

# The Outdoorsman

Bulletin Number 23

Selling Hunting Opportunity

April-June 2007

## Southeast Idaho Mule Deer Management

by George Dovel



Nampa resident Kyle Hubbard displays 39.5-inch steelhead he caught March 15, 2007 on the South Fork of the Clearwater River using a jig and bobber.



Kyle's cousin, Charlie Newell of Emmett, caught a smaller male in the same hole using the same set-up. Clearwater anglers generally reported catching more and larger steelhead this year.

### Primary Cause of Record Low Harvests

Mule deer are traditionally the primary deer species in the **76%** of Idaho that is south of the Salmon River. Stress from eight consecutive years of drought, six years of extended hunting seasons with kills averaging 77,000, and the severe 1992-93 winter, killed most of Idaho's mule deer.

Although each of these factors contributed to the record low mule deer populations and harvests Idaho is experiencing today, none of them are the primary cause. The primary cause for the failure of Idaho's mule deer population to recover is the Commission's failure to establish seasons that prevent mule deer populations from being depleted based on testimony and facts in evidence.

Ignoring testimony of widespread mule deer starvation from veterinarians and local citizens on February 3, 1993, the Commission joined IDFG biologists in publicly ridiculing the experts. The only changes the Commission approved for 1993 were **increasing** the number of antlerless permits in the Magic Valley by **2,000** and reducing the general antlerless season in nine Southeast units from 27 days to 20 days to make it coincide with the buck season.

### Commission Continues Antlerless Harvest

In 1994, following demands by the legislature for shorter mule deer seasons, the F&G Commission approved reductions in the number of antlerless permits and shortened or closed some general antlerless rifle seasons. However it continued to allow unlimited antlerless mule deer harvest in all of the **79** general season archery deer units.

The same Andrus-appointed Commission that had allowed several hundred thousand mule deer and tens of thousands of elk to starve, also approved killing thousands of antlerless elk in the Clearwater Region to "balance" the critically low ratio of bulls to cows. When Governor Batt allowed the Commissioners to refuse his request for their resignations, the pattern of rubber-stamping biologists' recommendations was continued indefinitely.

In 1991, biologists had implemented general season spike elk and two-point deer seasons in several units in an attempt to increase the number of mature bulls and bucks in three regions. This was soon followed by limited entry hunts for bulls or bucks when they were more vulnerable.

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## SE Mule Deer... *continued from page 1*

### Two-Point Units Added in SE Region

In 1997, all antlerless mule deer harvest in the SE Region was finally halted, most buck seasons were reduced to 5-10 days, and Unit 73 was limited to two-point buck harvest in a 20-day season. In a special meeting held in Malad on Feb. 14, 1998, Unit 73 hunters used adjacent Unit 56 (in the Magic Valley Region) to illustrate that two-point restriction ultimately leads to extreme reduction in the number of hunters allowed to hunt mature bucks.

They pointed out that the odds of drawing a coveted buck permit in Unit 56 at that time were only one in 15 years and insisted that adjusting season lengths was the appropriate biological tool. Less than three weeks later they presented a petition to the Commission signed by 1,000 local area residents who opposed the two-point restriction yet it was adopted again unanimously and was also implemented in Unit 70.

Then, as now, the Director and Commissioners ignored the citizen input and continued with the biologists' plan to turn Units 70 and 73 into "trophy" mule deer units. They insisted that the new 1998-2003 Mule Deer Management Plan, supplemented by SE Idaho mule deer research, would restore SE Idaho mule deer populations.

### Deer, Elk Plans Simplify Commission's Role

When Steve Mealey was hired by a split vote from a philosophically split Commission, he implemented systems to restore biological accountability to Idaho big game management. With accurate population and harvest data programs in place, minimum criteria were set to prevent over-harvesting deer and elk.

As explained in the previous *Outdoorsman*, these minimums were established in 1997-98 when mule deer populations and harvests were averaging record lows, but at least they reflected an actual number of animals in a unit below which no females or fawns could be harvested. Minimum post hunting season buck-to-doe criteria were also set, below which buck hunting must also be either eliminated or severely curtailed until a new post-hunting season count revealed the criteria were met.

Regardless of what season the Regional Wildlife Manager recommended in each unit, if the antlerless threshold was not reached or exceeded the Commission could not lawfully allow even one doe or fawn to be harvested. And if the post-season buck minimum per 100 does was not achieved, the buck season(s) must be further reduced until the buck minimum was reached.

### Reduce Special Privilege Bonus Hunts First

Any special privilege bonus hunts where the animals were more vulnerable must logically be eliminated before changes in general seasons. This would have been especially easy following 1998 when the plan was first introduced because the special privilege controlled deer hunts had already been reduced from 10,355 in 1997 to 8,935 in 1998.

### Mule Deer Quotas Ignored

But the firing of Mealey by the split Commission and resignation of Commissioner Siddoway at the beginning of the March 1999 Commission meeting halted the restoration of Commission control of mule deer management. Unlimited either-sex general mule deer archery seasons were restored statewide, except in the Salmon Region, and the number of bonus special privilege deer permits was increased by **30%**!

In Units 70 and 73 a three-day any-buck general season was allowed before the 18-day two-point season began. By allowing the harvest of mature bucks first – instead of at or near the end of the season – an excessive harvest of mature bucks that had not been hunted for two years was assured and it happened.

### Gibbs Supported Mule Deer Mismanagement

In July of 1999 Gov. Kempthorne appointed four new Commissioners. These included two who were Wildlife Council chairmen, and Marcus Gibbs who said, "I am not a wildlife biologist and I don't think I want to try to tell any of these gentlemen what's right and wrong." After interviewing him, Kempthorne said he decided that Gibbs "would be very good for the Fish and Game Department."

True to his word, Gibbs voted for virtually everything the biologists asked for until well into his second term when SE Region sportsmen threatened to sue if he didn't halt all doe harvest in the SE Region and implement a 4-point minimum in Units 70 and 73. His angry confrontations with State Big Game Manager Brad Compton during the March 2004 Commission meeting were described briefly in the April 2004 *Outdoorsman*.

### Gibbs Finally Supports Mule Deer

Because the Commission had failed to enforce the minimum antlerless harvest thresholds and buck-to-doe ratios in the Mule Deer Plan since its inception, the number of special privilege deer permits had increased from the 8,935 in 1998 to **14,848** in 2003. Gibbs pointed out that the SE Region had lost 9,000 does in two years and one unit had only six total bucks per 100 does.

He said that local sportsmen gathered 649 signatures in only six days supporting the 4-point restriction and told Compton to re-do the draft regulations to include only a five-day 4-point or better general season in the two units. He added, "There'll be no doe harvest in Southeast Idaho by any means other than automobile."

The following day Gibbs asked Compton why his instructions weren't followed and Compton responded that antler point restrictions do not work and "Staff" was not comfortable recommending them. A unanimous vote by the Commission passed the no-antlerless, 4-point or larger seasons for Units 70 and 73 and they have remained - with the 5-day season upped to 7 days in 2005, 2006 and 2007.

### Unwarranted 2005 Antlerless Harvest

Magic Valley Commissioner Fred Wood said he wished all of the seasons south of the Salmon River had

been shortened accordingly but that was not done. Mule deer seasons remained essentially unchanged in the other four regions south of the Salmon River, including unlimited either-sex general archery seasons.

Based on reported deer harvests on the IDFG website (<http://fishandgame.idaho.gov/cms/hunt/deer/>) the 2005 antlerless mule deer harvest was the second highest in the preceding 12 years, with ~ **9,879** adult does and female fawns killed by hunters. This does not include male fawns which are reported as bucks, and does not include the antlerless mule deer portion of 428 additional deer reported harvested in 2005 (in a March 2006 F&G news release).

If the ~10,000 female mule deer had been left alive to reproduce, they and their offspring had the potential to produce up to 120,000 additional surviving male and female mule deer by 2011. Controls were in place to prevent this over-harvest outside of the SE Region but they were ignored in all but the Panhandle Region.

### Sound Confusing?

Idaho's 99 Mule Deer Game Management Units (GMU's) are divided among 22 Mule Deer Data Analysis Units (DAU's) with each DAU containing from one to nine GMUs. If that sounds confusing, it is further complicated by the fact that some DAUs contain mule deer management units from more than one Region.

In theory, every one of the 99 mule deer units should have a minimum antlerless harvest threshold and a minimum buck-to-doe ratio. But since deer in many of the 99 units are never counted, one or several units that are counted are chosen to represent the populations in all of the units in each DAU.

In some instances that practice results in reasonably reliable minimum antlerless harvest thresholds. In others it results in female mule deer seasons that can never be justified biologically in many of the units.

### Mule Deer Exploitation in the Clearwater

The Panhandle Region does not conduct periodic mule deer census or age-sex ratio counts and uses the sole criteria that 30% of the bucks harvested must have at least four points as a management "goal" (not a minimum). The region harvested 1,047 mule deer and 8,619 whitetails in 2005 (11% MD) and does not allow antlerless mule deer harvest in any of its units.

The Clearwater Region also uses only the 30% 4-pt mule deer harvest goal but, unlike the Panhandle, continues to kill breeding females and replacement fawns in 12 of its 16 units. In seven any-weapon mule deer units, the general either-sex season lasts from Oct.10-Nov.3, following a 32-day either-sex archery season.

In four additional units, the either-sex any-weapon mule deer season lasts from Sept. 15-Nov. 18. Although the percentage of 4-points in the buck harvest in both regions is more than double the 30% minimum goal, there is no biological justification for any antlerless mule deer harvest in the Clearwater.

The Unit 11A general archery season allows the harvest of either sex of either MD or WT, while the any-weapon general season harvest is limited to WT only. Yet the 600-permit 11AX special antlerless hunt allows archers to kill an **extra** whitetail or **mule deer** from Aug 30-Sep 30 and allows any-weapon rifle hunters to kill an **extra** WT or **mule deer** from Oct 10-Nov 30!

In 2005 the Clearwater Region issued three times as many Unit 11A extra antlerless permits as it had in 2000 but hunters killed **five times** as many antlerless **mule deer** as they had in 2000. Originally implemented as a 100-permit extra antlerless "depredation" deer hunt only for whitetails in 1998, there was also a limited controlled hunt (CH) with 50 permits for mule deer bucks-only, and no general season except for archers.

In 2005, Unit 11A hunters killed three times as many mule deer does and fawns as a "**second**" deer than the number of mule deer bucks killed. The current total of only 65 antlered mule deer permits, plus 600 **extra** antlerless mule deer or WT permits (extending through the rut) is apparently an effort to maintain another "trophy" mule deer unit in the Clearwater for a handful of hunters while preventing recovery of the mule deer population.

Even where mule deer are far more scarce than whitetails, most hunters will shoot an antlerless mule deer in preference to an antlerless whitetail. If excessive numbers of white-tailed deer are still causing crop depredation on private farms in Unit 11A, the proper solution is to increase the number of extra whitetail permits – not allow extra antlerless mule deer harvest.

### 1995 Counts Showed Radical Decline

Of the 12 Clearwater mule deer units counted in 1995, Units 11, 13 and 18 had the highest numbers but still fell far short of the pre-1993 counts. Mule deer hunting in those units, and adjoining Unit 14, remains CH for bucks-only, with a total of only 678 permits in all four units, including 69 that are allocated to outfitters.

The 1995 deer count for wilderness units 16A and 17 totaled only 200 whitetails and 686 mule deer. That represented about one-half deer per square mile where IDFG reported eight deer per square mile three years earlier, yet the 65-day either-sex any-weapon general season for both species continues.

### Poor Management Impacts Other Regions

Hunters in the Clearwater harvested ~1,249 mule deer, including does and fawns, and ~8,182 whitetails in 2005 (13% MD). Because the 24% of Idaho north of the Salmon River provided only 7% of the total mule deer harvest in 2005, Clearwater biologists argue that their antlerless mule deer seasons have little, if any, impact on mule deer populations in the rest of the state.

They appear to have forgotten the reason for the Clearwater Deer Tag and the subsequent White-tailed Deer Tag. These were implemented to prevent hunters from

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### SE Mule Deer...continued from page 3

southern Idaho, where mule deer had declined, from taking advantage of the late deer hunting seasons in the Clearwater after they fail to fill their tags down south.

But these deer tags were not the first schemes to protect local residents from being invaded by crowds of unsuccessful hunters from other parts of the state where big game had been exploited. The over-harvest of both deer and elk outside of the Panhandle Region during the 1960s and early 1970s resulted in bucks-only and bulls-only seasons in the rest of the state by 1976.

#### The Panhandle Elk Tag

The Panhandle continued harvesting either-sex in a short general season followed by a longer buck or bull season. In 1977, in order to keep thousands of unsuccessful elk hunters from taking advantage of Panhandle either-sex seasons, the Region adopted the Panhandle Elk Tag with a limit of 12,000 sold to residents and 1,200 sold to non-residents.

That was 30 years ago and today if you want to hunt elk in any unit in the Panhandle you still have to buy a Panhandle elk tag (except now it's called a Panhandle "Zone" Elk Tag).

#### The Mountain Elk Tag

In the 1991 Big Game Regulations booklet, IDFG advised that bull elk were being over-harvested in the back country (outfitter) units. Its solution was to create a so-called "Mountain" Elk Tag in those 14 units, which would prevent hunters from hunting elk in an outfitter unit in addition to any other unit(s) in the state.

In one paragraph the regulations admitted that reducing season lengths with no hunting in the rut would prevent over-harvesting the bull elk. Yet in another they falsely claimed that "too many hunters" caused the over-harvest of mature bulls in the back country units.

The Mountain Elk Tag reduced the number of non-outfitted hunters that outfitted hunters might encounter on their hunt, but did not halt the excessive bull harvest in the back country units. Yet, along with the Panhandle Elk Tag, and the Regular Elk Tag, it remained in effect until the A-B Zone Elk Tags were adopted in 1998.

#### "Listen To Sportsmen Landowners"

In 2000, the Unit 73 sportsmen who had tried unsuccessfully for several years to convince IDFG of the need to halt the excessive mule deer harvest, decided to take matters into their own hands. They formed a coalition of landowners/hunters called the "West Side Sportsmen's Association, which initially controlled 131 square miles of private land between Malad and Preston in Unit 73.

This was ideal mule deer and pheasant hunting land and the group closed it to hunting until IDFG began to manage properly. An April 24, 2000 editorial in the *Idaho State Journal* urged IDFG to "listen to these comments from people who live among our region's wildlife the department is charged with managing."

"These people aren't lobbying for more hunting or loosened restrictions. They truly want to protect the deer herds so southeast Idaho sportsmen will have game to hunt for years to come," the editorial concluded.

#### Landowners Say F&G Statistics False

But in a February 23, 2001 *Idaho State Journal* interview, SE Region Wildlife Manager Carl Anderson said, "We have an increasing deer population. In what flying around we have done this year in Unit 73, we've seen about 50 percent more deer and we've got a real good buck-to-doe ratio."

Anderson claimed the buck-to-doe ratio was "about 35 (30.5\*) bucks per 100 does in Unit 73 and an average of 20-25 (15.3\*) bucks per 100 does in other units in the region." But in a March 30, 2001 letter to the *Journal*, West Side Sportsmen's Association member Kent Howell charged IDFG had "mislead (*Journal*) readers by quoting fictitious, fraudulent and misleading numbers to cover up their poor management practices." (\*recorded average buck-doe ratios for Unit 73 and for the other Units)

He said a member of their Association flew with IDFG and, when they kept seeing small bunches of does with no bucks, they failed to record 97 does and fawns they had counted. Then "they came across 12 bucks, which they counted (and recorded) and then put their book away until the end of the flight," Howell wrote.

In a separate *Journal* letter, Association member Kenton Fredrickson charged that good faith efforts to work with IDFG and the Commission always resulted in broken promises, facts being ignored or altered, and the group's efforts being belittled. He pointed out that the 96,805 acres of private land Regional Supervisor Dexter Pitman referred to as their "little back yard" was a large back yard and they would not stand for IDFG continuing to destroy the deer herd just for its pocketbook.

#### F&G Says "You Can't Stockpile Deer"

The population data on the F&G website at [http://fishandgame.idaho.gov/cms/hunt/MDI/population\\_data.cfm](http://fishandgame.idaho.gov/cms/hunt/MDI/population_data.cfm) (and the earlier count totals in the original Mule Deer Plan) reveal that SE Region officials have met minimum antlerless harvest thresholds only **once** since the 1992-93 winter. That was in 2001 when excessive buck and antlerless seasons wiped out the gains that had been made over nine years.

Their failure to mitigate starvation losses by either providing supplement blocks or feeding timely and properly during the following severe winter further reflects their willingness to ignore Idaho Wildlife Policy. Selling excessive hunting opportunity while "letting nature take its course" has been substituted for game management to a large degree in every region except the Panhandle.

Biologists have created clichés to excuse excessive harvests resulting from selling extra hunting opportunity when game is most vulnerable. "You can't stockpile deer" is used to justify killing too many Idaho mule deer.

They apparently fail to realize that in order to “stockpile” anything one must first create a surplus and they admit Idaho’s mule deer population has remained at **~50% of carrying capacity for the past 14 years.** Although IDFG biologists refer to the “huge” mule deer populations of the 1950s and early 60s, they are reluctant to discuss the restored populations that existed during the 1980s until the record low numbers began in 1993.

Pretending the habitat that supported ~600,000 deer for most of the last century would suddenly support only 300,000 or fewer deer defies logic. But the worst part of using that excuse is the biologists have not offered a single biological fact to support it.

#### **F&G Refuses Carrying Capacity Data**

Range conservationists are trained to measure forage and provide reliable estimates of the number of deer and elk AUMs (animal unit months) that a given range will support in a normal year. Shortly before Jerry Conley was replaced by Steve Mealey as IDFG Director, FS officials agreed to provide our SW Region feeding advisory committee with that information for the deer and elk herds on the South Fork of the Payette River.

That information is especially valuable to wildlife managers in areas like the South Fork where emergency feeding of deer and elk during extreme winters has occurred historically. The F&G Commission’s Big Game Feeding Policy, revised on April 30, 1996, provides that deer, elk, antelope and moose populations should be maintained under normal natural conditions and should not be reduced to accommodate extreme weather conditions.

Establishing the number of deer that the available forage will support during normal years provides a realistic antlerless harvest threshold for our wildlife managers. The Feeding Committee meeting in Emmett when the FS was scheduled to provide that information was attended by citizens and elected officials from the affected area.

To everyone’s surprise, the FS biologist in charge of the presentation said he was not prepared to present the information and said an IDFG official would have to explain why. Then SW Region Habitat Biologist Neil Johnson simply said, **“The Director does not want any numbers used in game management.”**

During Conley’s 16-year reign as Director, he opposed accurate reporting of game population and harvest numbers and even joked in his column about the highly exaggerated harvest survey estimates “providing bigger and better story-telling possibilities.” The bonus controlled hunts that did not exist when Conley was hired to replace retiring Director Joe Greenley became the major source of revenue for Conley to fund his non-hunter/fisherman program agenda.

#### **Biologists Continue Conley’s Agends**

In order to continue selling expanded hunting opportunity that could not be justified biologically, it was necessary to continue to conceal the normal carrying

capacity of Idaho’s mule deer ranges from the general public. When the combination of over-harvesting deer and failure to mitigate 2001-02 winter losses destroyed half of the SE Idaho mule deer, Wildlife Manager Carl Anderson issued a news release blaming the losses on “habitat, habitat and habitat.”

When private citizens pointed out that winter produced the second highest recorded snowfall in 50 years, Wildlife Bureau Chief Jim Unsworth told the Commission, “You can’t measure mule deer forage.” He claimed that fawns with high weights indicate a deer range in excellent condition and that fawns with lower body weights indicate a range in poor condition.

The implication that low fawn weights always indicate poor habitat is erroneous. Low fawn weights often result from killing too many mature bucks which causes extended/delayed fawning periods, from excessive hunter-caused stress and/or fat loss during the rut or later, and from failure to mitigate stress from severe winters, drought or excessive predator-to-prey ratios.

#### **2006 Seasons Ignored Criteria**

When the Mule Deer Plan was being developed, Team Leader Jim Unsworth developed a matrix to further define how much, if any, antlerless season might be allowed based on 1) Population Level; 2) Animal Condition; and 3) Winter Severity. That “Decision Model” is included on the first page of the Mule deer Plan and is of special significance in examining the 2006 seasons.

According to that Plan, none of the criteria were met to allow either the either-sex general archery season in 12 of 13 SE Region units or the 150 either-sex youth permits in limited controlled hunt 1067. Yet Gibbs joined the rest of the Commission in unanimously approving these and antlerless seasons in other regions that failed to meet the criteria.

The antlerless thresholds in most of the units that even have them were established during record low populations in the mid-1990s. In many cases they represent only a fraction of the historical carrying capacity of the units yet biologists, with Commission approval, continue to ignore even those extremely low minimums.

#### **Each Female Killed Represents Tenfold Loss**

When Commissioners and sportsmen groups repeat the biologists’ false claim that this group or that group “won’t kill enough female mule deer to impact the population,” they support the ongoing destruction of our mule deer. Every female that is killed now when populations are depleted represents at least a tenfold loss in harvest opportunity during the next decade.

Nearly a decade ago, Idaho F&G Commissioners allowed Virgil Moore to talk them into quietly replacing Idaho’s Wildlife Policy (“Preserve, Protect and Perpetuate”) with providing, advertising and selling more **hunting opportunity** than other states offer. Read “The Longest Hunting Seasons in the Lower 48” on Page 6.

# “The Longest Hunting Seasons in the Lower 48”

(In a series of media ads promoting preservation of large roadless tracts of land in Idaho, Idaho Wildlife Federation Spokesman and former IDFG Information and Education Specialist Jack Trueblood has been bragging that Idaho hunters enjoy the longest hunting seasons in the “lower 48”.

Trueblood neglects to mention that a 50% decline in the overall number of game animals and birds harvested has occurred since IDFG once again started selling extra hunting opportunity. This article includes letters from SE Idaho deer hunters expressing their concerns, and includes the F&G Commission’s recorded decision to create and sell extra hunting opportunity when game is scarce.

This first letter was published in the Idaho State Journal Outdoors Blog on April 7, 2007. The letter is included here, with the author’s permission, along with the three email comments that were published within the next few days.-ED)

## **F&G taking advantage of hunters**

By Michael Vroman

There was a time in old Idaho when a hunter, if he or she wanted a deer - or let’s say two, they could do it. And that went on for years.

Now in the new days, when the Idaho Department of Fish and Game is so good at game management, you are lucky to get a deer in two or three years in a general hunt. Let’s look at today’s average figures published by Idaho Fish and Game vs. my experience from the old days.

I know from 1966 to 1986 you could get your deer and it wasn’t anything unusual to shoot a four-point if you wanted one. I moved away from Idaho for about 11 years, and came back eight years ago.

It has been a very disturbing and hard eight years in terms of hunting to see how far Idaho Fish and Game has let the deer herds go downhill. Fish and Game sells deer tags like nothing is wrong.

When I first came back I was looking for just a nice four-point in the places where I had always seen or killed one years before. But for two or three years after I came back, no deer for me.

At first I thought I was being too picky. Then I was reading an article in December 2004’s Outdoor Life called “Bear Facts.” A man responded to Outdoor Life’s October’s snap shot feature, where he had read that they were going to have a bear hunt in New Jersey.

New Jersey’s Department of Fish and Game approved a hunting season for bear which sounded OK to me, but to make a long story short, he wrote that they were selling 10,000 permits when the state had somewhere around 3,000 bears in the whole state. So they justified selling 10,000 permits because the harvest was expected to be 3 to 5 percent out of the entire herd of 3,000 bears.

This made me think that’s what Idaho Fish and Game is doing. They know that for a general hunting season, 17 to 25 percent of all hunters in a good year are all who will get a deer of any size. You can hunt as hard as you like, but the 17 to 25 percent are all who are going to bring home a deer out of Units 74, 75, 76, 77 and 78, and it could be the whole state of Idaho, as far as that goes.

That sounds like New Jersey’s system. So with that reasoning Idaho Fish and Game says, “Let’s sell 10,000 permits, even though so few hunters will get their deer.”

That is just wrong. Look at all the hunters Fish and Game is taking advantage of just because they love to hunt. And that is what Idaho Fish and Game is doing to its hunters year after year, knowing that it has small herds of deer and that only 17 to 25 percent of the deer in the small herds will be harvested.

F&G’s mindset is: “Let’s sell tags like we have big herds of deer and look at all the money we will get, and we’ll have all those hopeful hunters in the field.” Fish and Game also knows the percentage of hunters that will screw up and make mistakes or unknowingly break the rules, and they will write up tickets so Fish and Game makes even more money.

Look at Unit 77 for the last six years. Around 168 deer are taken a year. Somewhere around 13 bucks are four points or bigger, and out of that 13, four are five points or better. In a good year Fish and Game will sell around 930 tags, so that means that in a good year they send 765 hunters home without a deer, and that is just one unit.

It makes me and other hunters sick looking at the harvest reports for the last six years. It’s time for Fish and Game to quit selling tags for deer they don’t have, and start managing the deer herds right.

All it’s going to take is one bad year for the fawn herd and none of us will be hunting for three to six years. Some older hunters don’t have that much time left when that happens.

So Idaho Fish and Game, start managing the small herds and make them into big herds and do it right. You have the schooling and knowledge to do it. And quit selling deer tags for deer that we don’t have.

Today, getting a good, four-point buck, not a Boone and Crockett (the ultimate trophy) is like playing the lotto. It is too much of a long shot.

Come to think of it, we should take all that money we spend for licenses, tag, permits, lodging, food, bullets and gas, and play the lotto instead. And if you are lucky and win the lotto, take the money and go to another state, to a private ranch where they know how to manage deer herds.

**Michael Vroman** of Preston is a hunter who loves to hunt large herds of deer that actually exist.

**Comment Posted by Jeff Talbot on April 8, 2007**

I totally agree with this. Idaho Fish and Game is just ripping us off.

I have been hunting since 1996 and I have only shot three deer in my lifetime. Two of those deer were on my friend's grandpa's land so there weren't any other hunters.

Their (F&G's) management is so poor it is going to make people hate hunting because the price of gas, food, tags, etc. If you have noticed, the price for tags and licenses keep going up every year and for what? Because the Fish and Game is money hungry. They don't care if we get our game or not.

Other hunters I have talked to are ready to give hunting up (something that we love so much). It is just getting too expensive for the amount of game out there. Fish and Game need to pull their heads out of their a\*! and do something about it or they will lose all the money they are getting.

Hopefully there will be a hunting season that's worth going when my son gets big enough to go because right now it sucks for all big game.

**Comment Posted by Robert Bartlett on April 8, 2007**

The problem with the Fish & Game is that their self appointed mission is no longer managing Idaho's game for the benefit of the animals. Their self appointed mission is to "maximize hunting opportunity" . . . or in other words, to get the highest number of people in the field in order to generate the highest possible revenue collections through license and tag sales - even if the animal populations aren't there to support it.

We've been getting lip service for years from the F&G in SE Idaho about the deer situation. But the only thing that is ever done is starting a new study of some sort. In the meantime, they keep "maximizing hunting opportunity" by selling licenses and tags to hunt animals that don't exist.

If one of the local caged shooting businesses were to do this, they would be charged with fraud. I guess the F&G, as a government agency, isn't subject to the laws that others must follow.

And you can bet that they won't anytime soon make any hard choices to help out the deer populations that might jeopardize "maximizing hunting opportunity" (their revenue stream). Perhaps they should change their name to Bait & Wait.

By the way, what does it cost now to hunt deer in Montana or Wyoming?

**Comment Posted by Warner Weber on April 13, 2007**

I lived in Idaho and moved to Arizona where this practice has gone on for a long time. Sooner or later the practice has to catch up. It is run as revenue producing

business to fund and perpetuate the salaries of the employees running the organization.

For example in Arizona a few years ago Fish & Game finally reduced deer tags in one area (still not enough to make a difference). When they reduced the deer tags they increased elk tags.

Those tags were in an area where elk spend their winters. During the season there was over a 90% chance elk would not be there yet hunters still applied for the tags.

As Idaho's population grows and game diminishes, there will soon be more applicants for tags than tags. Then the abuse will really start.

One year I was riding as a guide in the forest every day. I could see the deer that were there. I was amazed when I saw unbred does. Yet the AZ fish & Game still issue a large amount of buck tags.

The abuse will grow. Hunters as a group are all too eager to take the bait for the chance of taking an animal. It keeps us from trying to make a real difference.

Indiana in the face of no deer halted deer hunting in the state for 25 years. They resumed hunting when the deer herd became very robust. Today, it would be better to spend the money to travel and hunt in Indiana where the deer herds are very healthy.

I am not saying to end statewide hunting, but to close the season in a few areas and concentrate on predators would be a start.

**Does IDFG Manage Game or Sell Hunting Opportunity?**

In the late 1800s, with no season closures or bag limits, a relative handful of hunters decimated North American game populations outside of the most remote areas. Rebuilding those populations over the next 50 years required establishing general hunting seasons during short periods in mid-fall when game was less vulnerable.

Hunter distribution was easily maintained by using simultaneous opening dates over all or most of every state. Only a handful of limited controlled hunts were used in Idaho **solely** to prevent a massive opening day slaughter of protected animals in game preserves or sanctuaries that had not been hunted before.

The commercialization of hunting by arms and equipment manufacturers when World War II ended included massive ad campaigns to open western U.S. and Canadian lands to "trophy" big game hunting. These manufacturers also funded the Wildlife Management Institute (WMI), which conducted "in-depth reviews" of 70 state, federal and provincial game management agencies and the abundant game they had restored.

In Idaho WMI recommended increasing the number of out-of-state hunters and providing much longer seasons to increase big game harvests. The extra license income this produced was the bait used to sell the program.

*continued on page 8*

## The Longest Seasons...continued from page 7

### Lengthening Seasons Destroyed Record Game Herds

Idaho game wardens with many years of field experience warned that deer and elk herds could not stand the increased harvest but biologists ignored them, increasing most deer and elk season lengths by 50%-100% and opening areas to general either-sex hunting that had been closed for years. They designed a special \$25 nonresident deer/bear tag to draw more out-of-state hunters, and increased the deer bag limit to five by 1962.

From 1951 when biologists began the reduction in deer and elk numbers until 1969 when residents demanded an end to antlerless deer and elk harvest, the total number of resident hunting licenses sold remained stable. But during that same period the number of out-of-state big game hunters increased by over **1000 percent**.

From 1965-1969 IDFG big game check stations recorded **fewer than half as many deer** killed by hunters as they had from 1945-1949 (from IDFG annual and biennial reports that show a comparable number of check station days). Instead of reducing the season lengths and bag limits to halt the mule deer decline, IDFG biologists began publishing highly exaggerated harvest estimates to hide the deer decline (see 1968-1971 Legislative IDFG Performance Audit by James Defenbach).

### Proof That F&G Ignored Wildlife Policy

In a 1968 report by IDFG Director Dick Woodworth titled, "Progress in Game Management by Expansion of Hunting Opportunity," he listed the following examples of how the Department had "improved" game management:

- 1) Expanding Information and Education work at all levels in order to gain public acceptance of this accelerated progressive program of improving the hunting opportunity.
- 2) Opening three-fourths of the state to longer elk seasons than previously existed
- 3) Opening almost all of the state to longer deer seasons than previously existed.
- 4) Giving more deer hunting by adding two-deer limits.
- 5) Increasing the harvest of elk, deer, bighorn sheep and mountain goat.
- 6) Purchasing and increasing public access for hunters.
- 7) Increasing the chukar partridge season from one and one-half days to 105 days.
- 8) Legalizing the killing of hen pheasants.
- 9) Introducing exotics such as turkeys and Japanese green pheasants so as to provide more different species to hunt.

In a taped interview with The Outdoorsman staff, Woodworth admitted that all Idaho big game species were declining. When asked why he didn't close the general

bighorn sheep season as Idaho sheep biologist Jim Morgan recommended, Woodworth said since sheep numbers were declining anyway, they (IDFG) had just as well allow hunters to hunt and kill them.

We reminded him and Assistant Director Bob Salter that Idaho Code Section 36-104 requires the F&G Commission to shorten or close seasons when populations are declining. Salter responded by insisting their job was to provide hunting opportunity – not animals to hunt!

Then, as now, IDFG ignored its legislative mandate to manage wild game and fish to provide continued supplies for hunting, fishing and trapping. It took its marching orders from a Washington, D.C.-based group with an agenda that ignored Idaho law.

### Seasons Shortened Dramatically in 1972

When the Legislature was provided with the foregoing information, Woodworth was forced to resign in April 1991. His replacement, Joe Greenley, was instructed by the Legislature to shorten deer and elk seasons, halt antlerless harvest outside of the Panhandle, and allow a maximum of 9,500 non-resident deer or elk hunters.

Unlike now, when big game seasons are set the first week in March to accommodate outfitters and their nonresident clients, the 1972 seasons were set using biological facts – including winter/spring losses based on green-up counts. In July 1972, Greenley announced what F&G described as "sweeping hunting regulation changes."

The late November and early December portions of 85-day either-sex back country deer seasons and 45-60 day rural unit deer seasons were eliminated, with some units, including Unit 32, closed to all deer hunting. Antlerless deer harvest was either eliminated or allowed for only five days in the few units where it could be justified.

### No Bonus Controlled Deer Hunts in Idaho

When Greenley retired and Jerry Conley was hired in 1980, many early general archery seasons had been added but there were no "bonus"\* limited controlled deer or elk hunts in Idaho. In fact the **only** limited controlled deer hunts in Idaho were in former game preserves or sanctuaries\*\*, including the historical South Bennett Mountain Game Preserve hunt in Unit 44, and there were a dozen historical limited elk hunts in similar locations.

\* Hunts in units which also have a general season.

\*\* Now called WMAs.

### Selling Premium Bonus Hunts

Deer and elk populations were healthy and increasing but another Washington, D.C.-based group (the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, which elected Conley as its president) was now calling the shots. Using the same old excuse of expanding hunting opportunity, Conley and his biologists began to sell **bonus** limited controlled hunts where there was already a general season, rather than simply extend the general season.

Selling the exclusive right to hunt deer or elk when they were most vulnerable to a few hunters increased their

odds of killing an older male without relying on hunting skill or chance. At the same time IDFG began to sell bonus antlerless controlled elk hunts to rifle hunters where there were already general either-sex archery seasons.

When a huntable population of deer or elk exists in a unit or group of units, adding a limited controlled hunt, especially during the rut, has the same effect as extending the season. It increases both the kill and unnecessary stress to other animals and results in fewer animals surviving the winter and reduced recruitment the following year.

As pointed out on page 1 of this issue, instead of eliminating the bonus hunts following the severe 1992-93 winter losses, the Commission actually increased the number of Magic Valley Region bonus antlerless rifle hunts by 2,000 for the 2003 hunting season. When a large group of hunters told the Commission they should have closed the deer season instead, SW Region Commissioner Dick Meiers angrily rebuked them for not thanking the Commission for providing the extra "hunting opportunity." **Commission Says Increase, Sell "Hunting Opportunity"**

When a majority of new Commissioners replaced Conley with Steve Mealey in 1997, the IDFG hunting opportunity advocates quickly undermined his efforts to restore biological management. Former Information Chief Virgil Moore conducted a Commission "workshop" to tell the new Commissioners what their position entailed.

He told them that managing F&G was like running any other business where you have a product to sell to "remain in the black." Then he said that since they didn't own the game and already had longer hunting seasons than most other states, their responsibility was to **increase hunting opportunity even more**, advertise it to out-of-state hunters, and sell it to compete with other states for nonresident license dollars.

Commissioner Carlson reinforced More's pitch and suggested the Department use license dollars to advertise expanded hunting opportunity to out-of-state hunters in Washington and other states. Despite Idaho's game declines resulting from excessive hunting opportunity, the Commission voted unanimously to further increase hunting opportunity and to use license dollars to advertise and help sell it to non-residents.

#### **Gibbs "Must Sell All Nonresident Tags"**

The Department's number one priority of selling excessive hunting opportunity is reaffirmed in virtually every decision it makes. For example, during the October 2003 Commission meeting, biologists reported that deer numbers in the SE Region and southern half of the Magic Valley Region were still depressed from the 2001-02 winter losses.

Then they complained that IDFG had sold fewer than half of the 10,900 non-resident deer tag quota by opening day despite the Commission's approval of their plan to sell leftover NR tags to residents. Ignoring the obvious reason fewer hunters bought deer tags, they

blamed it on the failure of the marketing program approved by the Commission.

Commissioner Gibbs said, "In order to have this department how we want it to be, we've got to sell all those non-resident tags." He pointed out that the unsold non-resident deer tags and licenses could have netted the department an additional \$2.2 million in 2003.

Wildlife Bureau Chief Jim Unsworth said, "The overall quality of big game hunting in Idaho is near the long-term average and elk hunter success is higher than in Oregon, Washington and Montana. The department doesn't publicize those facts out of fear of making Idahoans angry."

#### **Burns Suggests Improving Game Herds**

"We're lousy at marketing," Unsworth continued. "What we need to get around is being apologetic for saying things are good." But Commissioner John Burns warned the Commission that the focus needs to be on improving the game herds rather than prove that all you want to do is sell tags by launching another marketing program.

Yet the Commission instructed IDFG staff to investigate how many non-resident tags other states are selling and what approach they are taking to market them and report back to the Commission. Then SW Region Wildlife Manager Jon Rachael blamed the fall 2002 harvest decline on hot, dry hunting conditions.

He said, "All our counts suggest we've got tons of critters - I have no reason to believe we won't have a great crop of deer and elk out there." As usual, Rachael's optimistic reports failed to predict the continuing decline in harvests that occurred in 2003.

With the exception of Burns' one-sentence comment, no one even suggested the obvious - that the decline in tag sales resulted from the radical decline in deer populations and harvests. Instead they blamed it on the national economy, adverse publicity over the reintroduction of wolves and superior marketing efforts by other states.

#### **Selling Bonus Hunts Create Record Season Lengths**

When Greenley retired, either-sex deer and elk seasons in the back country outfitter units were **68** days. Seasons in the rest of the state were a maximum of **26** days, with some units closed and antlerless hunting either severely limited or not allowed in most

In 2006 (and 2007) back country seasons are 65 days or shorter, with some antler-point and antlerless restrictions. But biologists have added **93** controlled deer hunts and **147** controlled elk hunts outside of the Panhandle, which extended "hunting opportunity" from midsummer through December 31 - up to **153** days.

In 2006 these special hunting opportunity permits were sold to **15,167** deer hunters and **20,587** elk hunters. The impact on deer and elk populations as well as on other hunters from selling the extra hunting opportunity to those 35,000 hunters is detailed in the following articles.

# The Mule Deer Initiative and Mule Deer Survey

*By George Dovel*

On Nov. 9, 2006 we received a copy of an email sent to IDFG Big Game Manager Brad Compton by former president of the Idaho Chapter of Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife, Kelton Larsen. The email was critical of Compton's refusal to consider cutting nonresident deer tag quotas "because they represent only a small portion of the total hunters."\*(see NOTE 1 on Page 11)

Larsen was also critical of setting nonresident quotas in the fall rather than in the spring, and asked Compton if adding another 1,200 antlerless tags would improve the poor buck-to-doe ratio when population numbers are well below carrying capacity. He said that a comment heard more and more from sportsmen is that IDFG only manages for money and not the health of the mule deer herd.

He said that cutting 800 nonresident tags would change the harvest\* but suggested it was not done because it would reduce license revenue. He asked Compton if IDFG is protecting Idaho wildlife or is another runaway government agency.

We also received a copy of SW Region F&G Commissioner Randy Budge's response to Larsen (which follows) along with several months of email exchanges between sportsmen and Commissioner Budge. With permission from the letter writers, we have selected a small representative sample of the letters for publication here.

Nov. 9, 2006

Kelton:

Brad Compton did respond to questions I had regarding the recommended no change in the non-resident deer tags. As I recall he did believe that to have little impact on overall herds because of he relatively small numbers as compared with overall hunter numbers\*. I don't recall any comment suggesting deficiencies in the herd should not be addressed.

I can assure you it is very important to the Commission that the Mule Deer Initiative be successful in restoring deer numbers, improving hunter satisfaction\*\* (see NOTE 2 on Page 11) and improving deer habitat, the stated goals. In fact a review of the initiative will be on the agenda for the January Commission meeting. Comments from sportsmen would be welcome and of interest at the public portion of that meeting. Thanks for your interest and support in improving deer populations and health.

Randy Budge

Jan. 4, 2007

Randy,

My question to you, are we really going to make any changes for Mule deer this year? Sportsmen continually tell me that they are discouraged in the process because nothing ever gets done and believe they are

wasting their time. You do have to understand that we have made good positive suggestions for the last five years and the Department basically makes little or no changes.

Most sportsmen feel that the Department does not have a good batting average anyway. So when Brad Compton puts on a mule deer clinic most sportsmen do not give it a lot of credibility. Also, when sportsmen send you positive suggestions and the department recommends no changes are you going to stand up and tell them that we have to have changes?

The mule deer herd in our region is not in good shape, especially with a 4-7 to 100 buck to doe ratio with a 32% fawn survival. So where do you stand?

Kelton

Jan. 4, 2007

Kelton

I have received considerable input on the MDI from many sportsmen and have been carefully reviewing and evaluating information obtained from the Department and the 3 regions participating in the MDI. Sportsmen have also been providing comments to the regions at open houses and directly to the Department. All of this will be presented to the Commission at the Boise meetings next week. Additionally, we expect to receive further sportsmen's input at the evening public hearing.

As I have indicated to you previously, I encourage SFW and all interested sportsmen to provide recommendations. My commitment is to carefully review and evaluate everything presented then use my best judgement as to what is in the best interests of all sportsmen and to achieve the goals of the MDI. It would be premature and inappropriate to indicate what changes may be supported or approved at this point. While many complaints are received, in addition to yours, few suggestions of change have been received. I am hopeful you and SFW will come forward with specific change recommendations so they can be considered.

No one disagrees that, in most areas including throughout the west, mule deer are declining. Further, the target objectives of the MDI have not yet been met. As this is only the first or second year since implementation began it is not realistic to expect immediate results. We have requested this comprehensive review to determine what progress is made, to evaluate existing programs and determine if changes are warranted.

Thanks again for your input,

Randy Budge

Jan. 8, 2007

Commissioner Budge,

I have sat back and watched you and Kelton banter back and forth on what should be done or what is not being done for the mule deer. You say that you want recommendations for change. This really sets my hair on end.

The Department's first MDI Biologist recommended that sportsmen be allowed to harvest a deer every other year. A hunter could hunt every year but if he harvested a deer this year he could not hunt deer the following year. This proposition was supported by SFW along with other groups but it was shot down by Brad Compton.

The Department's biologist recommended, as a way to increase buck to doe ratios, that we implement a 4-point restriction for 2 or 3 years. The biologist said that point restrictions were not good biology for the long haul but that it would be a quick way to increase the buck to doe ratio, while still allowing hunter opportunity. SFW again supported this proposal from the Department's own. However this idea did not make it past Brad Compton.

SFW has asked that the elk and deer hunts not overlap in units 75, 77, & 78. By the seasons overlapping, these units continue to receive more pressure than they would if the hunts did not overlap. With the high cost of fuel and limited hunting time, I cannot blame sportsmen for wanting to be able to hunt deer and elk at the same time. But is this the best for the resource, or are we managing hunters instead of the game?

During the last round of Commission meetings we asked you to propose the Southeast non-resident tags be cut by 2/3. Compton shot it down, saying that it would not have an impact. While 300 bucks probably would not have an impact on the herd statewide, 300 more bucks in the few units that make up the Southeast tag area could not help but have an impact. Especially when compounded over 2 to 3 years.

This is not the 1st or 2nd year of the MDI. We do have a new MDI Biologist. One that will march in step with the Department. When you have a chance just watch him. Toby will not answer a question concerning biology, or proposals without looking to Mark Gamblin.

You indicate that most areas throughout the west are declining. Yet I challenge you to find a western state where deer herds are in the condition that we are in Idaho. And 32% fawn survival last winter does not look good for our herds to improve anytime soon.

Some of the worst survival rates last winter were right here in the southeast. Yet last winter was much warmer than normal. We had rain in Cache Valley in January. I have lived here 50 years and can count on one hand the times that has happened. Yet the Department blamed low fawn survival on a colder wetter winter than normal. (See the Departments MDI newsletter).

What has happened with the MDI in the last year is that seasons have been moved to start and end at a later date plus the seasons have gotten longer. The seasons were moved to early October when the leaves were still on the trees to give the bucks a better chance of surviving the opening day barrage. By closing the seasons early before snows were probable, the bucks had a better chance of survival.\*\* (see NOTE 2)

At least this is what the Department told us years ago when the season opening was moved from the 3rd Saturday in October to the 5th of October. The season used to close the second Sunday in November, but was changed to close October 20. Now we have Oct 10 through

Oct 31. Buck-to-doe ratios continue to decline in the Southeast portion of the State, with the exception of unit 73 which has a 4 point restriction, and has had for quite a few years. Fawn survival is at its lowest point in recent history. One bright point was eliminating the late muzzleloader hunt, during the rut.

If you are truly interested in having a comprehensive review of what needs to be done. Take your biologists from each region and sit them in a room and implement what they tell you. Exclude their supervisors, and ignore what Brad Compton tells you will not work. The Department hired, and the sportsmen pay for, the wages of these biologists. Let's give them a chance to run things the way science and common sense says it should be. I have faith in what they have proposed in the past.

When talking directly to them in the past, I have been told by them that they make recommendations on a local level, but that they are changed in Boise more often than not. If we are going to do what Brad Compton says, then why are we paying everyone else? Your response reflects what the Department has told you. It shows how inexperienced you are in what has taken place in the past.

I would hope, that while performing your responsibility of overseeing the actions of the Department, you ask the hard questions of Brad Compton. Become familiar with the biologists at the regional level. Don't let the Department dictate what the sportsmen get for our hard-earned dollars. Dictate to them what they are going to do with those dollars. It will be interesting to see what comes out of Commission meetings this week. Are we going to see change or the same old thing?

Doyle Sears

**\*NOTE 1:** What Big Game Manager Compton reportedly told Commissioner Budge was, "We regulate through the season framework rather than hunter numbers. We are not going to change the total harvest by changing the number of non-residents because they make up such a small portion of hunters in the region." That statement was accurate.

Biologists know that when deer hunter success is relatively low, reducing the number of hunters by even one-third does not reduce the number of deer harvested. Fewer hunters generally harvest about the same total number of deer but the average hunter success rate goes up proportionally as fewer hunters are allowed to hunt.

If the success rate for nonresidents, and residents who buy NR tags to hunt a second deer, averaged 25% in SE Idaho and F&G reduced the quota by 800 tags, that would provide about 200 more bucks for resident hunters to harvest in SE. In some instances non-residents who can afford to hunt longer or hire an outfitter or buy private access have a higher success rate than residents.

**\*\*NOTE 2:** Both the Mule Deer Initiative and the Mule Deer Hunter Survey have emphasized the goal of

*continued on page 12*

### Mule Deer Initiative...continued from page 11

*“Improving hunter satisfaction by providing a diversity of management programs and hunting opportunities consistent with expectations of the hunting public.”* In other words, ignore harvest regulation through season framework and continue to sell special interest groups extra hunting opportunity when the deer are most vulnerable.

In his Jan. 8, 2007 email to Commissioner Budge, Doyle Sears correctly pointed out that Brad Compton ignored the goal of restoring mule deer populations when he changed the 2005 deer seasons to a later period when mule deer are far more vulnerable to hunters. Experienced hunters know that after the third week in October mule deer bucks' necks begin swelling and the quantity and quality of cover and feed are normally declining.

Sixteen years ago in 1991, the general deer season opener was set back from Oct 14 to Oct 5 (nine days) to prevent any closing date from extending into the early rut. In units with the earlier closing date, hunter success dropped from 41% to 28% and hunter days per buck harvested increased from 14 to 22.

By the mid-1990s, general deer season lengths in the Salmon Region units again extended into the last week in October or later. In 2000, despite considerable opposition, Commissioner Burns changed 11 of the general seasons to Oct. 5-Oct.22, and all 12 ended during the third week in October. The buck harvest dropped an average of **24%** in all 12 units (about the same as it had with the similar season change in 1991).

In March 2005, when Compton proposed extending the closing date once again by the same nine days, concerned deer hunters in the Region pointed out it would cause increased harvests in declining mule deer numbers. But their new Commissioner, former Region Supervisor Gary Power, voted to support the expanded hunting opportunity into the early rut.

#### **The Numbers Don't Lie – Or Do They?**

When the hunters' predictions became reality, F&G issued a Boise news release by Salmon Region Wildlife Manager Tom Keegan claiming the **67%** buck harvest increase in 2005 resulted from “all the moons aligning.” In the Nov 27, 2006 release titled *“The Numbers Don't Lie – Or Do They?”* Keegan admitted that closing the season nine days earlier in 1991 and 2001 was immediately followed by significant harvest declines.

But then he claimed that weather was at least partly responsible for the increased harvest resulting from closing the season later. Of course weather was responsible for the increased harvest - it made mule deer far more vulnerable to hunters.

The seasons were closed earlier in 1991 and 2000 because generations of hunters had watched older mule deer bucks sneak into a brushy hillside and disappear in early October – yet become extremely vulnerable once the leaves disappear and the hormones get active.

They had experienced the excessive kill when the occasional late October snowstorm causes the animals to sense that winter has arrived and temporarily head for lower elevations. But conservation management is supposed to prevent those radical spikes between feast and famine – not encourage them.

#### **Did Changes Help Struggling Mule Deer?**

The IDFG March 28, 2005 New Release titled, *“Big game seasons reflect commitment to mule deer,”* offers a later uniform opening date statewide but does not explain how closing the seasons nine days later in 2005 will “help struggling mule deer herds.” It states, *“The Idaho Department of Fish and Game has made some changes to the big game regulations that are designed to help struggling mule deer herds in southeast Idaho. Many hunters have complained that earlier seasons have occurred when conditions were too hot and dry.”*

*“The Mule Deer Initiative is not only about making more mule deer, it's also about providing higher quality hunting experiences”* said big game manager Brad Compton *“later seasons should provide a better experience.”* (emphasis added).

Although the longer, later seasons allowed hunters to see and kill more mule deer in 2005, they also caused fewer deer to survive the 2005-06 winter, thereby causing hunters to see and harvest several thousand fewer mule deer in 2006 than they would have otherwise. The liberal harvest philosophy that is part of selling maximum hunting opportunity violates Idaho Wildlife Policy because it reduces rather than perpetuates populations and harvests.

#### **The Mule Deer Survey**

On Jan 30, 2007 Commissioner Budge forwarded information about the Mule Deer Survey to Kelton Larsen, including the internet link for obtaining a copy. The email advised that respondents' opinions will provide the foundation to develop a new Statewide Mule Deer Management Plan in 2008.

An exchange of emails indicated that no changes would be made for the 2007 hunting season and Mr. Larsen suggested that the survey was simply being used as an excuse not to address unacceptable fawn losses and very low buck-to-doe ratios. Commissioner Budge responded with the following email:

Mar. 3, 2007

Kelton,

The survey in progress is the first since 1987. We will evaluate that and then decide what decisions are appropriate to move forward in a positive and progressive manner. I would encourage you to do the same and then make whatever recommendations you feel are appropriate which will be considered, along with all the rest. As I have indicated to you on several occasions Kelton, (offering) extreme negativism and complaints without positive recommendations doesn't go very far.

Randy

March 4 & 7, 2007 (edited for length)

Randy,

I am sorry that you think that sportsmen in Southeast Idaho are giving negative complaints. Like I have told you so many times, sportsmen are fed up with what has been going on for a long time. Along with other sportsmen, I have been giving you positive recommendations that I guess are being ignored. My suggestion to you would be to meet with some sportsmen in person and ask them their concerns.

Sportsmen have been making positive suggestions for so long and are being ignored that they felt it appropriate to give you a petition signed by 1,000 sportsmen and suggest that turkey hunting will be shut down on private ground. Sorry but that seems to be the American way.

Maybe in reality it's the Idaho Fish and Game that is not being positive in the way they are handling this. By the way I have a copy of the last year's survey.\*\*\* (see NOTE 3 on Page 14) If you would like I will send you a copy. I would also like to set up a positive meeting with some outside biologists that have no ties of bias to Idaho.

I have been on the phone with biologists from other western states. There is a research center in Fort Collins, Colorado and I was trying to find out if there was a study on buck to doe ratios affecting fawn to doe ratios.

They said that in their studies they could not show that buck to doe ratios actually affect fawn to doe ratios. But they said that their research included a ratio of 15-20 bucks. They do not have any studies that would fit Idaho because Idaho's buck to doe ratios are so low.

He made a comment that it is pitiful that Idaho has such low numbers and at that level it could be affecting doe to fawn ratio's. Do you still think our biologists are right in saying that 5 to 100 will get the job done? Remember the objective set by them is 15 to 100 which is a very low number to begin with. Why don't they hit their own numbers? I did not set those numbers, they did. I am fine with a survey but you are still going to have to set a minimum objective for a healthy herd. Remember these are the same guys who got us into this mess in the first place. Why are we relying on them to get us out of this mess?

Kelton

March 7, 2007 (edited for length)

Randy,

Again you have exhibited how new and uninformed or under-informed you are on what the Fish and Game Department has done in the past. You said that the survey being conducted is the first one the Department has done since 1987\*\*\*. Who fed you that information? Have you taken the time to look at the current survey? The questions are such that you do not know what you have answered when you are done.

If you will not meet with the SFW, please consider meeting with the West Side Sportsmen group. You will be hard pressed to find landowners that are also sportsmen who are as passionate about the deer as this group. These are not new guys in town that want to change things. Like me, most of these fellows were born and raised here.

They are not asking for something that we know nothing about. We have all seen what the possibilities are. We want to get the deer herd back to what we have had before. I believe it can be done, but the Department has got to do something other than say it can't be done.

I asked (Regional Wildlife Manager) Carl Anderson if we were going to have 50% fewer bucks to hunt this coming fall than we did last year wasn't that enough reason to take some action and change some regulations? He said no. They were going to wait a year to see what the survey results were before they would consider any changes to the hunt regulations.

Doyle Sears

March 7, 2007

Randy,

My name is Jeff Robbins and I am a health care provider in the Treasure Valley. I have been coming down to Southeast Idaho every year with my kids to hunt. I am not a trophy hunter or a horn hunter as many sportsmen have been labeled who have been asking for positive change. I simply like to take the first buck I see every year (my last 3 have been two points) to let my kids experience harvesting an animal and learn some of the same hunting lessons I learned growing up in a hunting family.

However, the past few years I have not harvested anything. In fact I didn't even see a buck the last two years I hunted in Southeast Idaho and didn't even go last year. I went near Council instead because Mule Deer hunting in Southeast Idaho has become so poor. It is amazing to me how rapidly the quality of deer hunting in Southeast Idaho has declined.

The simple truth of the matter is there is a huge disconnect between the IDFG and the Idaho Sportsman. Hundreds of positive proposals have been given to improve the quality of Mule deer hunting but the Dept sweeps them under the rug and calls sportsmen negative in order to continue their managing of sportsmen dollars instead of game.

Our buck to doe ratios are pathetic. Fewer out of state hunters come to improve our economy because our hunting is so poor. The Dept has even run off positive thinkers that they hire such as Shane King who did not go along with the same old status quo that obviously is not working.

They don't even follow their own biological recommendations and set seasons before all winter fatality reports are in. Bottom line, sportsmen are fed up with the same old crap and want positive change. We are also tired of department generated surveys which can be "interpreted" to fit whatever mold they wish it to fit\*\*\*.

I have three degrees, one of which is a public relations degree. In PR we learned to paint a rosy picture regardless of how negative the facts. However, after time, if the facts become more negative, the picture becomes harder to paint. Sportsmen have seen the real disappointing picture for a very long time. It is time for the Dept to admit we need change, quit coming up with excuses, listen to sportsmen voices without judging them as negative, and then actually do something that will have

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## Mule Deer Initiative...continued from page 13

a positive effect on the decimated Mule deer herds in Southeast Idaho.

**Jeff Robbins - Nampa**

**\*\*\*NOTE 3:** In February of 2006 F&G Southeast Region Supervisor Mark Gamblin sent a Mule Deer Hunter survey to a list of 2000 hunters whose mandatory reports showed they hunted mule deer in the SE Region, and to an undetermined number of groups and individuals who may never have hunted mule deer. Before the responses were all tabulated, Gamblin announced that the survey answers gave him "clear marching orders" to switch from general seasons to limited controlled hunts.

IDFG commonly uses "scoping meetings" and other opinion surveys with limited choices to lend legitimacy to its changing game management agenda. As Jeff Robbins pointed out in his email, the choices provided in the pre-selected answers often result in choosing the lesser of two evils rather than a realistic solution.

When non-hunting and anti-hunting activist groups gained control of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and were invited to make policy by the Washington, D.C. - based Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, they quickly emphasized non-consumptive wildlife-based recreation. State hunting rule brochures began to carry "ads" depicting a hunter saying, "I used to think it was a good hunt only when I put a deer in the freezer" or "a good hunt is so much more than just the harvest."

By 1987 when Idaho hunters were asked why they hunted deer, there were no choices to provide Jeff Robbins' answer (i.e. "to let my kids experience harvesting an animal and learn some of the same hunting lessons I learned growing up in a hunting family"). And in the current Mule Deer Survey there is still no choice to express Michael Vroman's description of a good hunt (i.e. "hunting large herds of deer that actually exist").

### What Makes A Quality Hunt?

For most mule deer hunters a quality hunting experience means having an equal opportunity for them and their family or friends to see and hunt animals that have not been spooked repeatedly, with a reasonable chance for harvest. But to provide that biologists would have to stop selling special privilege bonus hunting opportunity and manage deer rather than manipulate hunters to increase license revenue.

For obvious reasons (\$\$) the survey does not give hunters that choice. Instead the multiple answers it provides imply that if hunters want a reasonable opportunity to harvest a mature buck they must accept even more limited controlled hunts (**LCH**) which means hunting only one year out of every 2, 3, 5 or 10 years.

The survey perpetuates the **myth** that limited controlled hunts or longer seasons reduce overall hunter congestion. Nine of the Magic Valley units and five of the

Clearwater units have replaced their general any-weapon buck mule deer seasons with limited controlled hunts but only 12 of the 14 allow mule deer buck hunting with a rifle in those limited hunts.

In 2005 there were 14,767 applicants for mule deer buck hunts in the 12 units but only 2,109 permits were drawn. There were no unfilled first choice permits so **12,658** rifle hunters (**86%**), who had already paid their non-refundable license and application fees, were forced to go to other units or regions to hunt mule deer in general seasons.

Of the 12,658 displaced hunters, 10,867 were from the LCH units in the Magic Valley Region. Since there were only 6,446 total deer hunters (including youths and adults who don't apply for special hunts) in the five general season units in Magic Valley in 2005, most of the 10,867 displaced hunters did not hunt in that region.

Instead they either gave up hunting or invaded other units in other Regions. Like most dedicated Idaho general season mule deer hunters many moved on to still other units, hoping to find mule deer that weren't spooked by hordes of hunters. The names of these displaced hunters and the units they hunted in are available to the Wildlife Bureau but that information is kept secret.

### Exposing the Myths

Revealing it would expose the double lie that hunters have been led to believe (i.e. that limited controlled hunts both reduce hunter congestion and prevent over-harvest). When the managers of 14 of Idaho's best mule deer hunting units refuse to allow three-fourths of the rifle hunters (including doe hunters) to hunt there, it can double the number of hunters in some other general season units.

Although many hunters in those units assume there are far more hunters now because they are encountering far more in the field, the reality is there are fewer hunters buying Idaho deer tags now than there were during most of the past 50 years. The bonus special privilege early and late LCH permits that are raffled to hunters have reduced mule deer numbers so badly that most general season hunters are hunting more often and harvesting fewer deer.

Every general season that is replaced with a limited controlled hunt increases hunter congestion and reduces harvest success in the remaining general hunts. Every bonus LCH that is added (sold) to benefit a special interest group deprives the majority of general season hunters in that unit of the reasonable opportunity to harvest an animal (which also increases hunter congestion for those who spend more days hunting for a deer).

### Deer Scarcity Dictates Fees

IDFG brags about the number of hunter days of recreation it is creating and the (highly inflated) "value" of each animal harvested based on the money several hunters spend to harvest each deer or elk. Idaho hunters who think F&G will lose a major source of income if more deer hunters stop buying licenses don't have all the facts.

The push by F&G to replace general seasons with limited controlled hunts could provide the agency with several million additional dollars in license, permit and application income while reducing enforcement and other management costs. If it were implemented statewide, it would drive the majority of Idaho's rifle hunters away from hunting and, theoretically at least, eliminate the need to actively manage wildlife except in a few limited entry trophy units as Utah does.

As Utah and most other western states have learned, selling hunting opportunity does not require preserving optimum big game populations or sustainable harvests for large numbers of hunters. Instead, creating a scarcity of mature male animals drives the price sky high for those who can afford to pay, or who are willing to buy a ticket in a F&G lottery for the chance to hunt once every two to 50 years\*.

- \* In 2005 the average odds of drawing a permit in Idaho's 12 LCH rifle buck deer units were 1-in-7, but were even poorer in the more desirable units. For example 2,105 residents and 387 non-residents applied for the 50 permits in Hunt 1024 (the Nov 10-Nov 24 buck hunt in Unit 45). Before the 45 resident and 5 non-resident deer tags and permits were purchased for \$2,569 by the 50 successful hunters, the 2,492 applicants paid a minimum of **\$97,174** in non-refundable hunting license and application fees (more if combo licenses were purchased).

Selling the 50 hunting licenses and tags to 50 hunters in a 15-day general season would have netted IDFG only **\$3,463**. But by selling chances on 50 LCH permits for the same 15-day hunt plus the 50 tags and permits, IDFG received **\$99,743** in nonrefundable income, including \$81,026 for the unused hunting licenses.

To make those licenses valid for deer hunting, IDFG would receive another \$139,432 for the 2,442 deer tags. In other words one of two Unit 45 limited controlled deer hunts in 2005 generated at least **\$239,175** in license revenue (less vendor fees) if everyone bought a deer tag. The 1-in-50 average drawing odds were 1-in-47 for the residents and 1-in-77 for the NR applicants.

The other "less desirable" Unit 45 buck Hunt 1023 (Oct 5-Oct 31) had 1,061 applicants for 75 permits. Despite only half as many "first choice" applicants (and only one-third as many NR applicants) hunters paid F&G **\$39,858** to take a chance on getting 75 permits which would have cost only **\$5,010** in a general hunt.

If all of the unsuccessful applicants purchased deer tags to hunt in a general hunt F&G received an additional \$47,407. Thus the total revenue received by IDFG for the raffle of 125 Unit 45 permits in both hunts was **\$139,601** for just the 125 hunts or **\$326,440** if all the lottery losers bought general season deer tags.

If none of the losers bought deer tags, IDFG still averaged **\$1,116.81** in income for every hunter that won a chance to hunt a mule deer buck in Unit 45. For the 125 permit holders the chance of harvesting a 4-point buck was very good, but the odds of even seeing a buck with a minimum Boone and Crockett score were very poor.

#### Utah - Fewer Hunters Equal Higher Fees

Because IDFG generated between \$100,000 and \$326,000 from a single Idaho LCH buck unit, the temptation to convert more of the 80+ remaining general season units to LCH units is strong. But rather than upset the status quo Utah and several other western states simply impose higher fees than Idaho and also sell more licenses and tags to nonresidents who hunt on private ranches.

Currently Idaho charges a resident general season deer hunter **\$32.50** for a hunting license and deer tag plus \$6.25 for an LCH application fee plus \$7.75 for the permit if he/she is lucky enough to draw one. This totals **\$46.50** for a permit hunt for a resident (plus **\$18.25** if it's an archery or muzzleloader hunt).

Effective July 1, 2007, Utah charges a resident deer hunter **\$71** for a general season deer hunt plus \$20 for each LCH application plus \$40 more for a limited entry permit or \$108 more for a premium limited entry permit. This totals **\$131** for an LCH hunt or **\$199** for the premium hunt and there is no special weapons charge.

In other words, to compensate for fewer hunters Utah charges more than twice as much as Idaho for either a general season or a limited entry deer hunt (unless it's archery or muzzleloader) and more than three times as much for the application fee. Except for the several million dollars that has been spent on habitat improvement and predator control in a handful of LCH units, there is little difference between LCH units in either state.

In 2005 in Utah's two "Premium" and six regular limited controlled hunt units the 1,029 hunters who hunted harvested 800 deer for 78% success. In Idaho's 12 regular LCH rifle mule deer buck units 1,984 hunters harvested 1,465 deer for 75% success.

#### Killing Too Many Does Caused Deer Decline

Because hunters have been told for years that limiting the number of deer hunters limits deer harvests, many still equate a specific reduction in the number of hunters with a comparable reduction in the number of deer harvested. A careful study of the impact of hunter numbers on Utah mule deer populations from 1925 to 2005 reveals that, when managed properly, deer numbers continued to increase despite significant increases in hunter numbers.

From 1925-1938 antlerless harvest was prohibited (with a couple of minor exceptions), seasons were shorter and predators were controlled. The number of licensed deer hunters in Utah during that period increased from 5,650 to 54,500 yet mule deer populations continued to increase and were considered excessive in some locations.

*continued on page 16*

### Mule Deer Initiative...*continued from page 15*

In 1950, 122,087 Utah hunters harvested 54,384 bucks in general seasons plus 19,033 does with special permits. In 1951 biologists insisted on also allowing unlimited either-sex harvest in the general seasons and 121,757 hunters harvested 67,329 bucks and 34,308 does that year (83% average success).

The high antlerless harvest continued for the next 10 years and in 1961 general season hunters harvested 25,356 female mule deer and UDOW provided controlled permit and archery harvest of an additional 27,915 females! Utah mule deer might have recovered from the unprecedented killing of **53,271** female mule deer in 1961 but the antlerless kill increased to 55,092 the following year while the buck harvest declined from 79,007 to 75,464.

#### **Halting Doe Killing Restored Deer Herd**

By 1965 the buck harvest had declined to 53,686 yet the unwarranted doe slaughter continued and the decimated deer population could not recover without help. By 1975 it was no longer legal to kill an antlerless mule deer in a general season hunt and the harvest was only 45,401 - the lowest since 1940.

With no general season antlerless hunting allowed again until 1987 and antlerless permit hunting reduced from 1984-87 deer populations continued to recover despite hunter numbers remaining above 200,000. Large increases in mule deer harvests over the past 70 years always resulted from large increases in the number of antlerless permits sold to hunters.

#### **Increasing Doe Killing Decimated Deer Herd**

From 1976 to 1983 UDOW increased antlerless permit harvest from 95 to 13,164 which further reduced doe and fawn survival during the extreme 1983-84 winter.

Excessive antlerless permit increases in 1988-1992 once again left too few productive females to rebuild the herd following the 1992-93 winter losses. Instead of taking action to protect the remaining females, UDOW let hunters harvest 30,320 deer including 4,296 females in 1993.

A voluntary decline of 82,739 in hunter numbers (from 228,747 in 1992 to 146,008 in 1993) probably had little if any impact on the harvest. But in 1994 SFW Founder Don Peay convinced UDOW to cap hunters at 97,000 "in order to restore mule deer populations to the 426,000 UDOW said the habitat would support."

The 97,000 cap included a cap of 27,000 on bow and muzzleloader hunters, which allowed their numbers to increase. Yet it reduced the number of rifle buck hunters from 200,000 to only 70,000.

#### **Limiting Hunters Ineffective**

Despite the cap, the 1994 harvest of 29,926 deer was almost identical to the 1993 harvest. At the time that was Utah's lowest deer harvest since 1938 but having the cap in place for the past 13 years has not restored mule deer populations and harvests.

As deer numbers slowly began to increase, UDOW biologists steadily increased the LCH antlerless harvest from 699 in 1994 to 4,520 in 2000. That plus the 2001-02 winter wiped out any small gains that had occurred.

#### **"Figures Don't Lie But..."**

The harvest graph on page 17 has overlaid hunter numbers added and has been used to claim that increasing hunter numbers caused the increased harvests and mule deer declines. While the implication is that the graph compares cause and effect it does not even show the cause (excessive female harvest) or the declining total deer populations which resulted in the reduced harvests and voluntary reductions in hunter numbers.

Back when mule deer populations were healthy and managed by using the proper tools, the deer herds quickly recovered from the most extreme winters in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (see short "spikes in 1949-52). But selling excessive doe harvests in the 1960s and early 70s and again in the late 1980s resulted in depleted unhealthy deer populations and the extreme harvest declines in 1975 and 1993 following less severe winters (see long downward "spikes" in harvest totals).

If you compare the graph with the population estimates and limited deer permit harvests also found in the "Utah Big Game Annual Report 2005" it is obvious that both hunter numbers and harvest numbers are driven by changes in antlerless permit sales. This report is found at: [http://www.wildlife.utah.gov/hunting/biggame/pdf/2005\\_bg\\_report.pdf](http://www.wildlife.utah.gov/hunting/biggame/pdf/2005_bg_report.pdf) and those with net access are urged to study it.

Because the 1994 hunter caps could not restore deer numbers in the general season units, UDOW allows no hunting during the rut and limits the muzzleloader and rifle season to nine days. When the post-season buck minimum of 15-20 bucks per 100 does is not met, the late October rifle seasons are shortened to five days.

#### **More Proof Reducing Hunters Does Not Work**

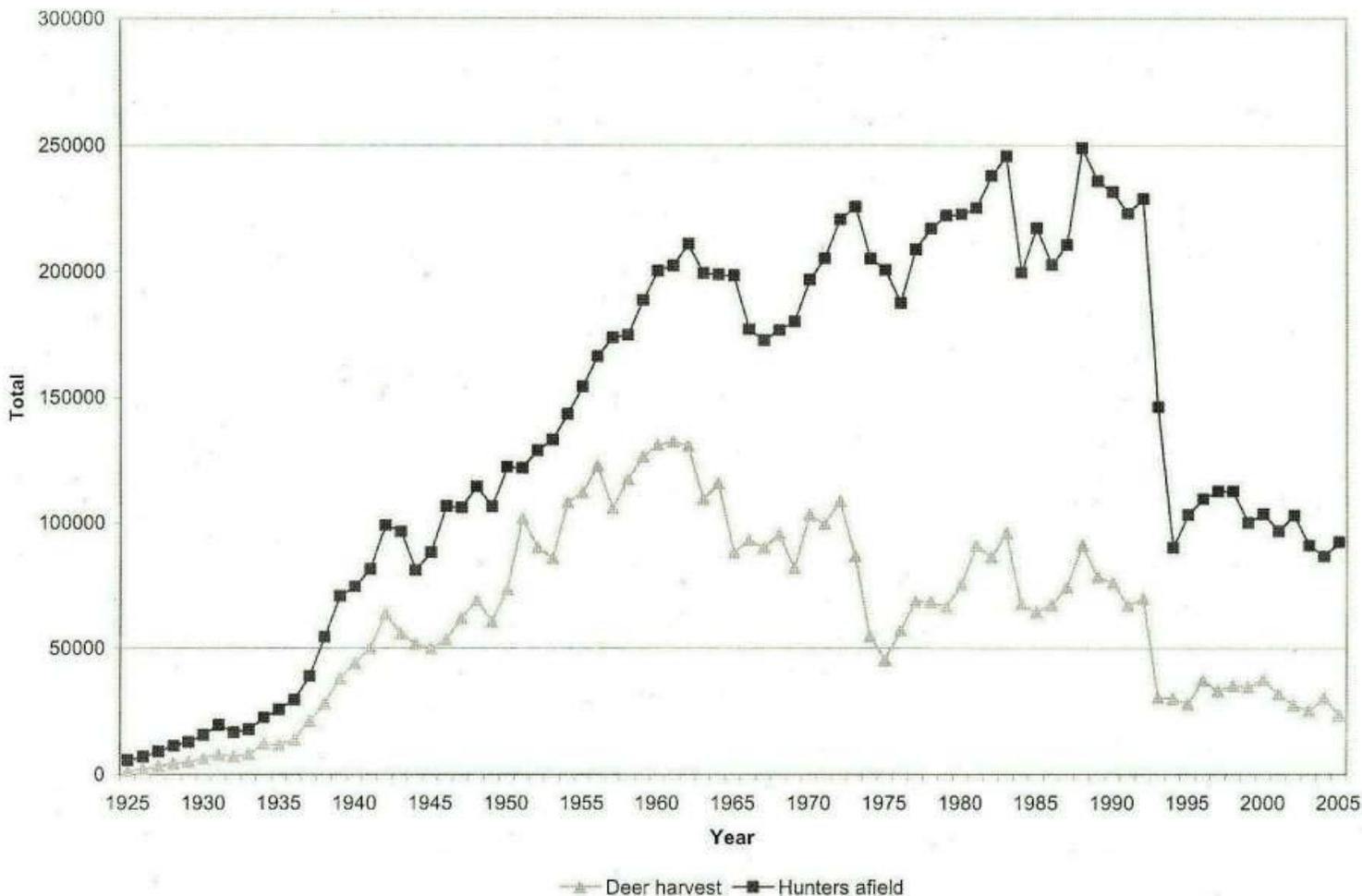
Added proof that adjusting season framework - not the number of hunters - is necessary to regulate harvests surfaced in 2004. A snowstorm on opening weekend of the nine-day late October rifle season in Utah's Central and Northeast Regions drove the deer down to lower elevations making them more vulnerable to hunters.

Although there were 4,265 fewer Utah deer hunters in 2004 than in 2003, they killed 5,404 more buck mule deer than in 2003, mostly in those regions. The obvious solution (to reduce the buck harvest temporarily while also reducing the chance of this happening again) was to set the season earlier and/or shorten it in those two regions.

Instead the citizen advisory committees insisted UDOW reduce the 97,000 cap by 1,000 in each of the two Regions. UDOW biologists agreed but told them it would make no difference in the harvest in those regions.

Post season 2005 buck-to-doe ratios were even lower so UDOW shortened the season in both regions to five days in 2006. But the doe permit harvest continues.

Statewide trends of deer harvest statistics, Utah 1925-2005



Year	General Season Harvest					Restricted Harvest*					Totals			
	Bucks	Does	Total	Hunters	Avg.	Bucks	Does	Total	Hunters	Avg.	Bucks	Does	Total	Hunters
1961	73198	25356	98554	164926	60%	5809	27915	33724	37379	90%	79007	<b>53271</b>	<b>132278</b>	202305
1983	82552	-0-	82552	228907	36%	-0-	13164	13164	16711	79%	82552	<b>13164</b>	<b>95716</b>	245618
1988	68125	1057	69182	222372	31%	378	21178	21556	26313	82%	68503	<b>22235</b>	<b>90738</b>	248685
1992	54804	1266	56070	213937	26%	1729	11866	13595	14810	92%	56533	<b>13132</b>	69665	228747
1994**	27699	-0-	27699	86121	32%	1528	699	2227	3859	58%	29227	699	<b>29926</b>	89980
2000	30728	126	30854	94304	33%	2303	4394	6697	9032	74%	33031	<b>4520</b>	37551	103336
2001	25255	112	25367	88798	29%	2157	4039	6196	7726	80%	27512	4151	31663	96524
2002	21954	53	22007	95264	23%	2409	3092	5501	7454	74%	24363	3145	27508	102718
2003	20906	89	20995	85553	25%	1619	2435	4054	5217	78%	22525	2524	25049	90770
2004	25954	85	26039	81260	32%	1975	2154	4129	5245	79%	27929	2239	30168	86505
2005***	19688	138	19826	87508	23%	1832	1813	3645	4727	77%	21520	1951	<b>23471****</b>	92235

- \*Includes Limited Entry units, CWMU ranch hunting, Dedicated Hunter, plus special landowner and antlerless permits.
- \*\*Hunter cap of 97,000 on General Season hunters.
- \*\*\*Hunter cap lowered to 95,000
- \*\*\*\*Lowest Utah deer harvest in 70 years.

The excessive doe/fawn harvests in the 1950s, and 60s can all be identified on this graph. From 1959-1962 Utah hunters killed more than 50,000 does each year.

The decline in deer populations from severe winters were the result of killing too many does and that, too, is seen on the graph. Hunters killed more than 30,000 does each year in the early 1970s and the decline in mule deer numbers and buck harvests in 1973-75 is easily seen.

Pretending that decline was caused by too many hunters, which were also declining, defies logic. Increased antlerless harvests from 1976-1983 and 1987-1992 left too few surviving does to recover following the severe 1983-84 and 1992-93 winters and that also is obvious on the graph.

When populations responded to several mild winters and showed an increase in 2000, it offered the ideal

*continued on page 18*

## Feeding Letters *continued from page 17*

opportunity to restore a healthy doe population. Instead NDOW chose to allow another 18,530 breeding does and replacement fawns to be killed by hunters over the next six years.

### Why Use Utah Records?

I have used Utah records to illustrate the impact of selling extra hunting opportunity using LCH permits rather than adjusting season structure because there are strong similarities between both states. Although some of the early hunter numbers cited by Utah may represent fewer hunters with extra doe tags, Idaho lacks reliable information with which to make an accurate comparison – even during the past five years.

There are major differences in the biological data that is collected and readily available to the general public. If a citizen wants to know the status of Utah game populations and harvests he or she does not have to spend hours trying to compare formats that are constantly changing, and converting percentages into meaningful data.

Utah's annual reports provide post season fawn-to-doe, fawn-to-adult deer, buck-to-doe and 3-pt or better info, as well as fawn-to-adult deer ratios from spring counts to estimate winter losses in every unit and subunit. But, more important, they provide the **population objectives** for every one of Utah's 35 game management units (GMUs) and the estimated population for each unit for the preceding four years.

### News Flash!

#### Limiting Hunters Does Not Restore Deer Herds

Despite the fact that every hunter in Utah must participate in LCH drawings, except the so-called "general season" hunters whose numbers are also limited\*, only two of Utah's 35 GMUs had reached their objective by 2005. Populations in 13 of the GMUs were even below the 2002 level and **none** of the Limited Entry, or even the Premium Limited Entry, units were meeting their objective.

- \*hunters in one of the capped regions must now enter a drawing to obtain a permit.

Henry Mountains Premium LE Unit 15, with its 25 buck mule deer permits is the most restricted deer unit in Utah. In 2005 archery hunters harvested 100% and only one rifle and one muzzleloader hunter failed to kill their buck, yet the unit does not even have half of its management objective of 2,000 deer.

#### Utah's Mule Deer Management Strategy

Utah's Mule Deer Management Plan states: "Mountain lions, coyotes and in some areas black bears are the primary predators of mule deer in Utah (Smith 1993). Proper management of these species can help deer populations which are well below population objectives and habitat capabilities. However, to be effective predator management must be of sufficient intensity and duration to significantly reduce predator populations." (emphasis added).

Yet the plan offers the following strategies to restore fawn production and herd growth, which do not include predator control and halting or radically reducing antlerless harvest:

1. Set buck permit numbers for each hunt, region or unit at a level which will allow buck:doe ratio objectives to be met
2. Implement additional management strategies as necessary to reduce harvest of bucks if buck:doe objectives are not being met. These options include shortened seasons, weapon restrictions and vehicle access management.
3. Support hunting programs that will minimize harvest while maintaining hunting opportunity such as primitive weapons hunts and the dedicated hunter program.
4. A long list of habitat programs, including "Discourage the practice of winter feeding programs which can cause habitat degradation."

These are the same strategies that the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies dreamed up several years ago and none of them have worked. The extreme emphasis both Utah and Idaho place on protecting adult male deer ignores the importance of protecting the "factories" that produce those bucks.

#### Low Density Deer Populations – The Problems

Mule deer managers ignore the importance of restoring a viable breeding population as quickly as possible to mitigate potential losses from over-harvesting or natural disasters, which may occur at any time. The biological term that describes the status of many of the mule deer populations in the West is "Low Density Dynamic Equilibrium" (LDDE).

LDDE describes a wild ungulate population in a given area that is well below the carrying capacity of its habitat. Although the population continues to fluctuate, it remains low because it is "out of balance" with other natural forces that limit its population.

For example, where predators of deer have alternate prey species on which they can exist, their numbers remain relatively high and their impact on reduced deer populations is greater than normal. For this reason the term "Predator Pit" is often used to describe the "pit" that deer cannot get out of but the problem is often deeper than just predator numbers.

When mule deer numbers are far below the carrying capacity in an area, spot and stalk hunting techniques are often replaced with hunters covering as much ground as possible trying to locate and shoot at scarce deer. The additional stress caused by hunters covering more ground for longer periods translates into decreased winter survival and/or lower birth rates when even a moderately severe winter occurs.

### Low Density Deer Populations – The Solutions

The theory of density dependence (i.e. that there are too many deer for the available habitat) has been widely used by biologists as an excuse to justify excessive antlerless harvest. More often than not, the biologists had expanded buck hunting opportunity until bucks became scarce so they “corrected” the buck-to-doe ratio by killing large numbers of productive does and replacement fawns.

That illustrates “the law of diminishing returns” and that is where we are today. There are not enough bucks being produced and we are at 50% of mule deer carrying capacity so our first action should be to eliminate all mule deer hunting after October and eliminate all antlerless mule deer harvest\* in every unit until realistic population objectives are established and achieved.

- \*Except for valid depredation concerns that cannot be resolved otherwise.

Utah has established deer population objectives in each unit that total the 426,000 mule deer the habitat will support statewide. Idaho biologists have established that existing habitat will support 600,000 deer statewide and Unit 39, with 2,615 square miles, already has a slightly higher antlerless threshold of 20,000 mule deer or 7.5 deer per square mile.

That is slightly less than the post-season 7.71 deer per sq. mi. average for the 20,700 sq. mi. in central Idaho published by IDFG in 1992, and it may be at least a realistic starting point for setting reasonable population objectives in other units. Some units already exceed that deer density but most fall far short.

Despite having 70% of its land area in public ownership, Idaho harvests only slightly more than one-half deer per sq. mile. States like Michigan and Pennsylvania, with 10 times our population, harvest 20 times as many whitetails per sq. mi. as Idaho does both species.

Although elimination of doe/fawn hunting is only temporary, it must not be resumed until new realistic female harvest objectives are met. In Idaho as in Utah, the resumption of antlerless mule deer harvest prematurely has always resulted in losing what gains were already achieved.

#### “No Doe Hunting” Means No Doe Hunting

As was pointed out earlier in this issue, the excuse that the few mule deer killed by special privilege hunters in special doe hunts won’t affect the population is a lie. Once deer population objectives are restored, a short either-sex season after the first week of hunting season will provide youngsters and others a chance to kill a doe.

Meanwhile, neither archers nor any other special group should be rewarded for their weapon choice or the extra money they pay, by being allowed to kill even one female mule deer in either limited or general seasons. Until minimum thresholds are met each female is worth ten times its former value for its role in restoring healthy mule deer herds and preserving our hunting heritage.

### Predator Management

Once the realistic antlerless thresholds are in place in every unit including the LCH units, and mule deer doe hunting is ended along with all November mule deer hunting, all buck seasons must be carefully evaluated to make sure they do not allow excessive harvest. Then if fawn recruitment and doe populations are not increasing at a reasonable rate, significant local reduction in predator numbers is indicated.

Utah’s Predator Management Plan provides that when deer populations are below 65% of the unit or subunit objective, predators may be controlled. The Plan also provides that when deer populations are below 75% of objective and are stable to decreasing for three years predators may be controlled.

That may also be appropriate for Idaho but the problem lies in the fact that the major predator of adult mule deer is still the mountain lion that is protected as a big game animal. Some but not all lion hunters want to pursue older lions at the expense of sound game management but, without controlling lions, depleted deer herds may not recover in some Idaho units.

#### Using Primitive Weapons To Reduce Harvests

Utah’s suggestion that replacing rifle hunters with primitive weapons hunters would help recovery because they are less successful deserves a closer look. The Utah General Archery season lasts 27 days from mid-August to mid-September; the muzzleloader season lasts nine days from Sep. 26-October 4, and the rifle season lasts nine days from Oct. 20-28.

In 2005 Hunter Success was:

13,808 Archery Hunters – **16%**

11,430 Muzzleloader Hunters – **27%**

48,862 Any-Weapon Hunters – **26%**

#### Bonus Special Draw Hunts

Although eliminating mule deer hunting in November will eliminate most of the special privilege LCH mule deer hunts, any LCH that still exists where a Regular Tag general deer season also exists should also be eliminated. If any of these bonus hunts remain, they still rob general season hunters of a better opportunity to see and harvest more mule deer.

That leaves the issue of units that allow either-sex General Archery mule deer seasons but prohibit Any-Weapon hunters from hunting either sex unless they successfully draw a permit. And there will be no need for two-point seasons when the November LCH trophy hunts are canceled.

Weaning the recipients of these special privilege bonus hunts off of them will no doubt meet with opposition. They are real money-makers from IDFG’s standpoint but they cannot be justified either biologically or ethically. It is doubtful that Idaho game managers will admit that selling extra hunting opportunity was largely responsible for the 1992 decline in mule deer numbers.

# Editorial Comment

This issue began as an April bulletin covering a number of timely topics including the controversy over outlawing all but "traditional" muzzleloaders for special late season muzzleloader hunts. But we had committed to publish a cross-section of letters expressing concern about SE Idaho mule deer management and it seemed an appropriate time to address the issue in depth.

Selling exclusive hunting opportunity via limited controlled hunts has become a major fundraiser for most Western Fish and Game agencies but it is not compatible with their mandate to perpetuate wild game populations and harvests. Young hunters who grew up competing in a lottery for a reasonable opportunity to harvest deer and elk have come to believe that it is a tool to manage wild game populations and harvests.

Except in circumstances where there is not a huntable population (bighorn sheep, goat, etc.) nothing could be further from the truth. Limited controlled hunts are used to create an artificial scarcity so hunters will pay money just for the chance to draw a permit.

With apologies for devoting so many pages in an effort to convince skeptics what really caused our declining game herds, I promise to devote the next issue to subjects that more readers will find interesting.

(To subscribe or renew or give a gift subscription, please fill out the coupon below, enclose it with your donation in a stamped envelope and mail to the address below. A donation of \$20 or more will pay costs for one year and also send a copy to your elected State officials)

When the F&G Commission decided not to allow in-line muzzleloaders or sabots and other improvements to be used in special muzzleloader seasons and hunts, I received many positive and negative comments. The pros pointed out that it would reduce the overkill of deer and elk in several late-season hunts in southern Idaho and that was good.

And of course the antis pointed out the many benefits, from the improvements, including giving a hunter with less than 20-20 vision a better opportunity to make a clean kill with a red-dot type scope. My conclusion was that the Commission should eliminate the late season overkill but they had gone about it the wrong way by removing the extra opportunity from one special interest group and giving it to another

That was no different than taking a hunting season away from rifle hunters and giving it to archers. Instead of trying to please special interest groups by robbing harvest opportunity from one group and giving it to another, I believe it's time the Commission instructed the Department to stop catering to the loudest lobbyist and get back to managing our declining wild game.

Idaho hunters share ownership of Idaho's wildlife and unlike non-participants, pay IDFG to manage it properly. They deserve to be provided with accurate reliable information, like any other shareholder, and receive tangible benefits in the form of restored wild game populations.

I hope this issue will help the Commissioners and our elected officials understand that our wildlife resource is not being managed in Idahoans' best interests.

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