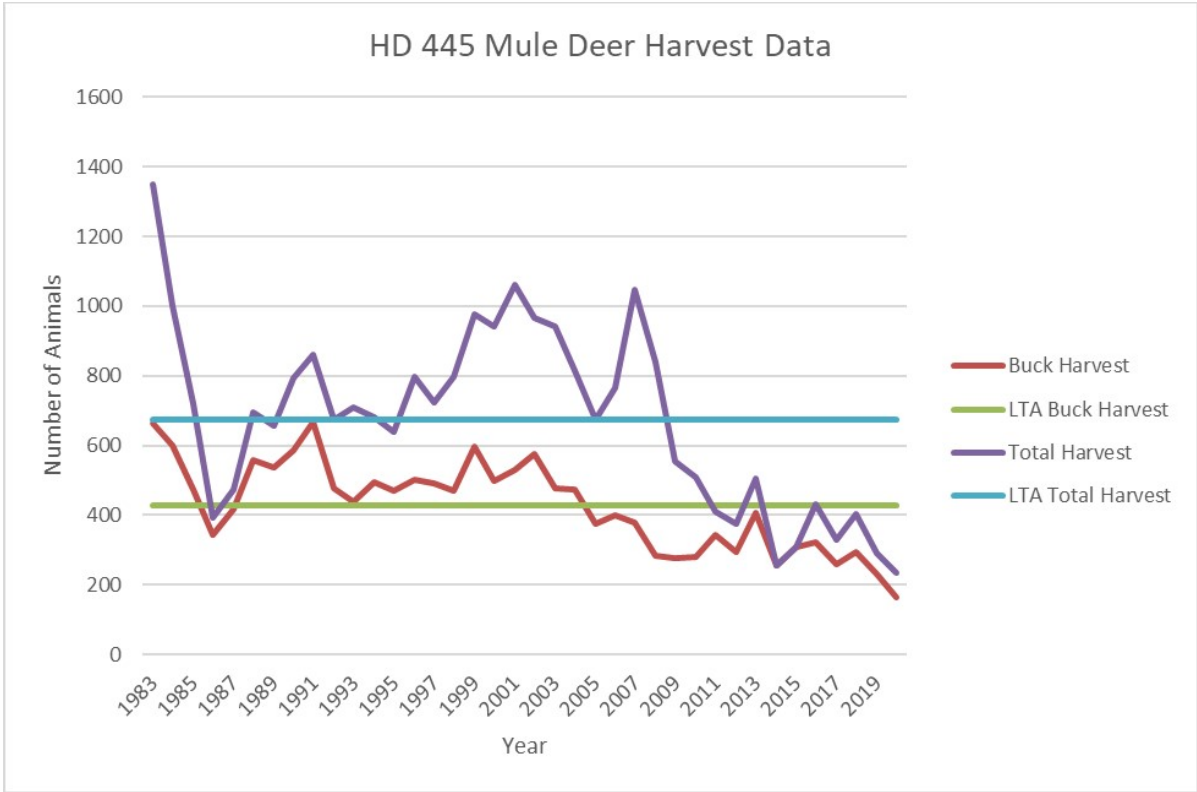


Figure 1: HD 445 Mule Deer Buck Harvest Data.

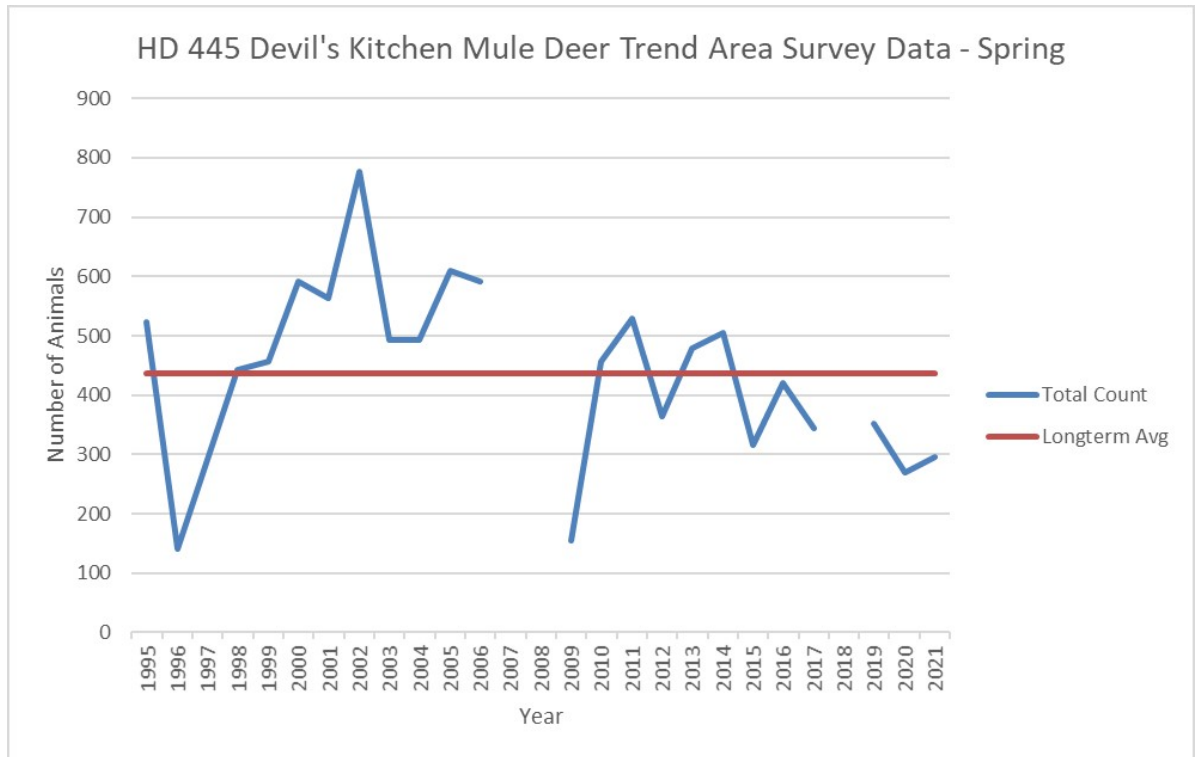


Figure 2: Devil's Kitchen Mule Deer Trend Area Data.

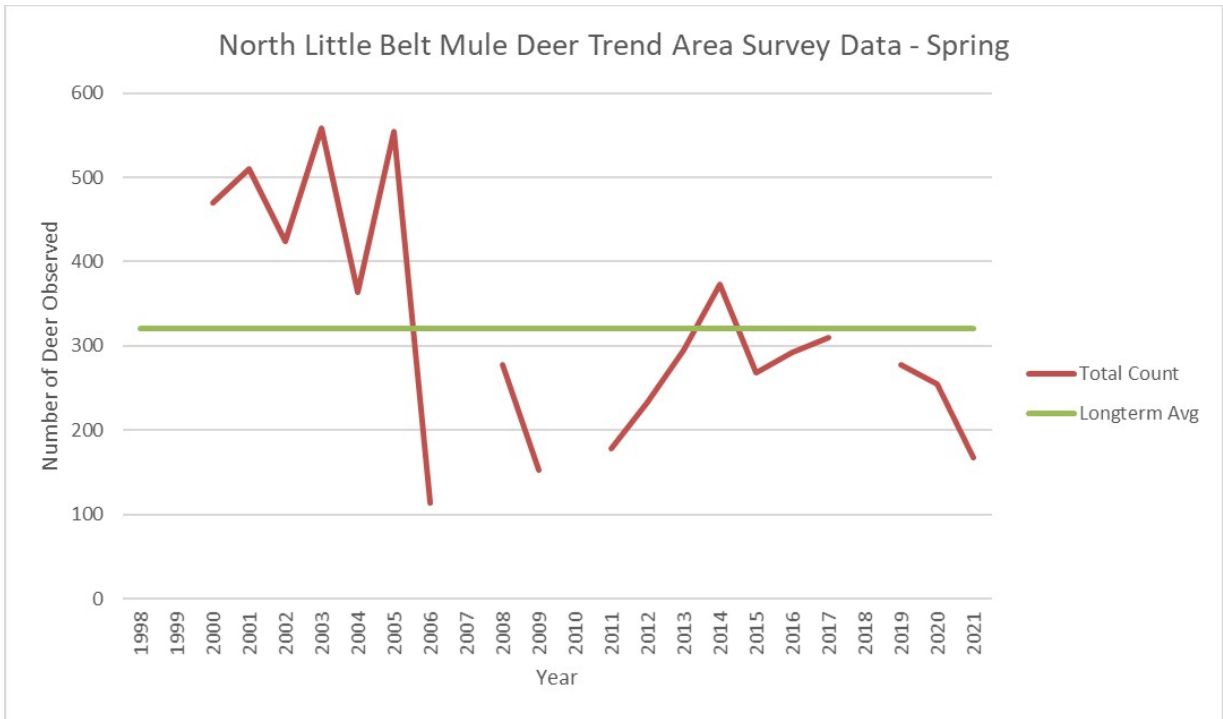


Figure 3: North Little Belt Mule Deer Trend Area Data.

5. Provide information related to any weather/habitat factors, public or private land use or resident and nonresident hunting opportunity that have relevance to this change (i.e., habitat security, hunter access, vegetation surveys, weather index, snow conditions, and temperature / precipitation information).

Overall, weather since 2017 has made it difficult for mule deer populations to recover in this area. Hot dry summers, extreme cold spells, and heavy snowstorms have likely slowed annual recruitment for mule deer. While fawn:doe ratios observed in both trend areas suggest recovery potential is present, only slow recovery is being observed in most areas. Hot dry summers which have the potential to limit nutrition available across the landscape, in particularly mountainous and native rangeland areas is thought to be a major driver affecting annual survival for mule deer in this area. Limiting the harvest of does to maximize production effort is recommended to speed up recovery. The summer of 2021 was particularly hot and dry; such a change may seem timely if the 2021/2022 winter is particularly harsh.

Habitat in HD 445 is mostly intermountain grasslands, hay lands and rocky mountainous habitat. Some annual cropland occurs on the north end near the Missouri and Smith Rivers. A handful of properties are enrolled in FWP’s Block Management Program and provide great opportunities to harvest mule deer. While outfitting occurs on other properties in HD 445, many places provide traditional hunting opportunities for friends, family and the asking public.

6. Briefly describe the contacts you have made with individual sportsmen or landowners, public groups or organizations regarding this proposal and indicate their comments (both pro and con).

Tentative changes were presented to the Devil’s Kitchen Working Group twice in the last 6 months. The group expressed support for the change. Little other outreach has been made to fully collect feedback from other landowners and sportsmen. With that being said, surprisingly very little comment was received during this year’s scoping comment period. Albeit relatively poor outreach and minimal comment during scoping; regional biologists feel this proposal would be accepted by the landowners and sportsmen who use the area.

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION
Mule Deer 2022
HD 425 Either-Sex MD

Hunting Districts: 425

1. Describe the proposed season / quotas changes and provide a summary of prior history (i.e., prior history of permits, season types, etc.).

Change HD 425 mule deer general season (archery and rifle) from antlered buck only to either-sex. During the 1980-81 seasons for general Deer A license holders, the first week of the general rifle hunting season was either-sex mule deer and antlered bucks the last 4 weeks. Beginning in 1982, Deer A license type regulations changed to antlered bucks the first 4 weeks and either-sex the last week of the general rifle season. From 1985 through 1997, the season type was antlered bucks the first 3 weeks and either-sex the last 2 weeks of the general rifle season. Starting in 1998, in response to low mule deer observations and survivorship, the season type went to antlered bucks only the entire season. In 2002, the first 3 weeks was antlered bucks with either-sex valid outside the Sun River WMA the last 2 weeks of the general rifle season. This season type was consistent across HDs 422, 424, 425 and 442 (focused harvest on antlered bucks the first 3 weeks for the entire district, then either-sex mule valid the last two weeks, but only off national forest lands, and continued antlered bucks the last two weeks on national forest lands. The latter season structure type was structured to continue to stay conservative on antlerless harvest but allow for some opportunity primarily on seasonal migrating deer onto private lands late in the season). In 2010, the regulation again went back to antlered buck only valid the entire season for the entire HD. This season type has remained in place since this time.

2. What is the objective of this proposed change? This could be a specific harvest amount or resulting population level or number of game damage complaints, etc.

This proposal first and foremost serves to adjust the general deer season type to align with biologically based AHM prescriptions as prescribed in the Prairie/Mtn. Foothill population management unit. Formal population/production level surveys are completed in this HD, and mule deer numbers and combined harvest estimates in comparison to recent levels warrant changing to a standard either-sex mule deer General License regulation for this area. Although to a lesser biologically justified perspective, this proposal also provides additional consistency in mule deer management along the Rocky Mtn. Front in the sense that it will align with antlered buck only prescriptions within the USFS boundary and maintaining either-sex opportunity outside the US Forest Service boundary. HD 425 is comprised of no National Forest within it's boundary so the entirety of this HD would become and either-sex general season type for the 5 week and 6 week archery only seasons.

3. How will the success of this proposal be measured? This could be annual game or harvest surveys, game damage complaints, etc.

The success of this proposal will be determined by first and foremost acceptance from the FW Commission and public. The current antlered buck only season type has been in place for just over a decade with mule deer numbers generally showing population stability in comparison to long-term average in recent years. Either-sex General License opportunity will aid, albeit in minimal fashion, in allowing license holders to harvest antlerless deer in areas where there is interest in increased harvest, thereby reducing, potential landowner game damage complaints (as/if they arise) and providing public hunting opportunity. Mule deer demographic data (harvest estimates, check station harvest data and survey data) will also be measured in time as outlined in AHM to confirm this harvest regulation type is appropriate and the need or not to make necessary adjustments (more liberal or conservative seasons) in time.

4. What is the current population's status in relation to the management objectives? (i.e., state management objectives from management plan if applicable; provide current and prior years of population survey, harvest, or other pertinent information).

Overall deer demographic management objectives for mule deer in this region are to maintain the total number of deer observed during spring survey areas within 25% of the long-term average (LTA) and maintain fawn

recruitment levels at or above 30 fawns:100 does. In addition, and as applicable, maintaining buck harvest within 25% of LTA is also a priority. Spring 2021 survey data placed overall observed numbers within the trend survey area at 37% above LTA and fawn recruitment at 34 fawns:100 does (6% above LTA). Additionally, buck:doe ratios also show general stability with near average numbers in the low to mid-teens bucks/100 does. Most recent buck harvest data (2020 season – check station data) placed harvest at 23% above the previous year, and right in line with LTA. Generally stable buck harvest data has been recorded for the last several years via Augusta check station records. Population status and trend can also be estimated or gauged by landowner/hunter comments and incidental observations, both of which, in places, indicate mule deer numbers having increased from recent lower numbers observed several years ago.

5. Provide information related to any weather/habitat factors, public or private land use or resident and nonresident hunting opportunity that have relevance to this change (i.e., habitat security, hunter access, vegetation surveys, weather index, snow conditions, and temperature / precipitation information).

Like most big game hunting in the fall, weather patterns play an important role for successful harvest. Many (not all) mule deer in this area spend the summer seasons on national forest lands and begin migrating out onto winter range (Rocky Mtn. Front foothills) in the fall. Recently completed mule deer research in this and adjacent HDs have helped to confirm this. Deer found in HD 425 appear to have strong ties to deer in adjacent portions of 424 and 442. Such information will, in time, aid in better understanding management scenarios for deer in this area given differing views on management strategies at times. Final report data for this project is set to be completed by end of 2021.

Winter/spring 2020 proved to be milder weather in nature compared with the 2018 and 2019 winter/spring periods. The ebb and flow of weather patterns and seasons from year to year influence overall production and survivorship, although in general, such variations appear to not have had long lasting significant detrimental effects on deer in this area in recent years. Access within this HD is variable with large blocks of private land, intermittent public lands as well as the Sun River WMA. The Sun River WMA will not be excluded for this season type and some hunters will certainly take advantage of the opportunity to harvest an antlerless mule deer.

6. Briefly describe the contacts you have made with individual sportsmen or landowners, public groups or organizations regarding this proposal and indicate their comments (both pro and con).

The tentative proposal was communicated to the Upper Sun Wildlife Team and no opposition has been noted to date. It is assumed landowners will be generally tolerable of this season type based on primarily known deer distribution and lack of game damage related concerns, although little to no mule deer game damage complaints are normally received in this area in recent time. Allowing potential (limited) harvest of antlerless mule deer on the Sun River WMA will be met with both agreement and disagreement for sportspersons. Typical annual antlerless mule deer harvest on a General License either-sex season type is low, so population level impacts should not be a concern. Although, allowance of any antlerless mule deer by any means is not favorable to some.

This proposal was submitted through the initial 'scoping' phase of the 2021/22 season setting process and available for the 30-day public comment period. A total of 5 comments were taken relative to the initial proposal of either-sex mule deer hunting opportunity HD wide along the southern RMF, including within National Forest. Four comments were not in favor, and one was acceptive of the proposed change. Ultimately this is very small perspective to gauge concerns/interest. However, after additional consideration when looking over the various demographic and harvest metrics used to gauge season structure for each HD, this modified season proposal, aligning all non-forest lands with an either-sex season type and antlered buck season on the national forest provides general consistency in management within this area.

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION
Mule Deer 2022
Quota range increase on 426-00 mule deer B License

Hunting Districts: 426

1. Describe the proposed season / quotas changes and provide a summary of prior history (i.e., prior history of permits, season types, etc.).

For the upcoming 2022/2023 hunting seasons:

Increase the maximum quota on the 426-00 antlerless mule deer B License from 100 to 500.

From 1986 through 1997, deer hunting in HD 426 occurred via an “Either-sex, either-species” regulation on a General License, with varying levels of B Licenses issued valid for antlerless deer of either species. In 1998, the 426-00 B License changed to an “Antlerless Mule Deer” regulation to better facilitate harvest of mule deer does. The “either-sex, either-species” regulation on a General License remained in HD 426 until 2009, then in 2010 General Licenses went to an “Either-sex White-tailed Deer,” and “Antlered Buck Only Mule Deer” regulation that remained until 2016. In 2016, the prairie-breaks Population Management Unit (PMU), including HD 426, returned to an either-sex, either-species regulation on a General License.

In 1986, 400 B Licenses valid for both mule deer and white-tailed deer were issued; this license quota increased to 500 in 1987, 600 in 1988, and back down to 500 from 1989-1993. In 1994, this license quota was further decreased to 200, and remained at this level through 1996, then decreased sharply to 50 in 1997 and 5 in 1998, when it became specific to mule deer. The 426-00 LPT remained at 5 in 1999, then jumped to 300 in 2000 and to 550 in 2001, where it remained through 2008, before dropping to 50 in 2009-2010, and 5 in 2011-2013 before going to 0 in 2014-2015. This license was reintroduced with a quota of 25 in 2016, along with the return of an either-sex, either species regulation. MFWP increased this quota from 25 to 50 for the 2017 hunting season and again to 100 for the 2018-2021 hunting seasons. Table 1 shows mule deer LPT structure and harvest for HD 426 from 2000 through 2020. Figure 1 provides a graphical representation of number of B Licenses issued vs. number of does harvested, 2011 through 2020.

Year	LPT	Harvest			
		Doe/Fawn	Buck	4pt. Buck	Total
2000	General (Either-sex MD/WTD)	226	648	363	874
	426-00: 300 Antlerless M D	93	0	0	93
	Total	414	650	363	1064
2001	General (Either-sex MD/WTD)	269	662	352	931
	426-00: 550 Antlerless M D	175	0	0	175
	Total	451	678	358	1129
2002	General (Either-sex MD/WTD)	294	547	187	841
	426-00: 550 Antlerless M D	163	0	0	163
	Total	467	547	187	1014
2003	General (Either-sex MD/WTD)	312	694	337	1006
	426-00: 550 Antlerless M D	183	0	0	183
	Total	496	694	337	1190
2004	General (Either-sex MD/WTD)	49	468	294	517
	426-00: 550 Antlerless M D	289	4	0	293
	Total	341	476	296	817
2005	General (Either-sex MD/WTD)	68	512	384	580
	426-00: 550 Antlerless M D	249	1	0	250
	Total	318	524	393	842
2006	General (Either-sex MD/WTD)	33	309	197	342
	426-00: 550 Antlerless M D	269	11	9	280
	Total	316	325	208	641
2007	General (Either-sex MD/WTD)	27	409	266	436
	426-00: 550 Antlerless M D	350	2	0	352
	Total	377	411	266	788
2008	General (Either-sex MD/WTD)	45	322	233	367
	426-00: 550 Antlerless M D	271	5	5	276
	Total	346	327	238	673
2009	General (Either-sex MD/WTD)	30	274	186	304
	426-00: 50 Antlerless M D	17	0	0	17
	Total	51	277	186	328
2010	General (Antlered Buck only MD/ Either-Sex WTD)	0	210	143	210
	426-00: 50 Antlerless M D	13	2	0	15
	Total	13	212	143	225
2011	General (Antlered Buck only MD/ Either-Sex WTD)	5	289	202	294
	426-00: 5 Antlerless M D	4	0	0	4
	Total	9	290	204	299
2012	General (Antlered Buck only MD/ Either-Sex WTD)	3	406	272	294
	426-00: 5 Antlerless M D	5	0	0	5
	Total	8	409	275	417
2013	General (Antlered Buck only MD/ Either-Sex WTD)	3	389	288	392
	426-00: 5 Antlerless M D	5	0	0	5
	Total	8	389	288	397
2014	General (Antlered Buck only MD/ Either-Sex WTD)	3	460	342	463
	Total	3	462	344	465
	General (Antlered Buck only MD/ Either-Sex WTD)	0	541	404	541
2015	Total	0	544	404	544
	General (Either-sex MD/WTD)	39	612	408	651
	426-00: 25 Antlerless M D	10	0	0	10
2016	Total	50	612	408	662
	General (Either-sex MD/WTD)	18	613	462	634
	426-00: 50 Antlerless M D	24	4	2	28
2017	Total	45	619	464	664
	General (Either-sex MD/WTD)	22	566	405	591
	426-00: 100 Antlerless M D	40	0	0	40
2018	Total	66	570	409	636
	General (Either-sex MD/WTD)	23	621	481	644
	426-00: 100 Antlerless M D	38	2	2	40
2019	Total	61	630	484	691
	General (Either-sex MD/WTD)	24	633	497	657
	426-00: 100 Antlerless M D	46	2	2	48
2020	Total	77	643	508	720

Figure 1: Table 1. Mule Deer license types, number issued, and harvest in HD 426, 2000-2020.

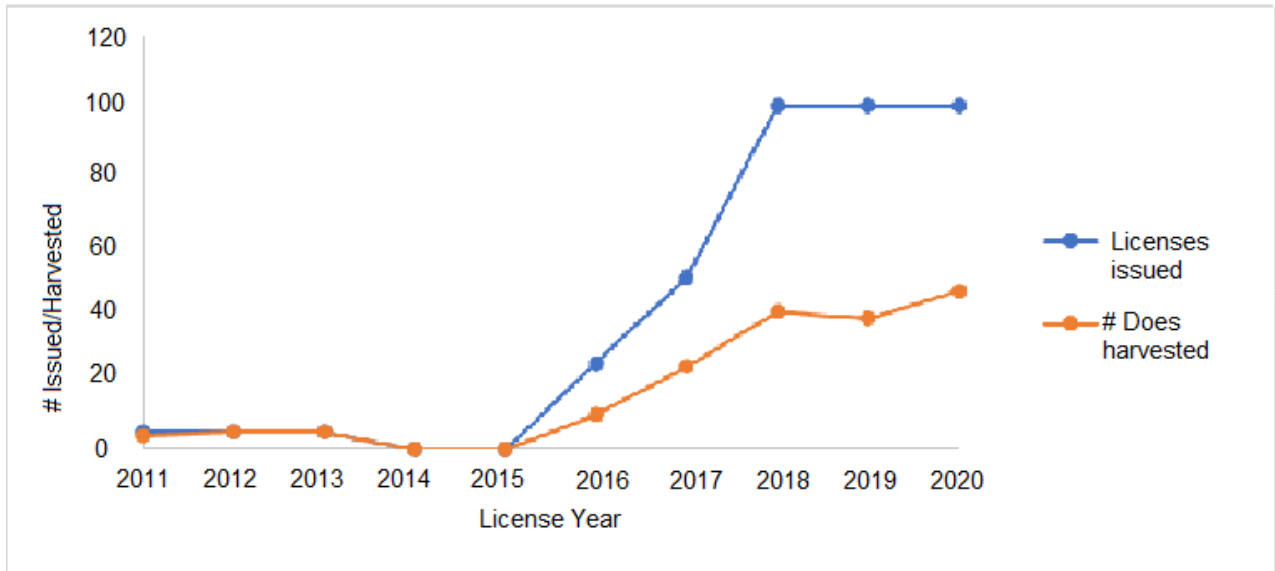


Figure 2: Figure 1. Number of mule deer B Licenses issued, and number of antlerless deer harvested in HD 426, 2011 through 2020.

2. What is the objective of this proposed change? This could be a specific harvest amount or resulting population level or number of game damage complaints, etc.

The objective of this proposed change is to manage HD 426 in line with Montana’s Adaptive Harvest Management (AHM) guidelines, by providing flexibility for increased antlerless deer harvest to address game damage problems and landowner concerns.

3. How will the success of this proposal be measured? This could be annual game or harvest surveys, game damage complaints, etc.

This proposal will be successful if it helps maintain mule deer numbers in this HD with a “Standard” regulation type (see description under “#4, Population Status”). There will be minimum game damage and survey data will suggest deer populations are healthy and within objective ranges. With a potential quota increase for 2022, hunters may comment on the increased opportunity afforded to them through legal harvest of antlerless deer, and landowners will have a means to address their game damage issues through public hunting of antlerless deer.

4. What is the current population’s status in relation to the management objectives? (i.e., state management objectives from management plan if applicable; provide current and prior years of population survey, harvest, or other pertinent information).

Montana’s AHM document provides population indicators and regulation types (standard, liberal, restrictive) for the different mule deer eco-types in Montana. Hunting district 426 falls within the “Prairie-Breaks” eco-type.

The AHM population indicators for a “Standard” regulation type in the Prairie-Breaks are: 1) the total number of deer counted on a survey area must fall within the range of 20% above and 30% below the long-term average (LTA), AND recruitment must fall between 30 to 60 fawns:100 adults.” In the absence of long-term aerial survey data, or to complement it, 2) buck harvest must be within 25% of the LTA. A “Standard” hunting regulation consists of a five-week either-sex general season, none-to-moderate numbers of B Licenses, and a six-week archery either-sex season.

For HD 426, the LTA total number of mule deer counted in the Arrow Creek/Coffee Creek trend area is 652.

Last spring’s aerial survey was flown with a different vehicle (helicopter), and the survey tracks were flown differently, thus yielding lower-than normal results. This methodology will be corrected and refined in future surveys.

During spring 2021, we counted a total of 382 deer in the trend area, 41% below LTA. Given how mild this past winter was, the lower-than-normal observed deer numbers is likely more a factor of survey efficiency than overwinter mortality. Deer densities have also increased across the HD outside of the trend area, with several landowners asking for an increase in deer B Licenses for the district to improve hunting opportunity and reduce game damage across the area.

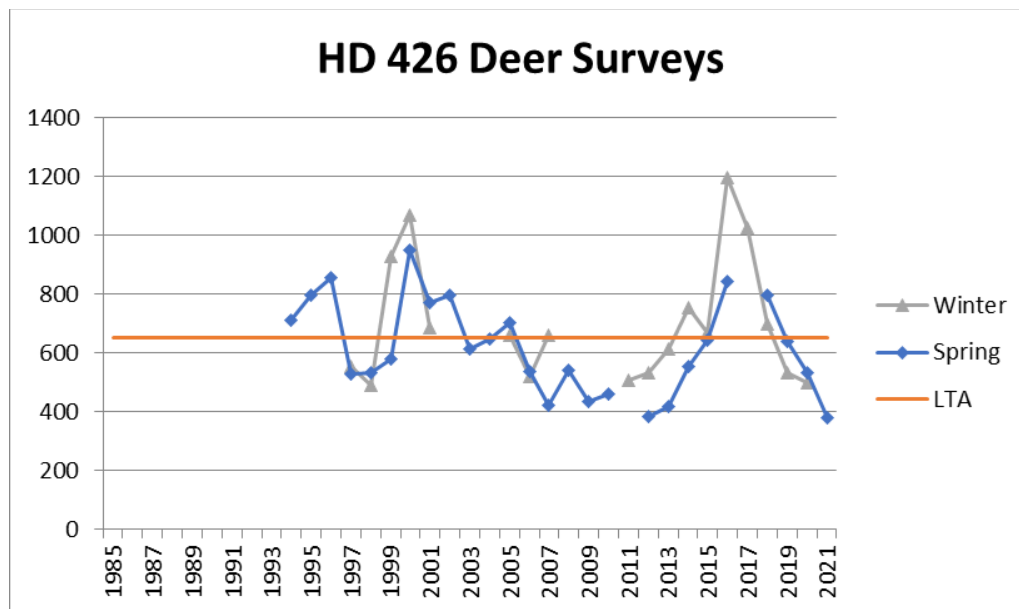


Figure 1: Figure 2. Mule deer surveys in the Coffee Creek/Arrow Creek mule deer trend area, HD 426, 1994-present.

5. Provide information related to any weather/habitat factors, public or private land use or resident and nonresident hunting opportunity that have relevance to this change (i.e., habitat security, hunter access, vegetation surveys, weather index, snow conditions, and temperature / precipitation information).

In general, mule deer numbers in these Prairie-Breaks districts fluctuate more widely than Mountain/foothill or other mule deer populations across Montana, with “higher” highs and “lower” lows. Given drought conditions this year, we would expect to see higher overwinter mortality than normal, especially if deer enter winter in poor condition and the winter is harsh. Landowners experiencing game damage do have high concentrations of mule deer on their properties (i.e., >100 congregating in a single field) and providing more B Licenses will better allow them to find hunters and provide opportunity for harvesting does.

Hunting district 426 consists of rugged, steep topography afforded by the timbered breaks of the Judith River, Wolf Creek, and portions of Arrow Creek, and the open breaks of Coffee Creek and remainder of Arrow Creek, separated by flat benches used primarily for agriculture. The land in HD 426 is primarily private, and some landowners limit, or lease mule deer hunting, but there is still a fair amount of public land available (BLM, DNRC, Block Management, the Beckman Wildlife Management Area).

This proposal does not set in stone the 2022 license quota; it provides increased flexibility to adjust the 2022 and future mule deer B Licenses if deer numbers remain strong and game damage issues persist. If this winter takes a significant toll on mule deer, we can readjust the B License quota to better reflect the current situation. As it stands now, the only possible direction to go with the current quota range is down.

6. Briefly describe the contacts you have made with individual sportsmen or landowners, public groups or organizations regarding this proposal and indicate their comments (both pro and con).

There are no problems anticipated with this proposal. Over the past several years, Denton-area Rod & Gun Club members, which include local sportsmen and landowners, in addition to other landowners, asked for a mule deer B License increase in HD 426 given game damage issues and continued “strong” presence of deer throughout the area this year.

**MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

Hunting Districts: 421, 445

1. Describe the proposed season / quotas changes and provide a summary of prior history (i.e., prior history of permits, season types, etc.).

The proposed change is to change the HD 445 / HD 421 boundary to I-15. Presently the boundary south of Cascade is the Missouri River and north of Cascade, I-15.

New HD 445 Boundary: Hound Creek

Those portions of Cascade, Lewis and Clark, and Meagher Counties lying within the following-described boundary: Beginning at Ulm from the junction of Millegan Road and Interstate-15, then south on Millegan Road to Ulm Bridge, then southeasterly down the west bank of the Missouri River to the mouth of the Smith River, then southerly up the west bank of said river to the mouth of Two Creek, then westerly up said creek to the divide between Trout Creek and Black Canyon/Rock Creek, then westerly along said divide to the Hound Creek-Rock Creek divide then westerly along said divide to the Beaver Creek-Hound Creek divide (Meagher and Lewis and Clark County line), then westerly along said divide to the posted Beartooth WMA boundary fence near Hump Cabin, then north and west along said WMA boundary fence, or posted HD boundary, to Holter Lake, then down said lake and the east bank of the Missouri River to Rock Creek near Wolf Creek Bridge, then north along said creek to its intersection with Interstate-15, then on Interstate-15 to the intersection of Interstate-15 and Milligan Road, the point of beginning.

Old HD 421 Boundary: Birdtail Hills

Those portions of Cascade and Lewis and Clark Counties lying within the following-described boundary: Beginning at Cascade, then west along the Missouri River to Rock Creek, then northwesterly up said creek to Interstate 15 then southerly along said Interstate to the junction with US Highway 287, then northerly along said highway to State Route 200 at Bowman's Corner, then northeast along said state route to Interstate 15 at Vaughn, then south and west along said Interstate to Cascade, the point of beginning.

Old HD 445 Boundary:

Those portions of Cascade, Lewis and Clark, and Meagher Counties lying within the following-described boundary: Beginning at Ulm, then southeasterly down the south bank of the Missouri River to the mouth of the Smith River, then southerly up the west bank of said river to the mouth of Two Creek, then westerly up said creek to the divide between Trout Creek and Black Canyon/Rock Creek, then westerly along said divide to the Hound Creek-Rock Creek divide then westerly along said divide to the Beaver Creek-Hound Creek divide (Meagher and Lewis and Clark County line), then westerly along said divide to the posted Beartooth WMA boundary fence near Hump Cabin, then north and west along said WMA boundary fence, or posted HD boundary, to Holter Lake, then down said lake and the east bank of the Missouri River to the Missouri River Bridge in Cascade, then west and north through Cascade to the Interstate 15 interchange, then northeasterly along said interstate to Ulm, the point of beginning.

(Figure 1)

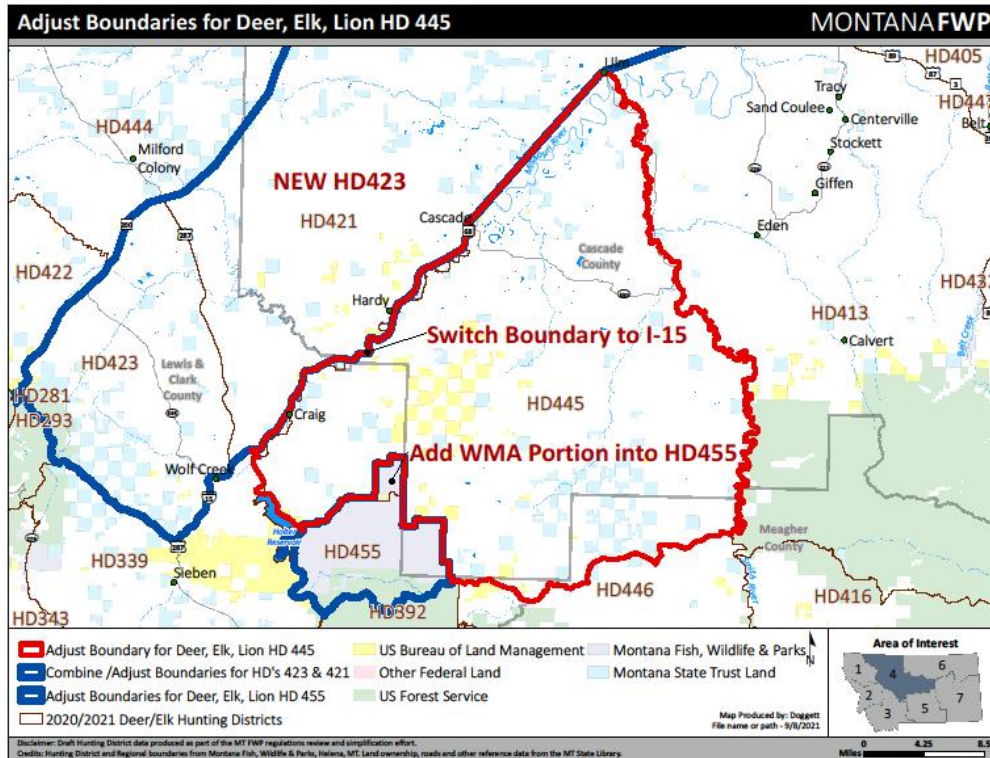


Figure 1: Proposal to switch 421, 445 boundary from Missouri River to I-15.

2. What is the objective of this proposed change? This could be a specific harvest amount or resulting population level or number of game damage complaints, etc.

The objective of the proposed change is to simplify the regulations and reduce confusion over the hunting district boundary.

3. How will the success of this proposal be measured? This could be annual game or harvest surveys, game damage complaints, etc.

Success may be measured by the reduction in law enforcement time spent clarifying the boundary.

4. What is the current population's status in relation to the management objectives? (i.e., state management objectives from management plan if applicable; provide current and prior years of population survey, harvest, or other pertinent information).

Mule deer frequently cross the river and Interstate in this area. Elk rarely cross Interstate in this area. Neither species are expected to be impacted by this change.

5. Provide information related to any weather/habitat factors, public or private land use or resident and nonresident hunting opportunity that have relevance to this change (i.e., habitat security, hunter access, vegetation surveys, weather index, snow conditions, and temperature / precipitation information).

Several residents live along the Missouri River in this area. Clarification will need to be made initially, with this change.

6. Briefly describe the contacts you have made with individual sportsmen or landowners, public groups or organizations regarding this proposal and indicate their comments (both pro and con).

No significant public comment was received during the scoping comment period.

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION
Mule Deer 2022
HD 450 MD B License

Hunting Districts: HD 450

1. Describe the proposed season / quotas changes and provide a summary of prior history (i.e., prior history of permits, season types, etc.).

Create HD specific antlerless mule deer licenses (n=50, quota range 50-300). The 1990-91 hunting seasons allowed for antlered mule deer buck hunting only during the general season. Beginning in 1992 and through 2000, an additional 50 antlerless mule deer licenses were allocated. Beginning in 2001 and through 2010, antlerless mule deer license levels have been allocated at 150. From 2011 through 2013, antlerless B License levels were reduced to 50. In 2014 and 2015 and by Director's office recommendation, antlerless licenses were eliminated (along with many HDs) and buck only mule deer General License season type was put in place. In 2016 (to date), either-sex mule deer seasons on a General License were once again reinstated with no antlerless licenses. The archery hunting season for mule deer was an either-sex season type from at least 1990 through 1997. From 1997 - 2015, mule deer archery hunting only season was limited to antlered buck only. From 2016 to present, the general archery only season was changed to either-sex mule deer, coinciding with the general rifle season regulation type.

2. What is the objective of this proposed change? This could be a specific harvest amount or resulting population level or number of game damage complaints, etc.

While no formal population/production level surveys are completed in this HD, mule deer numbers and harvest in comparison to recent levels have increased to levels in which this proposed renewal of a limited number of antlerless licenses is warranted (Table 1). This proposal looks to provide some limited level of antlerless specific harvest where necessary within this HD (i.e., localized game damage complaints). This proposed antlerless license level was last allocated in 2000. This proposal in line with deer performance criteria outlined in the statewide mule deer Adaptive Harvest Management Plan (AHM) to include a standard hunting season regulation package (either-sex General License with limited additional antlerless licenses).

3. How will the success of this proposal be measured? This could be annual game or harvest surveys, game damage complaints, etc.

The success of this proposal will be determined by first and foremost acceptance from the FW Commission and public. Additional antlerless license opportunity will also aid in allowing license holders to focus such harvest in areas where there is interest in increased harvest, thereby reducing, on a limited scale, potential landowner game damage complaints and providing public hunting opportunity. Mule deer demographic data (harvest estimates) will also be measured in time as outlined in AHM to confirm this additional harvest is not detrimental to the local deer population and/or necessary needs to increase antlerless license levels.

4. What is the current population's status in relation to the management objectives? (i.e., state management objectives from management plan if applicable; provide current and prior years of population survey, harvest, or other pertinent information).

In the absence of survey data specific to this HD, the primary specific management objectives for mule deer in this population management unit (as outlined by AHM) are to maintain total estimated annual buck harvest within 25% of the long-term average. Available long-term harvest estimates for this HD indicate most recent buck harvest (2020 hunting season) to be 3% below LTA and 4% below 2019 estimates. Since buck production and subsequent harvest is a direct indicator of overall population production, current indications are portraying general good production for mule deer in this HD. Other anecdotal observations of mule deer in places also indicate generally good production of mule deer compared to nearly a decade ago. Although limited harvest of mule deer from this HD comes through the Augusta check station, 2020 harvest records also indicate well above harvest compared to LTA (+47%). Population status and trend can also be estimated or gauged by landowner/hunter comments and incidental observations, both of which, in places, indicate mule deer numbers having increased

from recent lower numbers observed 8-10 years ago. Most recent immediately adjacent HD 442 spring mule deer survey observations also place overall observed numbers right in line with LTA with only slightly below (28/100) fawn recruitment as prescribed by AHM (30/100).

5. Provide information related to any weather/habitat factors, public or private land use or resident and nonresident hunting opportunity that have relevance to this change (i.e., habitat security, hunter access, vegetation surveys, weather index, snow conditions, and temperature / precipitation information).

Most deer in this hunting district (as currently defined...knowing that an additional proposal is in place to potentially move the HD 450 west boundary to the USFS boundary) are best considered "resident" in nature and take advantage of agricultural standing/stored crops as well as traditional mule deer prairie/foothill habitat types. Hunter access to deer in this HD can be limited due to limited accessible public lands along with varying opportunity on private lands. The proposed license opportunity in this HD will likely be tolerable given the low levels of licenses being proposed. Some landowner interest in additional antlerless harvest has been advocated for to limit cultivated crop damage during at least portions of the year.

6. Briefly describe the contacts you have made with individual sportsmen or landowners, public groups or organizations regarding this proposal and indicate their comments (both pro and con).

Contacts to date have been limited. This proposal was submitted through the initial 'scoping' phase of the 2021/22 season setting process and available for the 30-day public comment period. No comments were taken. One known landowner game damage complaint has been taken in recent months and has advocated for a limited number of antlerless B Licenses given lack of individuals willing to use their General License on an antlerless mule deer.

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION
Mule Deer 2022
HD 421 & 423 - Combine

Hunting Districts: 421 & 423

1. Describe the proposed season / quotas changes and provide a summary of prior history (i.e., prior history of permits, season types, etc.).

Combined HDs 421 and 423 thereby making a larger HD 421. Modify HD 423 general deer license to an either-sex mule deer season type (consistent with existing regulations in place for HD 421). For HD 423 and prior to 1998, there is a lengthy history (at least since 1985) of antlered buck only seasons with either sex mule deer harvest on the A license during the last two weeks of the general season and during the archery season. From 1998 to 2003, there was no prescribed antlerless mule deer season in HD 423. For the 2004 hunting season and through 2009, either-sex mule deer harvest was again made valid during the archery season and for the last two weeks of the general rifle season. 75 B Licenses were added for the 2005 season and 150 B Licenses available from 2006-2009. In 2010, the season type went back to an antlered buck season type for the general rifle season with continued limited number of antlerless licenses (n=150). In 2011, the general antlered only season type remained, and antlerless B Licenses were reduced to 50. In 2014, antlerless B Licenses were eliminated by directors' office and commission direction and the antlered only general season remained in place. In 2016 (through 2021), the season was changed to an antlered only season on USFS lands and either-sex season off USFS lands with no B License availability.

For HD 421, from 1990 through 2003, the season type was antlered buck mule deer only during the general rifle season on a general deer license with limited, fluctuating numbers of antlerless mule deer licenses available based on annual mule deer harvest and other observations. Beginning in 2004 and through 2007 on a general deer license, the antlered buck only season type was valid for the first three weeks of the general rifle season with the last two weeks becoming an either-sex season type. Limited antlerless licenses continued to be available. For 2008 and 2009, either-sex mule deer hunting on a General License was valid with a limited number of antlerless licenses available. In 2010, the season type went back to an antlered buck season type for the general rifle season with continued limited number of antlerless licenses. In 2014, antlerless B Licenses were eliminated by directors' office and commission direction and the antlered only general season remained in place. In 2016 (through 2021), the season was changed to an either-sex general deer license season district wide.

2. What is the objective of this proposed change? This could be a specific harvest amount or resulting population level or number of game damage complaints, etc.

While no formal population/production level surveys are completed in this HD, mule deer numbers and combined harvest estimates in comparison to recent levels have warrant maintaining an either-sex mule deer General License regulation for this area. This proposal looks to provide some limited level of antlerless harvest opportunity where necessary within this HD (i.e., localized game damage complaints). This proposed General License regulation type was last in place in the late 2000's depending on the HD. This proposal in line with deer performance criteria outlined in the statewide mule deer Adaptive Harvest Management Plan (AHM) to include a standard hunting season regulation package (either-sex General License regulation).

3. How will the success of this proposal be measured? This could be annual game or harvest surveys, game damage complaints, etc.

The success of this proposal will be determined by first and foremost acceptance from the FW Commission and public. The vast majority of both HDs currently either-sex so it is not anticipated to see any significant increase in antlerless mule deer harvest. Either-sex General License opportunity will aid, albeit in minimal fashion, in allowing license holders to harvest antlerless deer in areas where there is interest in increased harvest, thereby reducing, potential landowner game damage complaints and providing public hunting opportunity. Mule deer demographic data (harvest estimates) will also be measured in time as outlined in AHM to confirm this harvest regulation type is appropriate and the need or not to make necessary adjustments (more liberal or conservative seasons) in time.

4. What is the current population's status in relation to the management objectives? (i.e., state management objectives from management plan if applicable; provide current and prior years of population survey, harvest, or other pertinent information).

In the absence of survey data specific to this HD, the primary specific management objectives for mule deer in this population management unit (as outlined by AHM) are to maintain total estimated annual buck harvest within 25% of the long-term average. Given the proposal to combine these HDs into one larger HD, combining harvest estimates for this analysis is necessary. Available long-term combined harvest estimates indicate most recent buck harvest (2020 hunting season) to be -10% below LTA and 6% above estimates from the last couple years (2019 and 2020). Estimated buck harvest in this combined area (approximately 700 square miles) amounts an average of just over 300 deer a year. Since buck production and subsequent harvest is a direct indicator of overall population production, current indications are portraying general good production and stability for mule deer in this HD. Population status and trend can also be estimated or gauged by landowner/hunter comments and incidental observations, both of which, in places, indicate mule deer numbers having increased from recent lower numbers observed 8-10 years ago.

5. Provide information related to any weather/habitat factors, public or private land use or resident and nonresident hunting opportunity that have relevance to this change (i.e., habitat security, hunter access, vegetation surveys, weather index, snow conditions, and temperature / precipitation information).

Many deer in these combined hunting districts are best considered "resident" in nature and take advantage of agricultural standing/stored crops as well as traditional mule deer prairie/foothill habitat types. Of course, given what we know about mule deer and movement patterns, it is assumed that some level of these deer do in fact seasonally move (migrate), especially in more western fringes of this area. Hunter access to deer in this HD can be limited due to limited accessible public lands along with varying opportunity on private lands. The proposed license opportunity in this HD should be tolerable given the proposed season type is already valid over much of the area.

6. Briefly describe the contacts you have made with individual sportsmen or landowners, public groups or organizations regarding this proposal and indicate their comments (both pro and con).

Contacts to date have been limited given the small change this ultimately will be from a deer management perspective. Limited game damage complaints were taken in the eastern portion of this area during summer 2020, otherwise mule deer game damage across the HD is not known to be an issue across the broader landscape. This proposal was submitted through the initial 'scoping' phase of the 2021/22 season setting process and available for the 30-day public comment period. No comments were taken related to deer season types/regulations for this area.

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION
Mule Deer 2022
HD 421 & 423 - Combine

Hunting Districts: 421 & 423

1. Describe the proposed season / quotas changes and provide a summary of prior history (i.e., prior history of permits, season types, etc.).

Combined HDs 421 and 423 thereby making a larger HD 421. Modify HD 423 general elk license to an either-sex elk season type (consistent with existing regulations in place for HD 421).

In HD 421, permits affording the opportunity to harvest antlerless elk were available since at least 1982. Beginning in 1993, antlerless permits were initiated the week before the general season. For the 2000 season, the season was readjusted back to only 5 weeks. For the 2002 season, two different sets of antlerless permits (one before the general season, one after the general season) were made available and valid in both hunting districts 421 and 423. Also beginning in 2002 the general rifle season was changed from an antlered bull elk season to either-sex elk. The general season has remained either-sex since then. Unlimited B Licenses were made available for the 2003 hunting season under special season setting circumstances. These B Licenses were expanded into the archery and late seasons and made valid only on private and DNRC lands for 2004 and 2005. Consolidated into one regional B License in 2008, these licenses have remained in their current form (with increasing quota levels) since this time.

Beginning in 2016/17, special early (Aug. 15 – Archery opener) and late season (Jan. 1 – Feb. 15) ‘shoulder season’ hunts were established in accordance with the criteria adopted by FW commission at the October 2015. Other special or spontaneous game damage hunts have been completed off and on during these same time periods. Beginning in 2018, general and elk B Licenses were further liberalized to include the entirety of the late shoulder season. For the 2020 and 2021 seasons, shoulder seasons were reduced to focus harvest only in late summer (August 15 to the beginning of archery season) and January 1 – February 15.

Past antlerless harvest opportunity in HD 423 has incorporated either sex general season types as well as antlerless permits limited (for rifle) to the general rifle season. In 1998 the general rifle season became 4 weeks antlered bull elk and the last week either-sex elk. Prior to 1998, the general season was antlered bull elk only. For the 2002 season, two different sets of antlerless permits (one before the general season, one after the general season) were made available and valid in both hunting districts. For the 2002 season, two different sets of antlerless permits (one before the general season, one after the general season) were made available and valid in both hunting districts 421 and 423. Also beginning in 2002 the general rifle season was changed from the antlered bull elk/either-sex season to either-sex elk for the entire 5 weeks. Unlimited B Licenses were made available for the 2003 hunting season under special season setting circumstances. These B Licenses were expanded into the archery and late seasons and made valid only on private and DNRC lands for 2004 and 2005. Consolidated into one regional B License in 2008, these licenses have remained in their current form (with increasing quota levels) since this time. Beginning in 2016/17, special late season (Jan. 1 – Feb. 15) ‘shoulder season’ hunting was established in accordance with the criteria adopted by FW commission at the October, 2015. Other special or spontaneous game damage hunts have been completed off and on during these same time periods. Beginning in 2018, general and elk B Licenses were further liberalized to include the entirety of the late shoulder season as well as adding the early shoulder season period (August 15 – archery opener). For the 2020 and 2021 seasons, shoulder seasons were reduced to focus harvest only in late summer (August 15 to the beginning of archery season) and January 1 – February 15.

2. What is the objective of this proposed change? This could be a specific harvest amount or resulting population level or number of game damage complaints, etc.

Regulation Simplification. These two hunting districts comprise the Birdtail Hills elk management unit (EMU) given correlations between elk distribution related to at least portions of each hunting district. Collectively, elk are generally managed as one population in this area, although each HD does have different general season regulation types (either-sex vs. brow-tined bull/antlerless). Elk populations in this EMU continue to remain at or

above objective levels. Mild conditions provided for less-than-ideal survey conditions in winter/spring 2021 in which a reasonable number of elk were missed during the survey effort (as evidenced by observations in previous years). Liberal elk hunting seasons to include shoulder season hunts initiated in 2016/17 season, as well as other annual efforts through localized game damage hunting efforts, have been effective in reducing numbers from several years ago and at least, capping additional growth in most recent years. The current split shoulder season that was initiated in 2020, took into account considerations focused on 1) begin the process to slowly wane away from the need for full shoulder season implementation while still maintaining some shoulder season type to help with continued harvest needs; 2) allow landowner/hunter rest from the hunting season (some concerns over 6 month hunting period); 3) elk rest from the hunting season with the intent to let animals settle and start up hunting again for six weeks during the winter period (Jan 1 - Feb 15); and 4) accommodate to some degree to those landowners (and hunters?) that don't prefer any shoulder season hunting.

Providing this early and late season structure valid for the entirety of these four HDs provides an additional tool that in addition to normal general season harvest (archery and rifle). This proposed change will hopefully prove to be effective in simplifying regulations across the greater area, still allow further harvest on antlerless elk, limit the persistence of chronic refuge areas, and effectively break up larger groups of elk into smaller groups in order to lessen the direct damage to agriculture operations all while recognizing concerns of long hunting seasons on landowners, elk and hunters alike.

3. How will the success of this proposal be measured? This could be annual game or harvest surveys, game damage complaints, etc.

As per guidelines outlined from the October 2015 commission adopted 'flexible season structure with performance-based shoulder season criteria', a large part of how the success of these liberalized season types will be measured related to the shoulder season harvest and population survey criteria. In summarizing these details for the five-year period (2016-2020). HDs 421/423 fall within the above population objective and meeting harvest criteria with elk numbers having trended down from the peak observed in 2013. In general, it is believed based on elk distribution, mild weather conditions and a few anecdotal landowner/hunter comments that limited harvest occurred on elk in this area during the 2021 late shoulder season time period (January 1 – February 15). Phone survey harvest estimates for both HDs combined for the 2016/17, 2017/18, 2018/19, 2019/20, and 2020/21 late season hunts was 27, 28, 107, 21 and 23 elk, respectively.

As previously mentioned, general elk season regulation types differ between these the existing two HDs with HD 421 managed more for general wide-open opportunity (either-sex season) and HD 423 managed with a more restricted season type on bulls (brow-tined bull/antlerless, basically limiting any spike bull harvest). However, spike harvest on a General License in either-sex season types is typically minimal in this area, especially in areas in which private land presence is stronger. For perspective, over the last 5 years, harvest estimates portray an average of 3 and 7 spikes harvested for HDs 421 and immediately adjacent HD 422, respectively. Given the minimal harvest this is, in combination with most recent representative (minimum) observations of bulls in this collective area (2020 survey period = 35 bulls/100 cows, or, a classification of 65 brow-tined bulls, 23 spikes and 3 unclassified bulls), general harvest impacts on bull age structure are expected to be minimal. Therefore, moving towards a either-sex general elk season type is appropriate, although monitoring bull numbers and age structure in time will be important to confirm such limited impacts.

Additional future measurements of success will be observed through hunter access, success and support, landowner comments, concerns and/or support, observed elk distribution, and reduced game damage complaints.

4. What is the current population's status in relation to the management objectives? (i.e., state management objectives from management plan if applicable; provide current and prior years of population survey, harvest, or other pertinent information).

The current elk plan for the Birdtail EMU calls for population level observations to be within 20% of 500 elk during post season aerial trend surveys. 2021 dedicated aerial winter surveys gave way to a minimum observation of 516 elk, although as previously noted, some level of elk were missed during this effort given very mild open weather and based on observations from other recent years. Most noticeable was the complete lack of bulls during the survey, again, owing to very mild, open winter conditions in the area making observability difficult,

especially for more solitary bull groups. Up until the 2021 survey effort, elk populations within this EMU are consistently above objective levels and have been for several years.

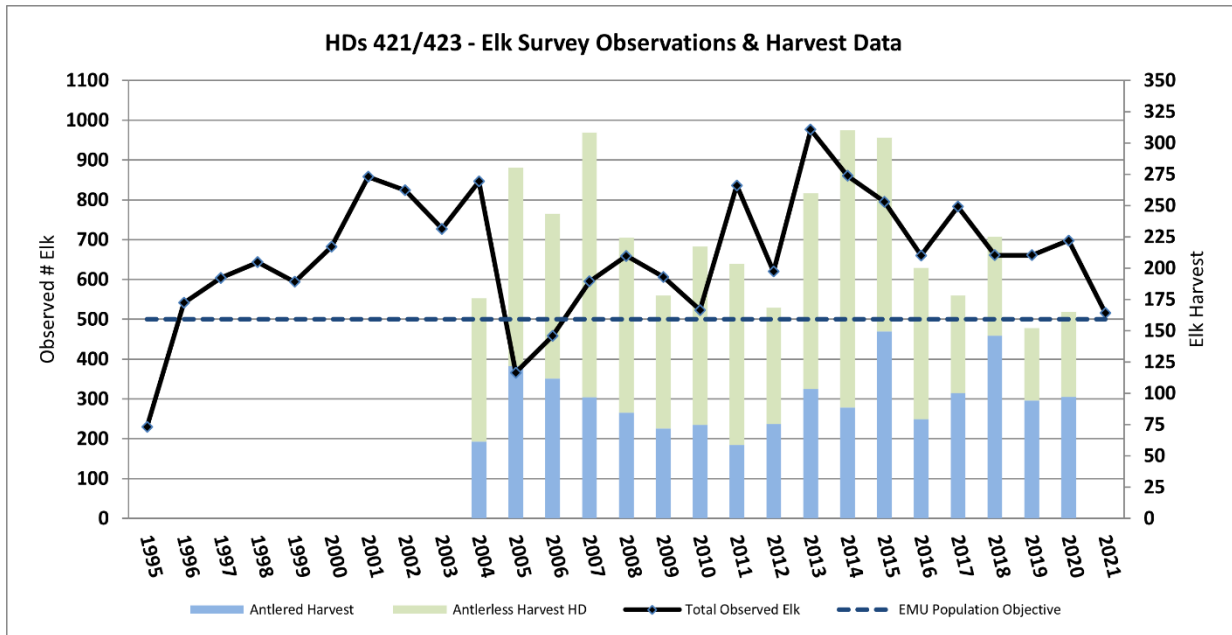


Figure 1: HD 421/423 elk survey observations and estimated harvest with respect to EMU objective, 1995-2021. The black and blue dotted lines are associated with the left Y axis. The green/blue bars are associated with the right Y axis.

5. Provide information related to any weather/habitat factors, public or private land use or resident and nonresident hunting opportunity that have relevance to this change (i.e., habitat security, hunter access, vegetation surveys, weather index, snow conditions, and temperature / precipitation information).

The vast majority of wintering elk in these HDs persist primarily on private lands. Some elk will be closely associated with private lands throughout the year. Although a number of private properties entertain varying levels of hunting pressure during the general season, certain areas are either closed or mostly closed to hunting. This reality, as it creates relatively secure areas for elk to move into, will continue to limit potential gains any season adjustment stands to generate. Game damage is most often reported as heavy elk use of private agricultural property during winter (fences and standing residual forage), late spring (fences and green-up) and late summer (fences, alfalfa and grain-ripe).

Additionally, despite more recent hard winters (2018 & 2019), impacts on elk have been minimal. Late spring and summer vegetation growing conditions have also been relatively good during this time. Both of the latter factors have allowed for continued fair to good elk recruitment and survival from year to year.

6. Briefly describe the contacts you have made with individual sportsmen or landowners, public groups or organizations regarding this proposal and indicate their comments (both pro and con).

Unfortunately, conversations with landowners and hunters related to this proposal have been minimal. As per direction, this proposal first and foremost was directed to focus on biological justifications and/or impacts. From a 'social' perspective, there will be concern and reluctance related to removal of a brow-tined bull/antlerless season type at least within the HD 423 portion of this area, while others will welcome it. This was evident in the only two comments that were received in the initial 'scoping' phase of this year's season setting process. As well, maintenance of the shoulder season regulation types in this area will also be met with some resistance, as has been the case since they were initiated. Although general acceptance, for now, of this season type has been maintained. With longer seasons does come added work to some degree (more telephone calls, hunter requests, etc.). Although it is also believed the reduction in shoulder season harvest opportunity that was initiated in 2020 has helped to limit impacts to those landowners and/or hunters that do not prefer these longer seasons.

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION
Mule Deer 2022

Hunting Districts: 413

1. Describe the proposed season / quotas changes and provide a summary of prior history (i.e., prior history of permits, season types, etc.).

The proposed change is to change the opportunity on the General License for mule deer from 'either-sex' to 'antlered buck only'. The regulations for mule deer presently allow either male or female mule deer to be harvested in HD 413. This change also reflects an effort to combine HD 432 and 413 to simplify the regulations. If the change goes through, the portion formally known as HD 432 would switch to 'antlered buck only' as well. FWP would also make available 100 mule deer B Licenses in the new, larger HD 413 to help with any game damage events that arise. Presently HD 416, 418, 420, 448 and 454 are all 'antlered buck only' on the General License. This change is intended to increase mule deer numbers but also to make mule deer regulations consistent with the other Little Belt districts.

2. What is the objective of this proposed change? This could be a specific harvest amount or resulting population level or number of game damage complaints, etc.

The objective of this proposed change is to allow the mule deer population to recover to long-term average levels. A secondary objective is to simplify the regulations. Many districts in the area with similar habitat are experiencing below average mule deer numbers. Limiting antlerless harvest of mule deer where mule deer are down may shift antlerless hunting and harvest to areas with above average numbers. Maintaining similar harvest opportunities in adjacent hunting districts after switching to 'Antlered Buck Only' may reduce hunting confusion initially and allow harvest opportunities to maximize management objectives.

3. How will the success of this proposal be measured? This could be annual game or harvest surveys, game damage complaints, etc.

Success could be measured by comparing new harvest data and harvest success to the old harvest data. Success could also be measured by comparing the number of new game damage complaints to the number of game damage complaints in the past. The stability of deer populations overtime may shed light on the consequences of the change. Public comment in future biennial season setting processes could reflect landowner/sportsmen satisfaction. Ideally, mule deer numbers would more quickly recover to long-term averages as monitored through survey and harvest data.

4. What is the current population's status in relation to the management objectives? (i.e., state management objectives from management plan if applicable; provide current and prior years of population survey, harvest, or other pertinent information).

Survey and harvest data suggest mule deer numbers in both districts are below the long-term average. Buck harvest data since Year 1992 from HD 413 suggest mule deer numbers are approximately 28% below the long-term average. Survey data from the North Little Belts Trend Area suggest mule deer are between 48% and 21% below long-term average (the 2021 survey efforts may not have been optimal). In HD 432, harvest data suggests mule deer are around 23% below the long-term average. Survey data from the Little Belts Front Trend Area (east portions of HD 432) suggest mule deer on the east end of the Little Belts are around 17% below the long-term average. Both districts are managed under the same criteria described in the Mule Deer Adaptive Harvest Management Plan, i.e. a Prairie/Mountain Foothill population.

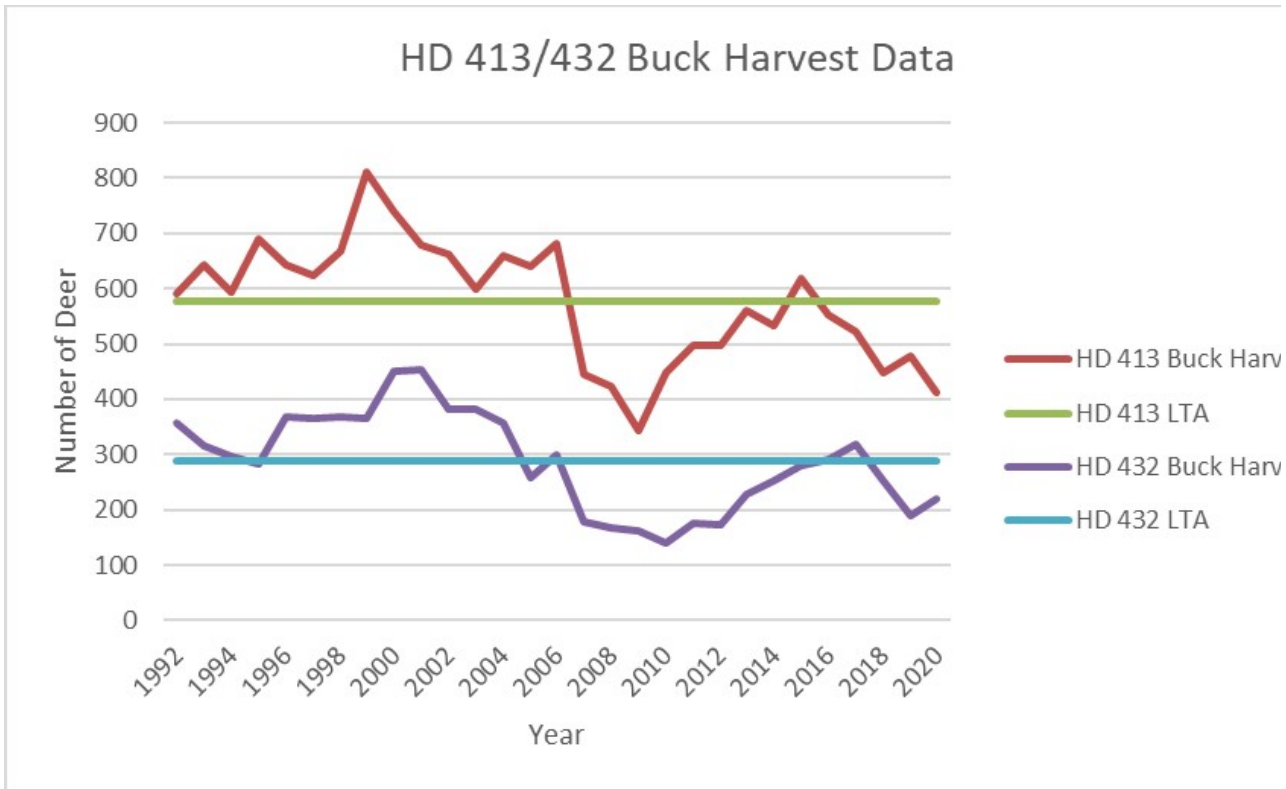


Figure 1: HD 432, 413 Mule Deer Buck Harvest Data.

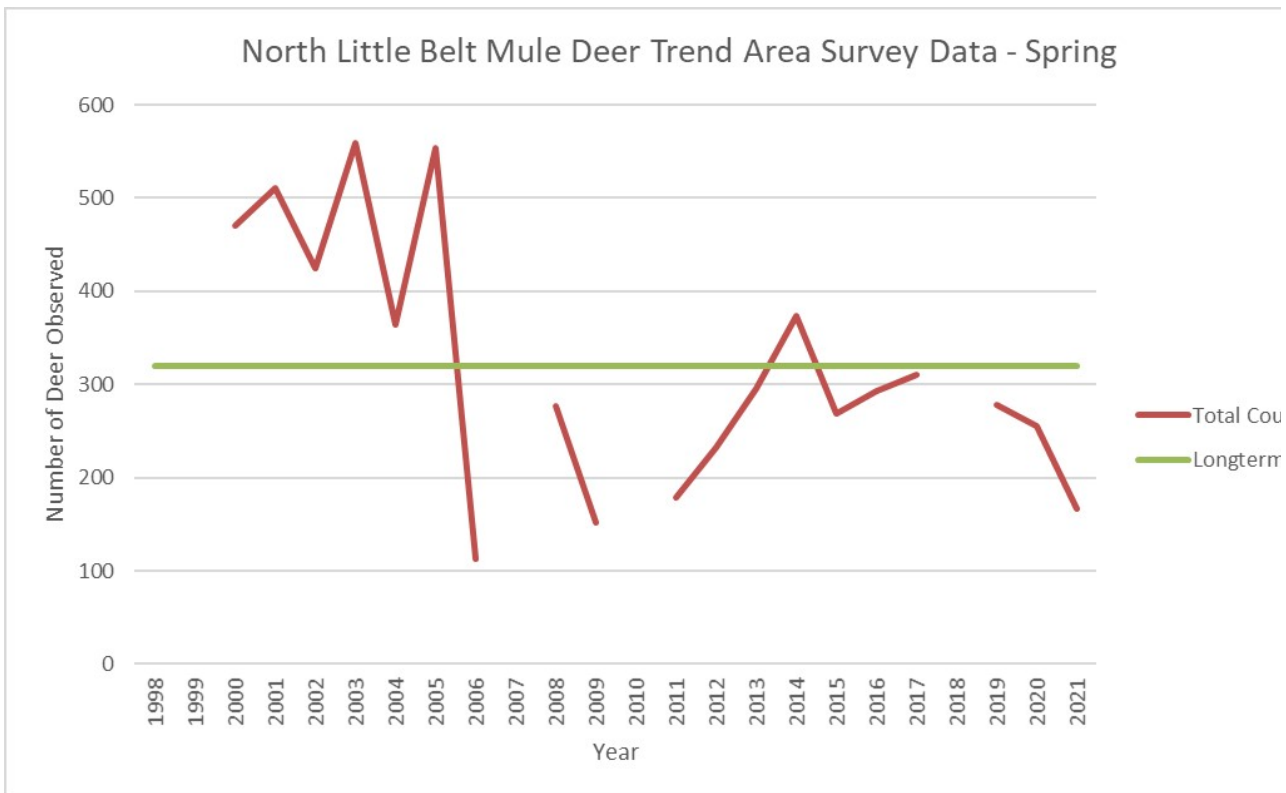


Figure 2: North Little Belt Trend Area Survey Data.

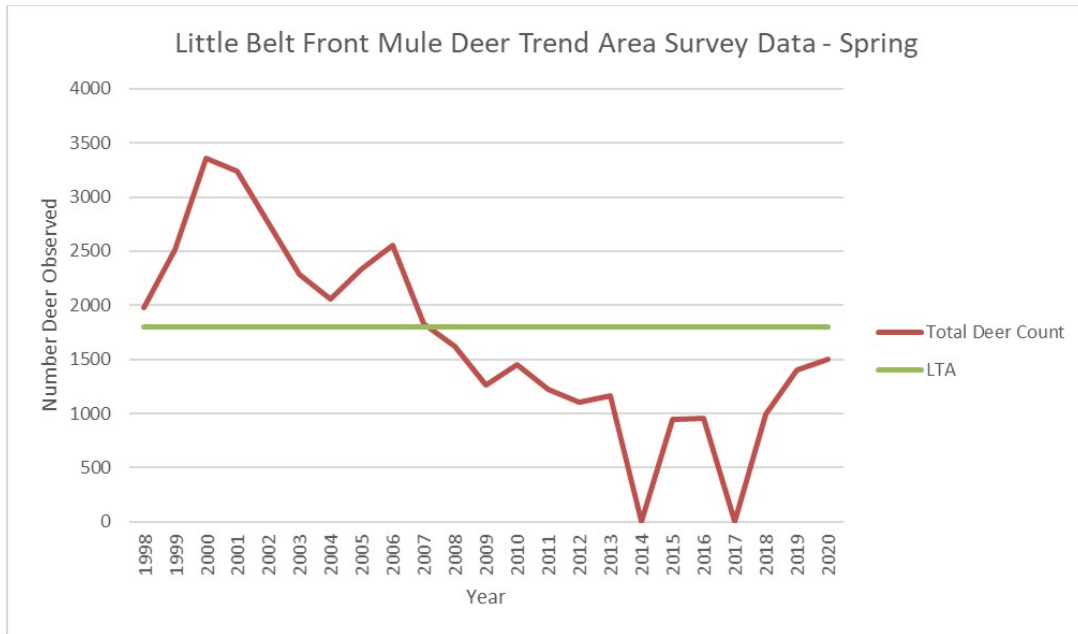


Figure 3: Little Belt Front Trend Area Survey Data.

5. Provide information related to any weather/habitat factors, public or private land use or resident and nonresident hunting opportunity that have relevance to this change (i.e., habitat security, hunter access, vegetation surveys, weather index, snow conditions, and temperature / precipitation information).

Overall, weather since 2017 has made it difficult for mule deer populations to recover in this area. Hot dry summers, extreme cold spells, and heavy snowstorms have likely slowed annual recruitment for mule deer. While fawn:doe ratios observed in both trend areas suggest recovery potential is present, only slow recovery is being observed in some areas. Hot dry summers which have the potential to limit nutrition available across the landscape, in particularly mountainous and native rangeland areas is thought to be a major driver affecting annual survival for mule deer in this area. Limiting the harvest of does to maximize production effort is recommended to speed up recovery. The summer of 2021 was particularly hot and dry; such a change may seem timely if the 2021/2022 winter is particularly harsh.

Habitat, weather and climatic factors affecting deer and elk in HD 413 and HD 432 are very similar. Both districts occur on the north side of the Little Belt Mountains and both districts contain similar proportions of forest, grassland, and hay land. More annual cropland occurs in HD 413 near Great Falls and further from the forested mountains; however, migratory elk and mule deer in these areas are uncommon.

Similarly, the amount of land open for public hunting is comparable between the two hunting districts as well. Whereas HD 413 has more private land enrolled in FWP-access programs, HD 432 contains more DNRC School Trust Lands which are open for hunting. Landownership classification where migratory elk and deer frequent is about the same in both hunting districts. As recognized in the elk management plan, both areas face similar challenges when it comes to private land access for deer and elk hunting opportunities. Work to address these challenges will continue regardless of whether the two districts are combined. Overall, we feel landowner tolerances for deer are similar between the two districts as is hunter interest in the hunting opportunities available. Deer harvest opportunities on the General License are presently the same in both districts.

6. Briefly describe the contacts you have made with individual sportsmen or landowners, public groups or organizations regarding this proposal and indicate their comments (both pro and con).

Given the nature of this year's season setting process, little local outreach has been made to fully collect feedback from landowners and sportsmen. With that being said, surprisingly very little comment was received during this year's scoping comment period. Albeit poor outreach and minimal comment during scoping; regional biologists feel this proposal would be accepted by the landowners and sportsmen who use the area.

**MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION
Mule Deer 2022
HD 442 MD ES language removal**

Hunting Districts: 442

1. Describe the proposed season / quotas changes and provide a summary of prior history (i.e., prior history of permits, season types, etc.).

Given the proposed change for the boundary of this HD and what the HD 442 boundary will ultimately be (as/if adopted), there would be no change to the MD season structure (remains buck only). In the old HD 442 boundary, non-USFS lands had an ES MD season type. Given the proposed removal of the non-USFS lands this HD, there's no longer a need for the either-sex MD language valid off USFS lands.

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION
Mule Deer 2022

Hunting Districts: 432, 413

1. Describe the proposed season / quotas changes and provide a summary of prior history (i.e., prior history of permits, season types, etc.).

The proposed change is to combine Deer/Elk Hunting Districts 413 and 432 to create a larger HD 413 named the North Little Belt Mountains. Both districts presently provide an either-sex opportunity for mule deer and white-tailed deer on the general deer license. Both districts presently provide an either-sex opportunity for elk as well, on the general elk license. A region-wide elk B License is also valid in both hunting districts outside the National Forest. No shoulder seasons exist in either HD 413 or HD 432.

New Deer/Elk HD 413: North Little Belt Mountains

Those portions of Cascade, Meagher and Judith Basin Counties lying within the following-described boundary: Beginning in Great Falls at the junction of US Highways 87 and 89, then southeast on US Highway 87 to Dry Wolf Creek Road near Stanford, then southward up said road, (up Dry Wolf Creek and Lyon Gulch, past Yogo Peak and Slide Rock Point) to its junction with USFS Road 487, then west on said road to U.S. Highway 89 at Kings Hill Pass, then north on said highway to its junction with Harley Creek (two miles north of Neihart), then westerly along said creek to its junction with USFS Road 839, then south on said road to its junction with USFS Road 586, then westerly on said road past Onion Park, Williams Park, and Eagle Park to its junction with USFS Road 6424 (South Fork Tenderfoot Creek Road), then westerly on said road (along the South Fork Tenderfoot Creek) to the fork of Tenderfoot Creek, then westerly along Tenderfoot Creek to its confluence with the Smith River, then north and down the west bank of said river to its confluence with the Missouri River, then northwesterly along the west bank of the Missouri River to the Ulm Bridge, then northbound on Millegan Road to its junction with Interstate-15, then eastward on Interstate-15 to its junction with US Highway 89, then eastward on said Highway to the junction of US Highway 87 and 89, the point of beginning.

Old Deer/Elk HD 413: Northwest Little Belt Mountains

Those portions of Cascade and Meagher Counties lying within the following-described boundary: Beginning at Ulm, then following Interstate 15 northeasterly to US Highways 87 and 89 at Great Falls, then southeast along said highways to Armington Junction (US Highway 89 and 87 separate), then south on US Highway 89 to its junction with Harley Creek (two miles north of Neihart), then westerly along Harley Creek to its junction with USFS Road 839, then south on said road to its junction with USFS Road 586, then westerly along said road past Onion Park, Williams Park and Eagle Park to where said road intersects with USFS Road 6424 (South Fork Tenderfoot Creek Road), then westerly on said road and down the South Fork Tenderfoot Creek to forks of Tenderfoot Creek, then westerly down the main Tenderfoot Creek to its confluence with the Smith River, then north and down said river to Ulm, the point of beginning.

Old Deer/Elk HD 432: Otter Creek

Those portions of Cascade and Judith Basin counties lying within the following-described boundary: Beginning at the junction of US Highways 89 and 87 at Armington Junction, then southerly along US Highway 89 to its junction with USFS Road 487 at King's Hill Pass, then east on USFS Road 487 to its junction with USFS Road 251, then northeasterly along USFS Road 251/Judith Basin County Road 101 (Dry Wolf Creek Road) past Slide Rock Point and Yogo Peak and down Dry Wolf Creek to its junction with US Highway 87 near Stanford, then northwesterly along said highway to Armington Junction, the point of beginning.

2. What is the objective of this proposed change? This could be a specific harvest amount or resulting population level or number of game damage complaints, etc.

The objective of this proposed change is to simplify the regulations by reducing the number of hunting districts in Region 4. HD 413 and 432 would be managed together as one hunting district called HD 413. The population as a whole would continue to be managed at the long-term average and within landowner tolerances and hunter satisfaction.

3. How will the success of this proposal be measured? This could be annual game or harvest surveys, game damage complaints, etc.

Success could be measured by monitoring survey and harvest data trends. Success could also be measured by comparing the number of new game damage complaints to the number of game damage complaints recorded in the past when both districts were separate. The stability of deer and elk populations over time may shed light on the consequences of the change. Public comment in future biennial season setting processes could reflect landowner/sportsmen satisfaction. If HD 413 and 432 are combined, hunters and landowners would experience the same deer and elk management historically conducted in the area but instead it would be implemented over a much larger area.

4. What is the current population’s status in relation to the management objectives? (i.e., state management objectives from management plan if applicable; provide current and prior years of population survey, harvest, or other pertinent information).

Survey and harvest data suggest the mule deer numbers in both districts fluctuate up and down in a similar way. This makes sense given that both districts have been managed under the same criteria described in the Mule Deer Adaptive Harvest Management Plan, i.e. a Prairie/Mountain Foothill population. According to harvest data, mule deer numbers in both districts are presently below the long-term average. The table below reflects mule deer buck harvest over time.

Survey and harvest data suggest elk numbers in both districts fluctuate up and down together as well. Both districts are managed with the same objectives in mind as described in the Little Belts chapter of the Elk Management Plan. According to survey and harvest data, elk numbers in both hunting districts are within acceptable ranges of the objectives established in the 2005 elk management plan (i.e. ~490 elk in HD 413; Objective 500 and ~453 elk in HD 432; Objective 325 Elk). Since winter elk surveys are conducted over the entire winter range in both hunting districts, future surveys could continue to be conducted in a similar fashion. The table below reflects bull elk harvest over time.

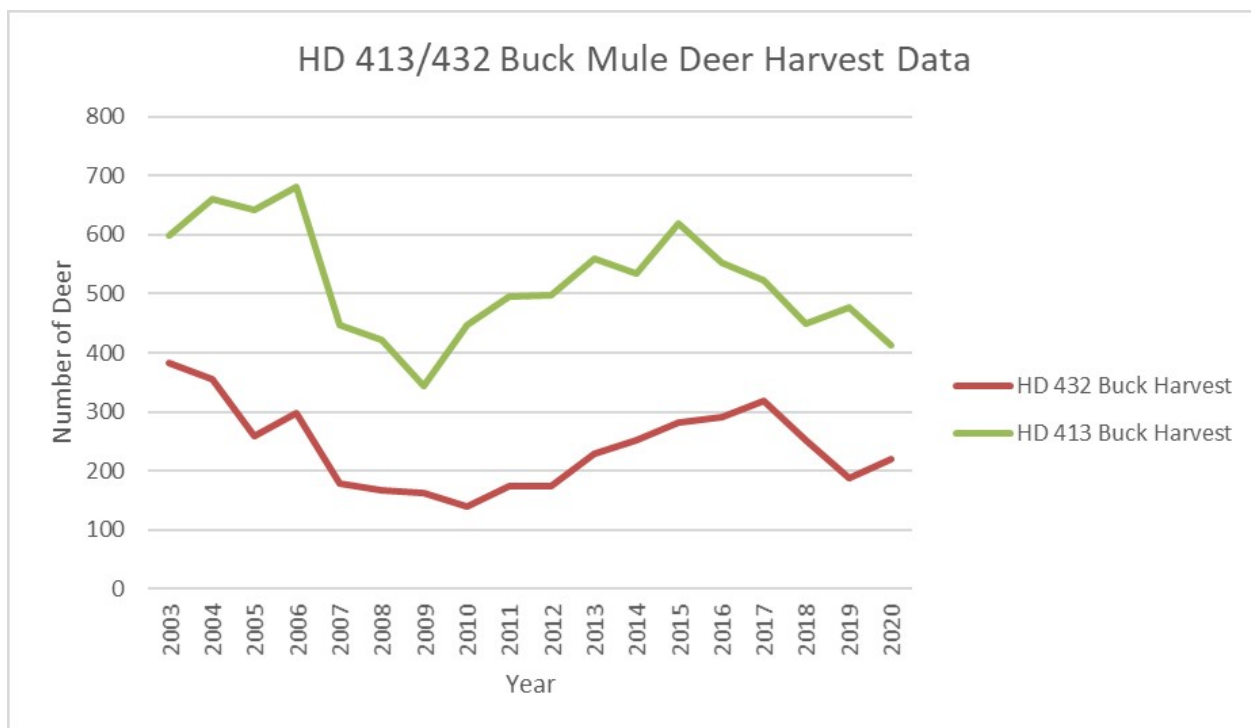


Figure 1: HD 413/432 Mule Deer Buck Harvest Data.

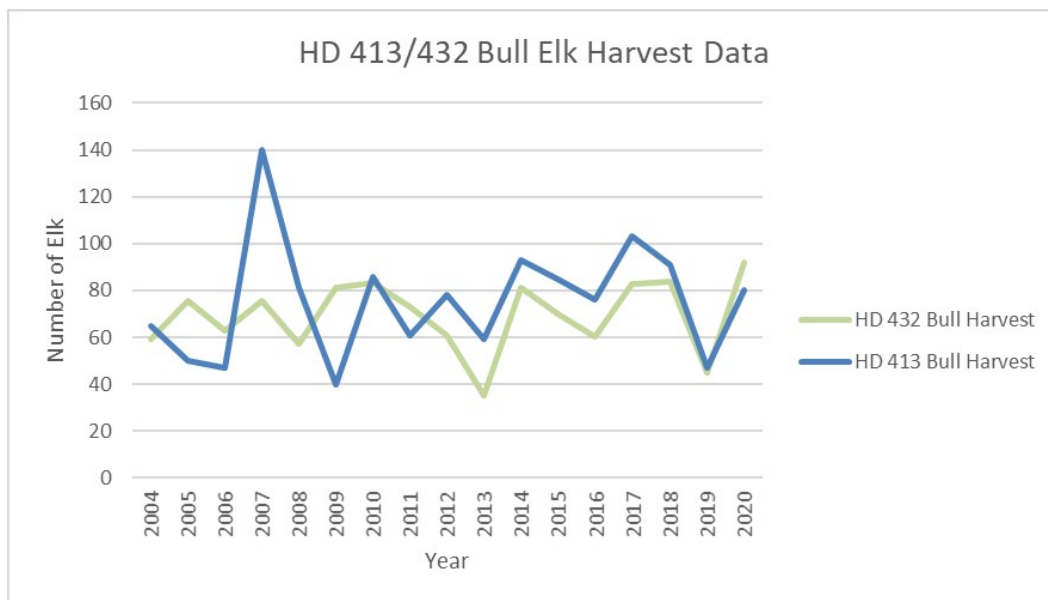


Figure 2: HD 413/432 Bull Elk Harvest Data.

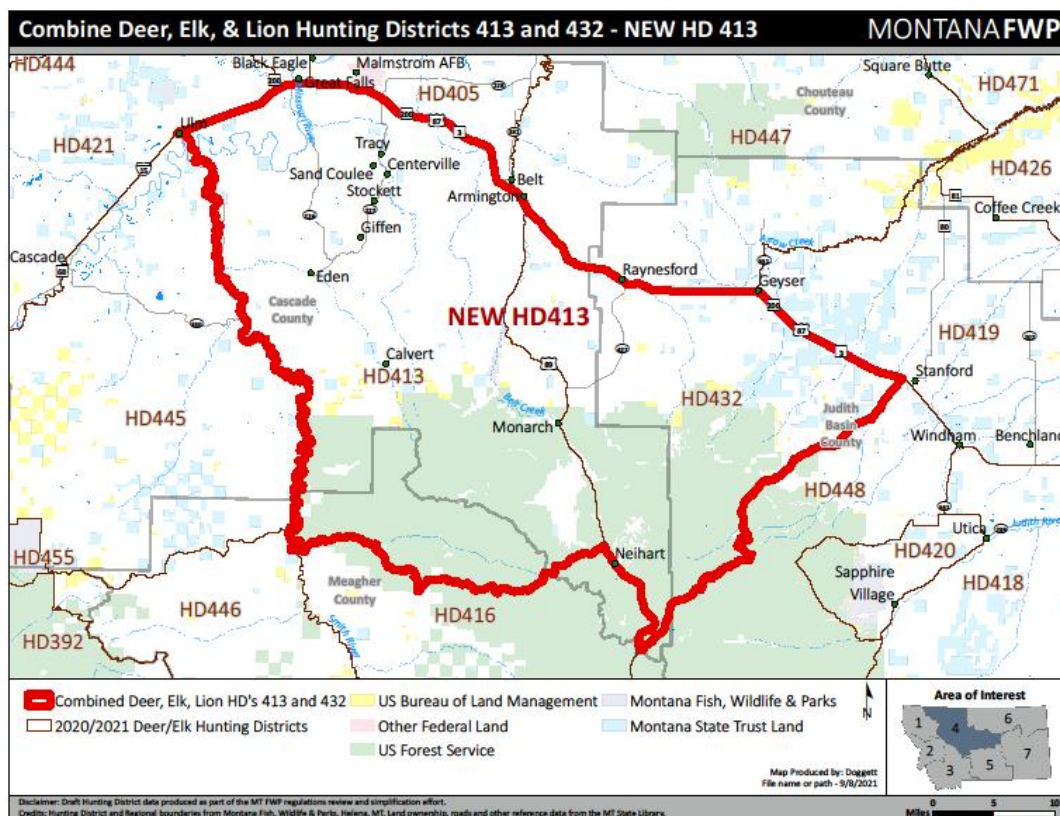


Figure 3: New map.

5. Provide information related to any weather/habitat factors, public or private land use or resident and nonresident hunting opportunity that have relevance to this change (i.e., habitat security, hunter access, vegetation surveys, weather index, snow conditions, and temperature / precipitation information).

Habitat, weather and climatic factors affecting deer and elk in HD 413 and HD 432 are very similar. Both districts occur on the north side of the Little Belt Mountains and both districts contain similar proportions of forest, grassland, and hay land. More annual cropland occurs in HD 413 near Great Falls and further from the forested mountains; however, migratory elk and migratory mule deer in these areas are uncommon.

Similarly, the amount of land open for public hunting is comparable between the two hunting districts as well. Whereas HD 413 has more private land enrolled in FWP-access programs, HD 432 contains more DNRC School Trust Lands which are open for hunting. The Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest provides excellent public land hunting opportunities for deer and elk; much of the districts is National Forest. Landownership classification where migratory elk and deer frequent during winter is about the same in both hunting districts; mostly private land. As recognized in the elk management plan, both areas face similar challenges when it comes to private land access for deer and elk hunting opportunities. Work to address these challenges can continue in the same fashion if the two districts are combined. Overall, we feel landowner tolerances for deer and elk are similar between the two districts as is hunter interest in the hunting opportunities available. Deer and elk harvest opportunities on the General License are presently the same in both districts. Hunters are encouraged to build relationships with private landowners and ask politely for permission to hunt private land.

6. Briefly describe the contacts you have made with individual sportsmen or landowners, public groups or organizations regarding this proposal and indicate their comments (both pro and con).

Given the nature of this year's season setting process, little local outreach has been made to fully collect feedback from landowners and sportsmen. Surprisingly very little comment was received during this year's scoping comment period. Albeit poor outreach and minimal comment during scoping; regional biologists feel this proposal would be accepted by the landowners and sportsmen who use the area.

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION
Mule Deer 2022
Create HD 555

Hunting Districts: 555

1. Describe the proposed season / quotas changes and provide a summary of prior history (i.e., prior history of permits, season types, etc.).

Simplify hunting regulations by combining HD 510 and the eastern portion of HD 502. These two areas are part of the Southern Mountain PMU as defined by the Mule Deer AHM Plan. Both areas are currently being managed with a liberal season type in accordance with the CWD Plan.

2. What is the objective of this proposed change? This could be a specific harvest amount or resulting population level or number of game damage complaints, etc.

Maintain post season buck/doe ratios at 10:100 or less and manage for reduced deer densities as described in the CWD Plan for hunting districts with a history of CWD.

3. How will the success of this proposal be measured? This could be annual game or harvest surveys, game damage complaints, etc.

Harvest will be monitored via the statewide hunter questionnaire survey. Mule deer trends will be monitored by annual aerial surveys.

4. What is the current population's status in relation to the management objectives? (i.e., state management objectives from management plan if applicable; provide current and prior years of population survey, harvest, or other pertinent information).

Mule deer populations are currently below the objective defined by the Mule Deer AHM Plan but are approaching appropriate levels for a hunting district impacted by CWD.

5. Provide information related to any weather/habitat factors, public or private land use or resident and nonresident hunting opportunity that have relevance to this change (i.e., habitat security, hunter access, vegetation surveys, weather index, snow conditions, and temperature / precipitation information).

6. Briefly describe the contacts you have made with individual sportsmen or landowners, public groups or organizations regarding this proposal and indicate their comments (both pro and con).

The Sunlight Ranch Hunting Advisory Committee was advised of this approach and had no objections.

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION
Mule Deer 2022
New 515 Mule Deer Structure

Hunting Districts: 500, 570, 515

1. Describe the proposed season / quotas changes and provide a summary of prior history (i.e., prior history of permits, season types, etc.).

Please refer to the following proposal for information about mule deer season structure in 515. R5-Elk-Structure-combine 500 and 570 into new 515.

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION
Mule Deer 2022
New 535 Mule Deer Structure

Hunting Districts: 511, 530, 535

1. Describe the proposed season / quotas changes and provide a summary of prior history (i.e., prior history of permits, season types, etc.).

Please refer to the following proposal for information about mule deer season structure in 515. R5-Elk-Structure-Combine 511 and 530 into new 535.

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION
Mule Deer 2022
New 565 Mule Deer Season

Hunting Districts: 560; 565

1. Describe the proposed season / quotas changes and provide a summary of prior history (i.e., prior history of permits, season types, etc.).

The proposal is to take the existing portion of district 560 south of Falls Creek, and make that portion a new deer/elk hunting district.

2. What is the objective of this proposed change? This could be a specific harvest amount or resulting population level or number of game damage complaints, etc.

The objective of the proposed change is to simplify the hunting regulations for new district 525 and 565, by removing the district portion which has caused confusion in the past. The elk, mule deer, and whitetail deer opportunity in this new district will be the same opportunity as was available in the past.

3. How will the success of this proposal be measured? This could be annual game or harvest surveys, game damage complaints, etc.

Regulations simplification. There are no biological measures of success associated with this proposal.

4. What is the current population's status in relation to the management objectives? (i.e., state management objectives from management plan if applicable; provide current and prior years of population survey, harvest, or other pertinent information).

New district 565 is part of the Southern Mountains Population Management Unit as defined in the Mule Deer Adaptive Harvest Management Plan. The mule deer will continue to be managed following the southern mountains season setting guidelines. The season structure will remain unchanged with a general antlered buck season for archery and rifle seasons. No B License opportunity has been available here in the past and none will be in the future. Population trends will continue to be assessed using the Green Mountain Mule Deer Trend Area.

Green Mountain Mule Deer Trend Area: This 28 square mile area includes the area between the Main Boulder and East Boulder rivers north of Green Mountain, lower Elk Creek, Fuller Gulch, Long Mountain and Dry Fork. In the early 1980s deer from this area had been marked, radio-collared and their movements monitored. The area was known to winter both resident deer from the foothills and migratory mountain deer.

Since 1982 this area has been surveyed 24 times (1982, 1989-90, 1994, 1998-2019) with a long-term average count of 357 mule deer. The 1982 survey was conducted during a period when deer numbers were high throughout the hunting district and at a time when there were 67 marked deer in the survey area. The 1982 survey produced a count of 584 mule deer including 37 of the 67 marked deer (55% survey efficiency). This total stands as the record high count for this area. Unfortunately, the area was not surveyed from 1991-93 thereby most likely missing the peak numbers of the early 1990s. Although numbers were still relatively high in 1994 (508 mule deer counted), the population was probably higher in 1992 or 1993. When next surveyed in 1998, the area had suffered through 5 consecutive years of poor fawn recruitment. The 1998 count showed only 320 mule deer. This should be representative of a low population for this area, although, it is likely that numbers were even lower in 1997 following the severe 1996/97 winter. The 2019 spring count was 13% below long-term average. Twenty-seven fawns per 100 adults were observed in the 2019 spring survey. The long-term average is 33 fawns:100 adults. No survey was conducted during the spring of 2020 due to COVID19 restrictions. No survey was conducted in the spring of 2021 due to helicopter mechanical problems.

5. Provide information related to any weather/habitat factors, public or private land use or resident and nonresident hunting opportunity that have relevance to this change (i.e., habitat security, hunter access, vegetation surveys, weather index, snow conditions, and temperature / precipitation information).

The proposal is not related to weather, habitat, or access factors.

6. Briefly describe the contacts you have made with individual sportsmen or landowners, public groups or organizations regarding this proposal and indicate their comments (both pro and con).

This proposal was available for public input during the initial comment/review period. No comments were received regarding mule deer in new proposed district 565.

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION
Mule Deer 2022
Remove 540-00 Mule Deer B License

Hunting Districts: 540

1. Describe the proposed season / quotas changes and provide a summary of prior history (i.e., prior history of permits, season types, etc.).

The proposal is to remove the 540-00 mule deer B License.

2. What is the objective of this proposed change? This could be a specific harvest amount or resulting population level or number of game damage complaints, etc.

The objective of the proposal is to simplify regulations. Currently, only 10 of these B Licenses are available annually. Hunter opportunity and harvest is minimal.

3. How will the success of this proposal be measured? This could be annual game or harvest surveys, game damage complaints, etc.

Regulations simplification. Only 4-6 mule deer does are harvested annually on these licenses. They are not contributing to management or hunter opportunity. There are no biological measures of success related to this proposal.

4. What is the current population's status in relation to the management objectives? (i.e., state management objectives from management plan if applicable; provide current and prior years of population survey, harvest, or other pertinent information).

There is no mule deer trend area in 540. A trend area in nearby district 418 is used to represent mule deer population trends in district 540. The spring 2021 trend survey of 418 showed that mule deer numbers were 17% below long-term average. Fawn recruitment was 18% below long-term average.

5. Provide information related to any weather/habitat factors, public or private land use or resident and nonresident hunting opportunity that have relevance to this change (i.e., habitat security, hunter access, vegetation surveys, weather index, snow conditions, and temperature / precipitation information).

Regulations simplification. It is not related to weather, habitat, or access factors.

6. Briefly describe the contacts you have made with individual sportsmen or landowners, public groups or organizations regarding this proposal and indicate their comments (both pro and con).

Initially the proposal was to increase the 540-00 from the current 10 B Licenses to 50 B Licenses in case of game damage complaints. Some comments were received during the initial comment/review period, that were concerned about the low number of mule deer in 540 and it was requested that that 540-00 mule deer B License be removed.

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION
Mule Deer 2022
New 525 Mule Deer Structure

Hunting Districts: 525

1. Describe the proposed season / quotas changes and provide a summary of prior history (i.e., prior history of permits, season types, etc.).

Hunting districts 520 and 560 (not including the portion of 560 south of Falls Creek) were combined into new deer/elk district 525. Both districts are included in the Southern Mountains Population Management Unit in the Mule Deer AHM Plan due to similarities in habitat types and deer population dynamics. These hunting districts offer similar hunter access opportunities. See the following justification for information and new legal description of 525. [R5-Elk-Structure-create new 525](#).

Both 520 and 560 had antlered buck mule deer archery and general seasons with limited B License opportunity. The B License opportunity was not valid on National Forest Lands. New district 525 is proposed to have the same mule deer season structure-antlered buck archery and general season with limited B License opportunity. The district combination was targeted at regulation simplification. No changes in mule deer harvest, hunter opportunity, or populations are anticipated from this proposal.

The second element of this proposal is to create a new mule deer B License opportunity that is valid in new 525. No changes are anticipated for harvest or hunter opportunity. The new B License restrictions would match the two old B Licenses. They will not be valid on National Forest Lands. The objective of the proposal is to simplify regulations. The new mule deer B License will be called 525-00. The quota is proposed to be 200, with a quota range of 200 to 500.

2. What is the objective of this proposed change? This could be a specific harvest amount or resulting population level or number of game damage complaints, etc.

The objective of the proposed change is regulation simplification.

3. How will the success of this proposal be measured? This could be annual game or harvest surveys, game damage complaints, etc.

This proposal is directed at regulation simplification. There are no biological measures of success associated with this proposal.

4. What is the current population's status in relation to the management objectives? (i.e., state management objectives from management plan if applicable; provide current and prior years of population survey, harvest, or other pertinent information).

New district 525 is part of the Southern Mountains Population Management Unit as defined in the Mule Deer Adaptive Harvest Management Plan. The mule deer will continue to be managed following the southern mountains season setting guidelines. The season structure will remain unchanged with a general antlered buck season for archery and rifle seasons. Limited B License opportunity will remain in place. B Licenses are not valid on National Forest Lands. Population trends will continue to be assessed using the Green Mountain Mule Deer Trend Area and the Sheep Mountain Trend Area.

Green Mountain Mule Deer Trend Area: This 28 square mile area includes the area between the Main Boulder and East Boulder rivers north of Green Mountain, lower Elk Creek, Fuller Gulch, Long Mountain and Dry Fork. In the early 1980s deer from this area had been marked, radio-collared and their movements monitored. The area was known to winter both resident deer from the foothills and migratory mountain deer.

Since 1982 this area has been surveyed 24 times (1982, 1989-90, 1994, 1998-2019) with a long-term average count of 357 mule deer. The 1982 survey was conducted during a period when deer numbers were high throughout the hunting district and at a time when there were 67 marked deer in the survey area. The 1982

survey produced a count of 584 mule deer including 37 of the 67 marked deer (55% survey efficiency). This total stands as the record high count for this area. Unfortunately, the area was not surveyed from 1991-93 thereby most likely missing the peak numbers of the early 1990s. Although numbers were still relatively high in 1994 (508 mule deer counted), the population was probably higher in 1992 or 1993. When next surveyed in 1998, the area had suffered through 5 consecutive years of poor fawn recruitment. The 1998 count showed only 320 mule deer. This should be representative of a low population for this area, although, it is likely that numbers were even lower in 1997 following the severe 1996/97 winter. The 2019 spring count was 13% below long-term average. Twenty-seven fawns per 100 adults were observed in the 2019 spring survey. The long-term average is 33 fawns:100 adults. No survey was conducted during the spring of 2020 due to COVID19 restrictions. No survey was conducted in the spring of 2021 due to helicopter mechanical problems.

Sheep Mountain Trend Area: For the last four years mule deer numbers on the Sheep Mountain trend area have averaged 48% below the long-term average. This decline was the result of three severe winters in a row. It is likely that the decline was in part due to over winter mortality and in part the result of redistribution of mule deer. In the spring of 2021 numbers rebounded somewhat following a mild winter. In 2021 the mule deer count was 30 % below the long-term average and there was a dramatic improvement of fawn recruitment.

5. Provide information related to any weather/habitat factors, public or private land use or resident and nonresident hunting opportunity that have relevance to this change (i.e., habitat security, hunter access, vegetation surveys, weather index, snow conditions, and temperature / precipitation information).

The proposal is not related to weather, habitat, or access factors.

6. Briefly describe the contacts you have made with individual sportsmen or landowners, public groups or organizations regarding this proposal and indicate their comments (both pro and con).