

The Outdoorsman

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Providing “Hunting Opportunity” is Not Management

by George Dovel



Author and hunter on left with 5X5 mule deer buck (plus brow tines). Hunter on right killed 5X4 buck (plus brow tines) at same location on same day.



First hunter with his second buck (4X4 plus brow tines) killed at same location the following day.

After I presented copies of Outdoorsman Bulletin #7 to the Idaho F&G Commission in Orofino on November 17, 2004, a reporter who is also a hunter asked me if both of the buck racks held by the hunter on the front page were actually killed in Unit 26. I replied that they were both killed there, along with two other large bucks, by the same two hunters during the opening week in September.

The reporter explained that he spends a lot of time in Unit 26 and sees almost no deer there. Then he asked if I really believed that hunters had killed them off. My response was “yes”.

I explained how, in the 1950s, we used to observe 400 mule deer on the open hillside directly across Big Creek from the Taylor Ranch in November, and used a spotting scope to glass as many as 90 adult bucks in that herd. When November snows drove the deer down from their summer range in the high country, we enjoyed watching an endless procession of mule deer descending the mountain above Rush Creek for several days.

I could have added that younger hunters who have only seen remnant mule deer herds in Idaho for the past 12 years don't know what it's like to hunt healthy herds with abundant mature bucks. Partially restored *post hunting season* healthy mule deer herds in southern Idaho in 1979 contained **44 bucks** and **83 fawns** per 100 adult does (see Bulletin #7, page 4).

15 Bucks Per 100 Females Is Not Adequate

Yet in the 1998-2003 mule deer plan, the average minimum buck-to-doe ratio, in the 84 units that even have a minimum, is only 17.5 bucks per 100 does! Three fourths of the units require a *pre-season* ratio of only 15 total bucks per 100 does, including yearling bucks.

Remember that a *post-hunting* season ratio of bucks to does is determined in December before the bucks have lost their antlers. That ratio includes those yearling (spike or forked-horn) bucks that survive to become two-year-olds but does not include the male fawns that survive the winter.

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Converting that December count to a 15:100 *pre*-season minimum the following summer requires a lot of guesswork. The number of mature bucks that die from all causes, including predation, starvation, accidents, disease, and hunter harvest during the next 11 months must be estimated, as well as the number of male fawns from the previous year that survive as yearlings.

A Back-Up Minimum Criterion

Since no one knows how many bucks are still alive during the summer, a second criterion used by biologists to indicate healthy buck-doe ratios is the percentage of four-point-or-better bucks in the total number killed by hunters.

Given a choice, most hunters will shoot a mature buck rather than a yearling or a doe or fawn. Despite the decline in the quality of meat from a mature mule deer buck once it enters the rut, many hunters take advantage of bonus late season hunts to kill large bucks when they are more vulnerable.

Although the percentage of mature bucks in the harvest will increase when more special late hunts are allowed, it remains a fairly reliable indicator of healthy buck ratios in the total annual harvest, or as a year-to-year trend in the late season hunts.

The statewide *minimum* 4-point buck harvest percentage in Idaho's mule deer plan varies from 15% in one unit to 50% of the bucks killed in the back country outfitter units. Unfortunately, most of the 4-point harvest minimums were only 30% based on the depleted numbers that existed in 1998 rather than on sound biological goals.

Biologists, Most Commissioners Ignore Criteria

We did not meet or exceed those low mature buck harvest minimums in the 2003 season in most units. Of the 19,369 mule deer bucks reported killed in Idaho by general season, controlled hunt, archery and blackpowder hunters in 2003, some were fawns and only 5,423 (28%) were four-points or better.

That indicated the need to eliminate antlerless hunting and shorten the 2004 buck hunting seasons in all the units that did not meet the minimum. Yet antlerless mule deer harvest was stopped only in Commissioner Gibbs' SE Region and Commissioner Burns' Salmon Region.

The buck season in Units 70 and 73 was shortened and changed to 4-point minimum, but buck hunting season lengths were increased in 18 units in the Magic Valley and Upper Snake Regions. A 51-day antlerless youth hunt was added in Owyhee County and most of the rest of the state remained unchanged.

A few token reductions were made in the number of antlerless controlled hunt permits. But biologists know that reductions of less than 50%, where there are several hundred permits and limited harvest, increase the kill percentage and may actually increase total harvests.

Except for the low buck minimums and the lack of minimum fawn-to-doe criteria, the 1998-2003 mule deer plan was a good plan *if it had been followed*. It included a matrix developed by Jim Unsworth to determine both the length of buck seasons and when doe harvest must be reduced or halted. Unfortunately the doe hunting criteria is being ignored.

Even when general any-weapon (rifle) hunting seasons were reduced, biologists rarely reduced the general either-sex archery seasons or the several thousand bonus special hunt permits that extend most hunting seasons well beyond the length that can be biologically justified.

The Department remains obsessed with providing expanded *hunting "opportunity"* rather than preserving healthy game populations and sustained harvest. Expanded hunting opportunity translates into more license and permit revenue to fund the non-game/fish programs mandated by the IAFWA and other national groups.

Healthier Buck-Doe Ratios in Nevada

Other western state fish and game agencies are faced with the same problems and biases, but increased participation in the process by sportsmen and their elected officials in some states makes a big difference in how mule deer are managed. Although Nevada has only a fraction of the deer habitat found in Idaho, its mule deer herds have healthier buck-to-doe ratios.

Both states experienced heavy mule deer losses during 2001-2002 following an extended drought, but they reacted very differently. Idaho continued its unwarranted doe and fawn killing while Nevada halted its antlerless harvest in all but a handful of units.

The female adults and fawns that are vital to restore Idaho's herds continue to make up nearly one-third of the total mule deer harvest. Yet Nevada's 2003 doe harvest, including all either-sex youth hunts and female depredation hunts, was only 8% of the total mule deer kill.

Instead of searching in vain for even a forked-horn buck as most Idaho youth hunters did, Nevada youth hunters achieved 54 percent kill success of which 77 percent were bucks! Forty-one percent of those bucks killed by youngsters were 4-points or better.

Of the **92 percent** bucks killed by all Nevada hunters in 2003, **38%** were 4-points or better. That ratio is 36 percent higher than in Idaho where both total harvest numbers and the percentage of mature bucks continue to decline.

Although mule deer harvest numbers in Idaho have declined more than 50% since the last peak in 1988, the percent of four-point or better bucks in the harvest remained fairly high through 1996. Since then it has declined from 48% to the present 28%.

Why Some Deer Hunters Like Nevada

While he was an Idaho F&G Commissioner, Fred Wood applied for controlled hunts in Nevada and praised those hunts compared to what was available in Idaho. He

explained that Nevada hunts offered him the opportunity to harvest a 4-point mule deer buck with a muzzleloader without having to compete with crowds of hunters.

The following photograph of a Nevada archery hunter and his Pope and Young record mule deer was included in a November 10, 2004 news release from the Nevada Department of Wildlife. It describes how the hunter first saw the deer in 2003 and successfully drew an archery hunt permit for the unit in 2004.

He said he located the deer on opening day but was unable to get close enough for a shot because it was with 11 other bucks. The following day the big buck and two others left the herd and the hunter was able to stalk and shoot it with his bow.



Nevada bowhunter Greg Krogh with new Pope and Young world record typical mule deer that "dry" scored 202 2/8.

The fact that the deer was traveling with 11 other bucks in August in a unit open to hunting indicates it couldn't have happened in Idaho in 2004. That could only happen where wildlife managers maintain healthy mature buck to doe ratios.

Except for a few any-weapon antlerless permits in a handful of units, bowhunters are not allowed to shoot does and fawns in Nevada. The female fawns grow up to produce more fawns and the male fawns grow up to replace the older bucks that die or are killed by hunters.

Why Some Deer Hunters Dislike Nevada

During the 1950s and early 1960s, extensive predator control allowed multiple deer harvests and gave every resident hunter the opportunity to hunt every year. Now every big game hunt in Nevada requires a special drawing and the realistic odds against drawing a permit in the first year can average as high as 7 to 1.

Is This Idaho Hunters' Future?

Nevada's bonus point system increases the chance of drawing each subsequent year for those who are unsuccessful, but still took up to 10 years before some applicants were allowed to hunt. Unless IDFG and the Commission halt the antlerless mule deer harvest and eliminate the bonus limited draw hunts for a few years until mule deer populations are restored, this is what Idaho deer hunters can expect down the road.

Colorado led the western states in mule deer harvests, with *average* annual deer harvests exceeding 79,000, from 1949-1992. But in 1986 Colorado wildlife managers decided to increase the number of nonresident elk hunters to increase revenue. They devised a scheme to have everyone select one of three periods as their hunting season to hunt both deer and elk at the same time.

To assure enough bull elk to breed the cows, they prohibited killing any bull with less than 4 points per side and set aside a few "trophy" units where older bulls could still exist with limited hunting. Like Idaho, Colorado's mule deer harvest was sacrificed for license dollars.

In 1990 hunters in Colorado killed 90,490 deer including 29,388 does and 2,090 fawns. By 1999, Colorado's deer harvest had dropped to only 19,639 including 7,169 does and fawns!

In 2004, Colorado deer hunters had to choose: (a) one of four combined deer-elk bucks-only rifle seasons beginning in early October and lasting 5, 7 or 9 days, with 2-4 day breaks between; (b) a 9-day buck muzzleloader season in September; or (c) a 30-day archery season beginning in late August and restricted to bucks only in one-third of the hunts. Deer hunter numbers are capped at half of the 1990s number.

What Must Be Done

Again, reducing the current number of deer hunters by less than 50% with statewide controlled hunts will not reduce harvests where success is already less than 40%. It simply denies hunters the chance to hunt. Mule deer hunting seasons must be moved out of the rut, maintaining simultaneous opening dates, with antlerless hunting halted until goals are achieved.

With the exception of depredation situations, when they exist, there is no justification for *any* antlerless mule deer harvest in most units, or for buck mule deer harvest later than October 31 until populations recover. Changing this should not conflict with late season white-tailed deer harvest in the Clearwater and Panhandle Regions.

Remember that once adequate daily total digestible nutrients (TDN) are no longer available in late fall forage, the additional stress and energy requirement caused by hunters pursuing mule deer results in measurable additional losses during even a moderately severe winter. Unlike the early season mule deer hunts, bonus late hunts cannot be biologically justified and must be eliminated, at least until carrying capacity is once again reached.

IDFG Fee Increase Facts

By George Dovel

In a guest editorial recently published throughout Idaho, IDFG Director Steve Huffaker says hunters and anglers are being asked to pay "about the price of a Mepps spinner to continue supporting some of the best hunting and fishing in the country." To support his claim IDFG published the following chart allegedly comparing the cost to hunt deer in 11 states, with Idaho ranking fourth from lowest:

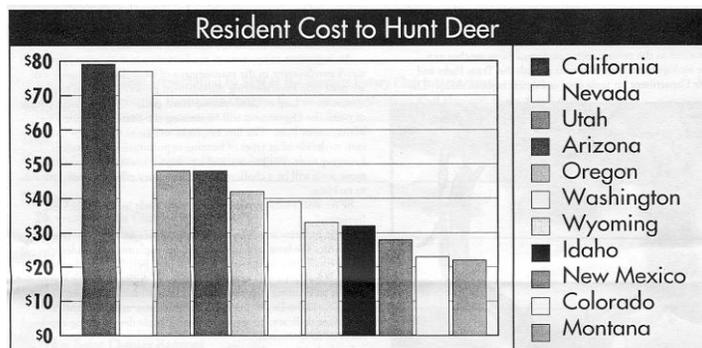


Chart provided by IDFG makes it appear that Idaho will charge the fourth lowest fee among western states to hunt deer if the proposed fee increase is approved. Not true.

This is a typical example of IDFG comparing apples to oranges rather than printing all the relevant facts. In some of the other states, the fee includes such costs as controlled hunt applications and permits, and the ability to hunt with archery and black powder weapons.

In Nevada the \$73 also includes special dedicated fees, mandated by lawmakers at sportsmen's request, for predator control and habitat improvement. No more than 10% of those dedicated fees can be used for administration.

Most Idaho deer and elk hunting seasons are structured to encourage rifle hunters to buy a \$16.50 archery permit to hunt in the early archery season for a better chance to harvest either species. According to IDFG harvest statistics, only one out of seven whitetail hunters harvested a deer in the general rifle season and one out of six mule deer hunters killed a deer in the general season.

Those who were unsuccessful were encouraged to buy a \$16.50 muzzleloader permit to participate in a late season buck, doe or either-sex hunt. The rifle hunter who wants better odds of killing a mule deer or elk with a rifle must now pay an extra \$13.50 for a bonus hunt application fee and permit (if he or she is lucky enough to draw one).

To have a reasonable chance of harvesting even a doe or fawn in 2003, most resident deer hunters paid between \$43.00 and \$62.50 in fees and some paid even more for an extra nonresident tag. Idahoans actually paid higher fees than most western states (including Alaska, which charges the least but is not included in the chart).

Increasing the resident cost for a reasonable chance to harvest a deer from \$62.50 to \$70.25 will do nothing to stop the radical decline in mule deer and will undoubtedly further reduce the number of deer hunters. Compared with Colorado, which charges only \$23.25 for all of the same privileges, Idaho's fees are already way out of line.

Game Harvest Declined 50% In Five Years

But Idaho's declining mule deer population is not its only wild game management crisis. Two major national anti-hunting groups celebrated their recent merger by gleefully announcing that many state wildlife agencies have killed off too much game and are running hunters off by charging them too much to hunt what is left.

As proof, on November 22, the Humane Society of the United States and the Fund For Animals published statistics from state agencies and the National Survey of Hunting, Fishing and Wildlife-Related Recreation. They indicate Idaho is at the top of the list in declining game harvests and near the top in increasing hunter fees.

Idaho	1996	2001	Difference
Nbr. game killed	1,630,000	814,000	-816,000

State	Year	License Holders	Licenses Issued	Total Cost
Idaho	1994	247,113	654,659	\$15,197,794
	2001	<u>246,844</u>	<u>805,208</u>	<u>\$20,496,792</u>
	Change	-229	+150,549	+\$ 5,298,998

Average game animal and bird harvest numbers increased in 21 states and dropped by 30% or more in only three other states. In 2001, after Idaho harvests had dropped by 50%, resident hunting fees were increased 35% (\$5.3 million). Ranking only #30 among the 50 states in the number of wild animals and birds harvested in 2001, Idaho ranked #8 in the highest fees charged to hunters.

Do Hunters Support The Fee Increase?

Of the 30 people who testified during the F&G Commission public hearing in Orofino on November 17, 2004, only two voiced support for the proposed fee increase. One, representing a fly fishing organization, candidly testified the Commission had always given his group whatever they asked for and said his group always supported whatever IDFG asked for.

Others, who testified, said they wanted to see evidence of improved game management before they would approve a fee increase based on promises that were never kept the last time. The Executive Director of Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife said his group needs to know what benefits sportsmen will receive.

Several people representing about 100 low-income families that were present opposed the fee increase and asked for a reduction in the total fees for harvesting deer, elk, turkey and salmon to \$50.00. Several testified they could not afford the existing license, tag and permit fees to hunt declining populations of elk and deer in the Clearwater Region and were forced to stop traditional hunting for game to feed their families.

Commitment Not Kept

As part of its commitment to sportsmen during the 2000 fee increase hearings, IDFG agreed to feed Idaho deer and elk properly in problem areas across southern Idaho during the next severe winter. Yet less than two years later it admitted allowing 50 percent of the mule deer in southeast Idaho to die from advanced malnutrition.

In 2000, IDFG quickly accelerated its unlawful diversion of sportsmen's license dollars to fund an increasing number of non-game/fish activities. Both the original Pittman-Robertson Act and Idaho Code Title 36 prohibit the use of sportsmen license dollars for non-game activities but the misappropriation continues.

Funding for "The Compass" and the non-game public opinion survey reported in Bulletin No. 7 are two recent examples of the ongoing misuse of license dollars. If approved, the proposed fee increase will force sportsmen to continue to fund these types of activities.

Nongame Spending Increases

The IDFG "Stockholders' Report" for FY 2001, (the first year after the recent major fee increase) and the FY 2004 "Stockholders' Report" covering the period through June 30, 2004, illustrate the shift in emphasis from game management to non-game activities in just three years. With an estimated 24.3% increase in the Wildlife Bureau budget, notice the three programs that have exceeded that percentage (in **bold-faced** type).

	<u>FY 2001</u>	<u>FY 2004</u>	<u>% Change</u>
License, fees	27,488,501	32,845,819	+19.5%
Restricted use	2,614,903	2,754,225	+ 5.3
Other	4,376,426	5,947,300	+35.9
Fed aid	8,542,343	11,374,236	+33.2
100% Fed	<u>15,708,962</u>	<u>19,767,950</u>	+25.8
Total budget	58,731,135	72,689,530	+23.8%
Wildlife Bureau			
Game Surveys	2,503,426	2,743,915	+ 9.6%
Manage Lands	4,677,105	5,979,397	+27.8
Reduce Damage	1,396,380	1,458,478	+ 4.4
Emerg Feeding	712,998	698,098	- 2.0
Trap, Transplant	143,400	116,800	-18.5
Nongame	1,259,006	2,116,117	+68.1
Studies	1,632,648	2,366,176	+44.9
Data/Oversight	<u>1,947,763</u>	<u>2,258,145</u>	+15.9
Total Wildlife	14,272,726	17,737,126	+24.3%

In the FY 1998 IDFG Wildlife Bureau budget, \$2,116,379 was budgeted for Game Surveys (monitoring wildlife populations) and only \$153,571 was budgeted for "Nongame". Six years later, in FY 2004, Game Surveys

had increased to \$2,743,915 (+29.6%) but Nongame had increased to \$2,116,117 - a **1277.9%** increase!

That is "only the tip of the iceberg". Besides the **14** nongame employees being funded by the Wildlife Bureau budget, there are **21** more working on "nongame conservation" and other non-game issues in the Idaho Conservation Data Center (CDC). For those who have internet access, a profile of these 21 CDC employees in the IDFG Natural Resources Policy Bureau can be viewed at: <http://fishandgame.idaho.gov/tech/CDC/staff.cfm>

Budget Inconsistencies

The 21 employees on the CDC staff make up 70% of the 30 total Natural Resource Policy Bureau employees. According to the FY 2004 Budget Analysis provided by Legislative Services, just the *personnel costs* for 20.29 of the 30 employees was **\$1,544,800** in federal money while the remaining 9.71 employees' *personnel costs* were listed as \$674,000 (mostly license money and no federal money).

Yet the IDFG FY 2004 Stockholders' Report claims the *total budget* for the CDC was only **\$678,092** of which only 64.3% was federal money. Because of the variations in several different sets of IDFG records, it is not possible to determine how much of the \$644,185 in sportsmen license fees in the Resource Bureau budget was spent for non-game activities.

Non-Game/Fish Spending in Other Bureaus

Other Bureaus, funded mostly or entirely by license dollars, also devote considerable time and resources to non-game activities. The Communications (formerly I&E) Bureau budget was \$3.1 million in FY 2004, including \$1.8 million of sportsmen license funds.

Sportsmen license dollars are the primary funding source for training teachers in "Project WILD" and for conducting massive non-game/fish programs via special classes, publications, the internet, the media (including in-house video production and expensive brochures), and publishing in-house and inter-agency communications.

The largest chunk of sportsman license, tag and permit fees (\$8,431,473) goes to the Enforcement Bureau which reported "about" 2,700 citations issued and 200 arrests in FY 2004. Those numbers are down significantly from FY 2001 and represent an average funding of \$3,123 per citation issued and ~\$42,157 per arrest.

According to the FY 2004 Stockholders' Report, only one-third of Idaho Conservation Officers' activities involve law enforcement. Although Idaho sportsmen should pay for C.O.s assisting in monitoring and managing game species and emergency search and rescue operations, they should not be charged for nongame activities or the 20,000+ recorded hours they spend each year giving public presentations and performing other agencies' functions.

Historically Idaho's Game Wardens, now called "Conservation Officers", have been the backbone of Idaho's fish and game agency. They performed a multitude

See Fee Increase on page 6

Fee Increase

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of tasks in the field, utilizing their experience to monitor game and predator populations and relay the information to wildlife managers. Many were skilled outdoorsmen who provided a real deterrent to poaching but that is changing.

An increasing number of activist conservation officers have publicly criticized the Commission's efforts to restore a healthy predator-prey balance. Director Huffaker's claim that IDFG has put more law enforcement personnel in the field ignores the reality that many are spending less time in the field and more time promoting the new IDFG agenda to the general public.

Administration Now 19% of Budget

The second largest chunk of sportsmen money is given to the Administration Bureau, whose FY 2004 Budget is 2-1/2 times larger than it was in FY 1998. Of the \$13.9 million administration cost, sportsmen license fees fund a disproportionate 57.5 percent.

Increases in federal non-game/fish programs, federal and industrial grant money, and IDFG spending for land management and non-game research have all added to Administration overhead. Updated high-tech office and publishing equipment acquired to handle this volume has increased the skyrocketing cost funded by sportsmen.

What Are Sportsmen Offered?

Instead of spending sportsmen dollars judiciously on beneficial game and fish programs that qualify for three-to-one matching federal excise tax dollars, IDFG is adding nongame programs that will require a 50-50 match, with sportsmen subsidizing their cost. So what is IDFG offering sportsmen in return for paying some of the highest hunting and fishing fees in North America?

Despite sportsmen's overwhelmingly rejection of paying for the "Access Yes!" program with license fees, Huffaker says he will use one-half of one percent of the increase to fund the limited access. His second "offer" is to add another \$100,000 to the \$1.8 million sportsmen are already paying into the Communications Bureau budget.

His third offer is to use part of the funds to pay for the mule deer biologist in the Southeast Region. Thus far, the biologist is simply blaming habitat and climate for IDFG allowing too many female deer to be killed, and pretending that improving quaking aspen stands and CRP will somehow restore the mule deer population.

Studies With No Benefit

In the annual Stockholder's Report, the significant portion of the Wildlife Budget that is spent on studies is called "Developing New Ways to Manage Wildlife." Some "stockholders" say that title is no longer appropriate and should be "Pouring dollars down a rat hole."

As reported in previous Bulletins, during the past 30-plus years dedicated North American biologists have been disproving the application of many unsupported wildlife management theories by conducting fact-based

research that withstands scientific review. The elk study in the Clearwater Region from 1973-1983 proved that bear predation on newborn calves - not elk density or declining habitat - was the primary cause of poor recruitment and declining populations.

But this, and other irrefutable research illustrating the necessity to maintain a healthy ratio of prey to predators was ignored by the academic theorists. Idaho and one or two neighboring states continue to spend millions of dollars, duplicating each others' efforts, trying to prove excessive elk density in reduced habitat is the real cause of poor recruitment.

The cost for this never-ending effort in the Clearwater, in FY 2004 alone, exceeded half a million dollars, with questionable benefit to elk or the sportsmen who are footing the bill. Eight years of pressure from concerned area sportsmen resulted in some hunter caps and some increased bear and lion kill but the elk populations, although increasing slightly, have not recovered.

When the initial 11-year study was initiated in 1971, accepted healthy elk calf survival rates were 45-55 calves per 100 cows but the Clearwater Region averaged only 25 calves per 100 cows. The study was translated into action and surviving calves remained above 55:100 for several years.

But during the current study, calf ratios plummeted to single digits before any management action was taken and they remain far below healthy levels in much of Idaho. The ongoing study, which never ends, provides an excuse for not taking corrective management action.

Mule Deer Population Monitoring

When the 1998-2003 mule deer plan was implemented, Idaho followed Colorado's lead and created Data Analysis Units (DAUs) in nine key areas to estimate over-winter fawn survival rates and the cause(s) of death. When radio-collared winter fawn losses were high in specific DAUs, it enabled the biologists to make timely recommendations to halt antlerless harvest, adjust buck seasons and implement predator control if indicated.

This type of monitoring can be very beneficial, if it is utilized as intended. When extreme mule deer fawn losses were documented from both starvation and heavy predation during the 2001-02 winter in several of the DAUs, the results were published under Wildlife Research on the IDFG website.

In January 2004, I wrote a letter, including the web site address, asking why no mule deer season adjustments were made. Concerned sportsmen circulated the letter widely and IDFG responded by removing the valuable information from the Wildlife Research site, which now contains nothing.

Hunter and angler behavioral research and the proliferation of non-hunting public opinion surveys cost license buyers thousands of dollars and provide no tangible

benefit to Idaho sportsmen or the game and fish they pay millions of dollars in fees to pursue and harvest.

More often than not the results of these surveys are used to justify reducing spending needed to perpetuate wild game and fish harvest, and using the dollars to sustain an exploding bureaucracy that lacks funding to support its ambitious agenda.

Meanwhile there is such a demand for mule deer to hunt that nonresident hunters from the U.S. are spending huge sums traveling to private ranches in the Canadian Provinces to shoot mule deer in alfalfa fields.

Nevada charges all nonresident deer hunters, including youths, \$382 (\$442 if guided) and has thousands of applicants that are turned away every year (19 out of every 20). With fewer nonresident elk permits, nearly 200 nonresident applicants apply for each one that draws an elk tag (which costs \$1,342 for either a youth or adult!).

Yet Idaho couldn't sell its quota of nonresident deer tags, even when it charged nearly 1,000 nonresident youth hunters only \$16.25 each to hunt deer of either sex (\$21.50 for elk or \$31.25 for both). The reason is obvious.

Nevada manages its deer and elk and offers nonresidents better than a 50% chance to *harvest* either species. Idaho exploits its game and has nothing to sell but "hunting opportunity" with a slim chance for the *average* hunter to harvest an animal.

Unlike the Nevada Division of Wildlife, which must depend on sportsmen and boater fees and matching federal excise taxes for most of its funding, IDFG receives millions of extra dollars in fisheries mitigation from Idaho Power and numerous federal agencies. Instead of taking advantage of that huge income and using sportsmen dollars to manage wild game and fish for sustained yield, it continues to exploit Idaho game and the hunters who pay for its management.

If the proposed \$4 million fee increase will only allow IDFG to continue for one year, what happens then? Unless the Legislature is willing to deprive schools and state agencies of their limited funds and donate the millions needed to bail out Fish and Game, the alternative would appear to be eliminating the superfluous programs and getting back to basic management of fish and game.

When IDFG restores pheasants and mule deer to the 70 percent of Idaho that is state or federal land, hunters and fishermen will buy the licenses to support that. But after a dozen years of listening to broken promises and the habitat excuse, few mainstream sportsmen seem willing to pay more until they see some results in the field.

Other Opinion

(The following Guest opinion originally appeared in the Idaho Statesman prior to the last IDFG fee increase and was changed slightly to reflect current events. It represents the author's opinion.)

New Roles Needed For IDFG

By Dr. Fritz Dixon

I respect the individual employees of the Idaho Department of Fish and Game but, in my opinion, the department is suffering a severe leadership problem, including the Fish and Game Commission. They appear to be adrift without even knowing who their customers really are, or what their mission is or should be.

Currently the Idaho Code gives the authority for both game and non-game wildlife programs to Fish and Game but non-game funding is limited at the state level.

I suggest the Idaho Legislature define the agency's mission for it, by the simple step of leaving consumptive catch-and-take-home fish and game in the department under the commission, funded with license and tag sales and the appropriate portion of federal and dedicated money.

The non-consumptive bird watching, research and related personnel, no matter how much or little it is, would be transferred to the Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation or other appropriate agency. It would require only a bill in both houses and a non-veto by the Governor.

The Commission would no longer have to cater to wildlife biologists who do not believe in providing game and fish for harvest, but who stay in the department because that is where the money is. That includes the salaries for the multitudinous research studies that are the key to published articles and the climb up the degree ladder to promotions and advanced careers.

When IDFG Director Steve Huffaker was still Chief of the Fisheries Bureau, he was quoted in Bassmaster magazine as saying, "I have seven Ph.D.'s on my staff and 46 people with master's degrees."

These people are not stupid and should be able to read published research and historical data and then make recommendations without spending so much money on more and more research – unless, of course, research itself is the objective and hunters' and fishermen's money is only their stepping stone to advancement.

Staff states informally that the reasons for the declining number of persons who hunt and fish are competition with other recreational choices, lack of places to hunt and fish, insufficient time, etc. But despite all the research and surveys, no one has made the effort to learn the real reasons fewer people are buying licenses – and then do something about it.

Over the long haul, as game populations continue to decline and Fish and Game loses its customer base, it will have to either acquire state tax funds or cut staff and programs. It would seem prudent for the Legislature to take the necessary steps now to prevent this. *Fritz R. Dixon of Meridian has degrees in zoology and medicine and has experience administering multimillion-dollar programs.*

Restoring Mule Deer

By George Dovel

In response to increasing pressure from sportsmen groups in southeast Idaho who want healthy mule deer populations restored in their region, IDFG recently transferred Biologist Shane King from the Tex Creek WMA to the position of Southeast Idaho Mule Deer Biologist in Pocatello. This transfer has been included as a benefit to Idaho sportsmen from the proposed fee increase.

In an interview published in the Winter 2004 SFW newsletter, King listed five "short term" actions he intends to take to "stimulate" mule deer recovery during the next five years: (1) improve CRP quality, (2) improve aspen communities, (3) improve winter range, (4) reduce the effects of invasive species, and (5) improve summer range. He talked about the need for sportsmen to decide what types of hunting opportunities they desire and added the Department's favorite habitat/climate cliché to excuse its lack of management.

Although *normal* carrying capacity is the ultimate criterion used to determine optimum populations, the short-term solutions King proposed did not include the changes in management needed to address the real problem. Fortunately for Southeast Idaho mule deer, Commissioner Gibbs has already taken a first step in the long process of restoring a viable herd by eliminating antlerless harvest.

The next steps include establishing a minimum post-hunting season ratio of 15 or so *mature* mule deer bucks for each 100 does, and dramatically reducing predator numbers in areas where spring green-up counts reveal surviving fawn-to-doe ratios lower than 40:100.

King said, "Cutting-edge science will dictate our management activities" yet failed to mention the use of emergency winter feeding and intensive predator control to mitigate mule deer losses from abnormal climatic conditions or over-harvesting. Long-term indifference, not habitat and climate, caused Idaho's mule deer crisis.

Is Forage the Culprit?

Like most other wild animals in Idaho, mule deer spend a good part of every day in late spring, summer, and especially early fall, renewing their stored energy (internal and external body fat) in order to survive the coming winter. The quantity and quality of forage on transition range is the most important natural factor affecting winter survival.

Qualified range conservationists or experienced laymen can measure the number of deer AUMs (animal unit months) of forage available in a given unit to determine the approximate carrying capacity for mule deer. An important strategy in mule deer management, once adequate nutrients are no longer available in mid-Autumn, is to minimize their loss of energy and thereby maximize survival time on their fixed energy reserves.

The forage utilization on both transition and winter range following a normal winter and a severe winter can also be measured and compared to determine whether or not range condition is a significant factor in survival. Obviously when winter forage is covered by deep snow during an extreme winter neither the quantity nor the quality of forage is relevant since it is not accessible.

King reported that area mule deer are entering the winter in good to excellent condition, based on fat measurements taken at check stations in early October. If accurate, this indicates that lack of quality forage is not the problem and can be confirmed by continuing to measure body fat on road and predator kills into the winter.

Look At This Photo Carefully

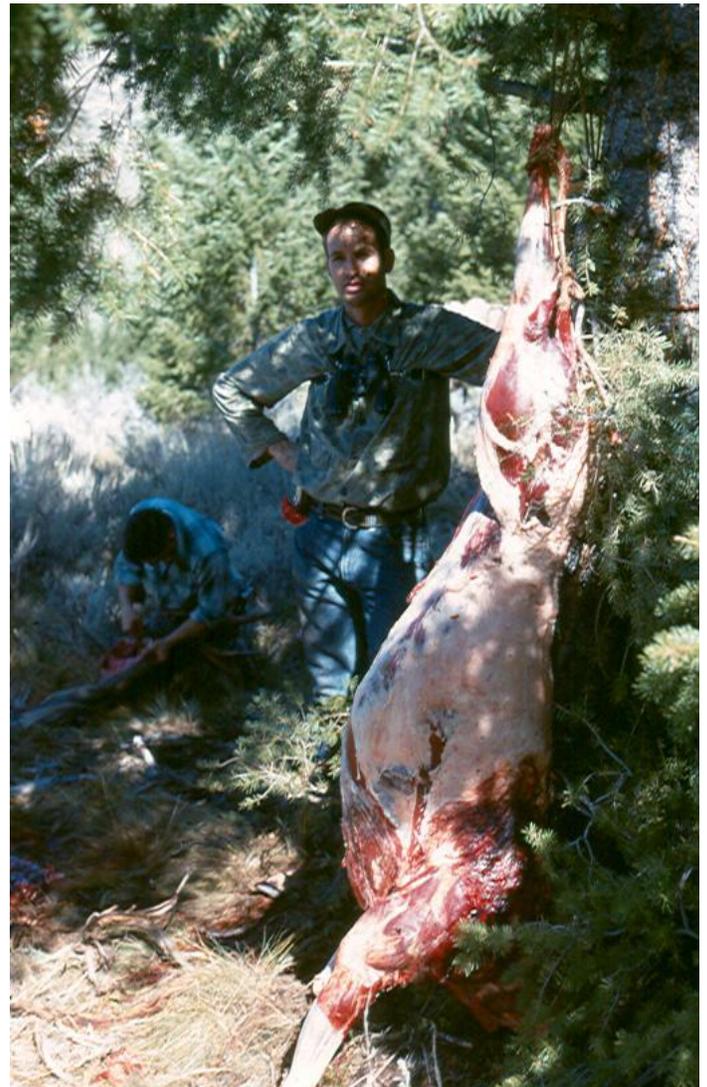


Photo of skinned carcass of one of the buck mule deer racks on the front page of this issue. Author, kneeling in background, removed cape from skull after preparing meat for cooling. Note healthy fat layer over most of body.

Another Reason Not To Hunt Late

Although some of the detail in the color slide scanned on page 8 is obscured by dark shadows in bright sunlight with no flash fill, you can make out the thick layer of fat indicating a healthy animal that will survive the winter. If you study the photo you will also see a hunter who was visibly upset because I “wasted time” taking care of the meat properly before I finished the caping process and resumed hunting.

The two hunters gave me the meat from all of their deer and said they didn't like the taste of venison, especially mule deer, based on past experience. Two days later, I included some of the tenderloin with their breakfast eggs and hot cakes and they compared it to the best filet mignon they had eaten.

After several meals of backstrap (loin) they took back their gift and had all of the meat processed and shipped back to Texas. They had eaten only tough, tainted meat from bucks killed during the rut and had no idea how tender and delicious a prime mule deer buck on good feed can be before the rut.

Each year during the late 1950s, before I began outfitting to help out a friend on lower Big Creek, my hired pilots and I transported several hundred hunters to a few remote airstrips in Unit 27 on the Middle Fork of the Salmon River. From November 1, through mid-December we could easily recognize the carcasses of a new arrival from upstream by the generous amount of body fat that remained compared to several hundred local deer.

Expanded Hunting Opportunity

The local deer, pursued by hunters for up to 90 consecutive days, had lost most or all of their body fat. Each year I asked the F&G Commission to shorten the 90-day season by a month and a half. Instead, they added a Middle Fork Antlerless tag in 1962.

Eleven years later A new Director chopped a month from the tail end of the season but it still remained open until mid-November and the Unit 27 deer herd has never recovered. The current bucks-only season with a minimum 3-point antler restriction ends October 22, but a “bonus” unlimited hunt allows 3-point or larger bucks to be killed through November 18.

Providing an exception to “no November mule deer hunting” cannot be justified biologically. So why do it? And if you're going to do it, why an unlimited controlled hunt instead of extending the general season?

\$\$ Signs

The answer is money. Whether it was for a limited controlled hunt, or the unlimited controlled hunts and landowner permission hunts which require no drawing, IDFG collected nearly \$1 million in FY 2004 from more than 90,000 nonrefundable application fees, 43,000 permit fees and over 4,000 special drawings. This does not include moose, sheep, goat and antelope permits, which are scarce enough to justify controlled hunts.

In return for paying the extra ~million dollars, the lucky controlled hunt applicants, and those who bought unlimited hunt permits, were allowed to hunt early or late when the game was more vulnerable. In most cases there were also fewer hunters in the field.

Idaho's \$13.00 total fee increased to \$13.50 on July 1, 2004, yet Colorado charges only a total of \$3.00 for both fees. Halting the practice of issuing bonus controlled hunt tags and temporarily ending antlerless harvest will shave years off of the recovery time and quickly increase the percentage of mature bucks in the harvest.

Why Not Emphasize Habitat Improvement?

My involvement with range improvement projects ranging from re-seeding and fencing rest rotation plots to controlled burns, generally reflects a high cost for a limited benefit to a small area. I strongly support cost effective habitat improvement, but that is not the game managers' first priority.

They are charged with maintaining populations of big game at the level which will provide a sustained annual yield and harvest consistent with the forage that is already available. If the game population gets too low to crop and prune the available forage, it will become decadent and deteriorate.

Over many years we simulated occasional excessive use of browse by dragging large chains behind tractors or using power saws to severely prune the limbs and branches. This increased new annual growth by several hundred percent and restored healthy root systems while increasing reproduction.

Inside exclosures, without large ungulates to press in the seeds and disturb the limbs, soil and root systems, both browse species and grasses eventually deteriorate and would provide little benefit to wildlife. Last month in the desert west of St. Anthony, I observed a few thousand acres of bitterbrush mixed with sage and bunchgrass that reflected limited utilization by deer and elk as winter range.

A Statewide Problem

Although the Department is addressing the mule deer decline in the Southeast Region in response to pressure, the mule deer crisis is equally severe in other parts of Idaho, especially the Southwest and Upper Snake Regions. Effective management must be restored statewide to prevent excessive harvests in one or two Regions.

Check station reports from one Montana Region reflect a six-year high in deer and elk harvest success while Idaho hunter success has reportedly declined. The majority of Idaho hunter harvest reports will have been received within the next month and should be scrutinized carefully to insure appropriate season adjustments.

The January Outdoorsman, Bulletin No. 9, will provide that information to Legislators who are interested in monitoring the situation to see that appropriate season adjustments are made.

“The Compass” Vote Delayed Again

by George Dovel

On November 19, 2004, at the F&G Commission meeting in Orofino, the Commissioners were scheduled to approve or reject the controversial 15-year Strategic Plan vaguely outlined in “The Compass”. Some of the testimony opposing the plan was included in last month’s Bulletin No. 7.

The process officially began in 2000 (FY 2001) when Rod Sando was Director. It was the brainchild of the IAFWA (International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies) the Washington, D.C. based group consisting of U.S. State and Canadian Provincial F&G Directors.

The claim by this group was that wildlife values are changing and state game agencies must adapt to those changes. The Compass outlined a major shift in emphasis to managing for non-consumptive wildlife watchers and managing non-game and fish species.

At the Commission meeting, IDFG Natural Resources Policy Bureau Chief Tracey Trent introduced Planning and Human Resources Administrator Michele Beucler from the IDFG Human Resources Office. She gave a presentation entitled, “Idahoans’ Opinions of Wildlife Management”, which categorized 85% of Idahoans as supporting The Compass concept, with a few “Utilitarians” who supported only hunting and fishing and a few “Greens” who did not support either.

Then Trent explained that about 20 IDFG employees had attended a week-long course on Comprehensive Management Training in 2000 costing about \$200 each and answered questions from several Commissioners. Commissioners Marc Gibbs and Cameron Wheeler were highly critical of the project cost, which was not mentioned but included a 2002 public opinion survey.

Supporters To “Tweak” Plan

Commissioners Hadley, Watts and Power voiced support for the Plan, as outlined in The Compass, but obviously lacked the additional vote needed to pass it. Watts said The Compass just needed a little “tweaking” to make it acceptable and made a motion that outgoing Chairman Hadley appoint two or three Commissioners to work with Deputy Director Mansfield, Beucler (and Trent) to make a few minor changes in the wording.

Hadley appointed Watts and Power and asked Wheeler if he would like to serve but Wheeler declined. She instructed them to bring the finished product to her for approval before the January Commission meeting in which newly elected Chairman Gibbs will preside over the vote.

Former Commissioner Fred Wood was in the audience and he reportedly told Commissioner Irby and several sportsmen that IDFG had slipped the project by the Commission originally without an adequate explanation.

Costs Paid With Sportsmen Dollars

Our subsequent research revealed that IAFWA’s Teaming With Wildlife Committee arranged the agenda and provided a private consultant to spend nine months in Idaho, with all charges and expenses paid by IDFG using sportsmen license fees and 3-to-1 matching sportsmen excise tax dollars.

The cost-to-date to hunters and fishermen for IDFG planning, the 2002 opinion survey, and preparation of the 25 page “Compass” as of December 13, 2004 is **\$565,556.86!** Equally disturbing is the fact that the half million plus was diverted from wildlife management to satisfy birdwatchers and anti-hunters who paid nothing to disfranchise the sportsmen who pay the cost of preserving and managing Idaho wildlife.

The second non-game non-sportsman oriented survey described in Bulletin No. 7 costs an estimated \$815,422 with 20 states and one province paying \$367,500 (45% of the total cost). Idaho’s pro-rated share of that is \$17,500 in sportsman license dollars for 400 mail-in opinion surveys to residents including processing.

Other Commission Meeting Highlights

On November 18, Huffaker’s Special Financial Advisor, Steve Barton, informed the Commission that Governor Kempthorne had suggested he prepare a FY 2006 budget with \$2 million shaved from it “in case the Legislature does not approve the fee increase.”

The Commission decided to drop its request for the authority to make its own fee increases every year, in addition to the 13.7% increase requested for FY 2006, beginning next July. They agreed that continuing with both requests at the same time could jeopardize their chance of getting the current increase approved.

The Biologists’ proposal to designate a statewide whitetail tag and another deer tag that only allowed hunting early in the Clearwater was designed to replace the Clearwater Deer Tag. That tag was implemented by the Commission in 1998 to prevent unsuccessful hunters in the rest of the state from also hunting in the Clearwater.

Except for some of the “X” whitetail tags, which allow hunters to harvest one deer in the Clearwater and another using a Regular Tag in the rest of the state, the Clearwater Deer Tag reduced the number of hunters in the Clearwater Region. According to Irby, it also reduced complaints from landowners.

The Commission was split with Hadley, Power and Watts supporting the new tags and Irby, Gibbs, Wheeler and Wright opposing them. The new tag proposal failed to pass so the Clearwater deer tag remains in effect for at least another season.

Editorial Comment

The impact of the facts we publish in *The Outdoorsman* is apparent in communications we receive from Legislators, and in the reluctance of four of the Commissioners to “rubber stamp” the Department’s diverse agendas. This has been driven by input from sportsmen who stay informed by reading our facts.

There is little doubt that, without the information we provide, the radical Compass plan would have been approved and the dual fee increase proposal would have remained on the agenda. Instead of moving in opposing directions, sportsmen from each region are beginning to seek uniform biological solutions to restore wildlife that was formerly abundant.

The definition of wildlife when Idaho’s wildlife policy became law in 1938, and for several decades after that, included only those species that are hunted, fished or trapped by man. But in 1976, when predator protectionist’s philosophy had replaced sanity in our nation’s wildlife laws, the definition of wildlife was changed in I.C. Sec. 36-202 to mean “any form of animal life, native or exotic, generally living in a state of nature.”

However I.C. Sec. 36-201 specifically prohibits changing the classification of predatory animals so if a rattlesnake is an animal, it is also a predator. Without any public input, Idaho wildlife managers have brazenly adopted the animal rights/preservationist agenda and made it a misdemeanor offense to harm creatures that spread disease and destroy crops, livestock and pets.

If the Legislative Rules Committee dignifies these new rules by making them permanent, it will establish a dangerous precedent. It will also pave the way for new public and private land use restrictions to protect the more than 100 non-game/fish species that IDFG ecologists, zoologists and botanists have already identified as potential candidates for ESA listing.

Scientific information in the next bulletin on successful pheasant management in some other states will provide clear alternatives to the Department allowing the destruction of this popular “invasive species.” Governor Kempthorne’s Invasive Species Committee properly addresses the control and eradication of noxious “invasive” species like yellow starthistle.

Yet wild rainbow trout, which have been “native” to Idaho streams and coexisted with native species for almost a century, are on the list of the “top 100 invasive species threatening native species and their fragile ecosystems.” IDFG fisheries biologists poisoned the rainbows in several eastern Idaho streams and a lake claiming they were destroying the cutthroat population.

Now, after several years have passed, the cutthroats are still declining leaving a void where a popular trout fishery formerly existed.

IDFG biologists are stocking sterile “triploid rainbow trout hybrids to prevent them from reproducing wild fish in Idaho’s streams and rivers, yet they show no concern for declining mountain whitefish populations or the native mountain quail that are being replaced by California quail and other “invasive species”.

Sportsmen and Legislators who throw up their hands and say, “What can we do, they’re too powerful,” have either forgotten, or are too young to remember, the nationwide environmental insanity of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The facts we published in *The Outdoorsman* then halted the destruction of Idaho’s wild game and fish and resulted in a new management direction, which restored populations in a few years.

The only difference in *The Outdoorsman* then and now is that we ran it as a business and quickly increased our circulation to 30,000. Now, just the cost of printing, handling and mailing each copy via bulk mail is almost \$1.00 and that does not include the fixed costs of operation or the 150+ hours of research and effort that go into each issue as my donation to present and future outdoorsmen.

We have rejected offers of financing from a single group because that could compromise the integrity of the information. Thus far, generous donations have paid the printing and distribution costs and we sincerely appreciate every one, including those for only \$5 or \$10 which don’t quite cover the cost of the bulletins we send the donors.

We recently had additional copies of the early issues printed so we can send them to all of the newly elected Legislators and to others who are requesting back issues. It costs more than \$1 to print and mail a single issue but every issue that is read and circulated provides effective ammunition to combat misinformation the public is receiving.

IDFG is using its multi-million dollar facilities, funded by sportsmen, to promote its non-game/fish agenda to the public. Then it spends more sportsmen’s dollars to circulate public opinion surveys to verify that the public is listening to its misinformation. The time has come to increase our circulation to reach more elected officials and groups.

If you represent a typical family with one or more license buyers, Fish and Game is asking you to contribute another \$20 or more in increased fees to support continued mismanagement of our wild game. For that same amount of money, you can read the truth and know that several *Outdoorsman* copies will be provided to concerned Idaho citizens via volunteers across Idaho.

Donations received from your area will increase readership, both in your area and statewide. It will be nearly Christmas when you receive this issue and I urge you to also donate for a friend or relative to be placed on the mailing list and receive notification of your gift. Please fill in the name and mailing address on the coupon on page 12 or use a blank piece of paper for several addresses.

A Constitutional Amendment Guaranteeing Idahoans The Right To Hunt, Fish and Trap

Four years ago, a proposed amendment to the Idaho Constitution that would guarantee Idaho citizens the right to hunt, fish, trap and harvest continued supplies of wild animals, birds and fish was carefully crafted. Copies were submitted to the National Rifle Association and the Wildlife Legislative Fund of America (now the U.S. Sportsmen’s Alliance) for their consideration.

The legal staffs of both organizations praised the language as containing wording with the teeth necessary to protect sportsmen’s right to pursue and harvest supplies of wild game and fish. It passed the Idaho House but was tabled in the Senate Resources Committee by the chairman because IDFG objected to “managing to provide continued supplies for harvest” as Idaho law already requires.

The following year a similarly worded amendment was challenged by Idaho Water Users because they felt that “providing continued supplies of fish” could mean diverting irrigation water from farmers. The F&G Commission also wrote a letter claiming the wording was ambiguous and objecting to providing continued supplies for harvest rather than only providing hunting “opportunity”.

Last year Representative Clete Edmundson submitted a third version approved by IDFG because it only agreed to provide the “opportunity” to hunt, fish and trap – rather than “be managed to provide continued supplies for hunters fishermen and trappers to harvest.”

National anti-hunting groups expressed delight with this and similar right to hunt amendments that passed in several states because the right to hunt does not mean a reasonable opportunity to harvest.

Before this or any other right to hunt amendment to the Constitution is submitted, to be effective it must contain language stating that the wildlife will be managed: (a) to provide continued supplies to harvest, or (b) “to provide a sustained yield” or (c) “to provide reasonable harvest opportunity.” Anything less is simply “feel good” but impossible to enforce.

Legislators or groups with a similar proposal this session are urged to contact Outdoorsman editor George Dovel to obtain the input from national organizations that specialize in these amendments to state constitutions.

Each month, Outdoorsman articles reveal little known facts about a variety of fish and game management issues that affect every Idahoan, especially those who cherish Idaho’s hunting, fishing and trapping heritage. Please help distribute these facts to help stop the destruction of our billion-dollar wildlife resource and restore sound wildlife management for future generations. A donation in any amount will help defray the cost of printing and mailing these informative bulletins to elected officials. A donation of \$20 or more will pay the cost of printing and mailing all bulletins to you for the next 12 months, and will guarantee they will be sent to the Legislators in your District and distributed by volunteers to other sportsmen.

To receive future bulletins, please fill out and clip the coupon below and mail it with your donation to:

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