

FWP deserves accolades for Deer License Reduction

Montana's Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks recently announced they were reducing hunting licenses for mule deer in a large swath of Central and Eastern Montana. That move was catalyzed by low spring counts, hard seasons over the last few years, and increasingly stressed and declining deer populations.

Although this decision will result in a short-term loss of opportunity, it shows that FWP is putting the resource first. For that, the Department deserves the thanks of Montana hunters.

The undersigned groups have never shied away from criticisms of the agency, but we also need to give credit where credit is due. During the past year, hunting organizations and citizens have voiced concerns about mule deer numbers across the state. In this last legislative session, legislators introduced several bills aimed at reducing non-resident hunting licenses in an attempt to reduce crowding on public land and increase resident hunter success rates. One of the few bills that made it through was from Senator Pat Flowers (D-Bozeman)—Senate Bill 281.

That bill directed FWP to institute a limit on non-resident antlerless deer licenses sold. The starting date for that new policy is in 2024. Still, FWP has taken the intent to heart and has reduced antlerless harvest across the board, meaning that there will be fewer non-resident hunter days in Montana, less pressure on our game animals, and fewer trucks at the Block Management sign-in box and at your trailhead.

Mule deer populations across the West are declining, and state wildlife management agencies are grappling with what needs to be done to halt the decline and preserve hunting opportunities for this iconic and deeply valued species. Above all, mule deer need healthy, connected habitat and the opportunity to survive and rebound when tough winters and hunting pressure reduce populations to unsustainable levels. We're grateful that the Department has listened to hunters and stepped up to address the trends we've all seen on the ground.

FWP's decision will surely be debated across Montana, but with all that deer are facing this is a welcome course correction. Montana's hunters have helped restore and maintain wildlife populations across the United States and we're happy to step up and reduce our impact at this point in time. We also encourage FWP to use this opportunity to continue moving forward with the revamp of the Mule Deer plan that looks far into the future, like they've done with the Elk Management Plan. With loss of habitat due to noxious weeds, drought and increased housing development and new challenges like Chronic Wasting Disease it's time to check our plans and adapt to the changing western landscape.

We thank the Department for responding to the concerns of mule deer hunters, landowners, outfitters and wildlife professionals across the state, and we stand committed to helping FWP restore the deer populations we love.

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