

**5-YEAR BIG GAME SEASON STRUCTURE (BGSS) 2005-2009
FINAL POLICY
June 15, 2004**

Following are the Division of Wildlife's final Big Game Season Structure policies for the 2005-2009 big game season structure. As of May 11, 2004, the Commission has adopted policies that will guide the implementation of 2005-2009 big game seasons in Colorado. Adjustments to license fees and regulatory complexity were presented as policy issues early in this process and will be addressed through means other than policy. Specifically, future adjustments to license fees will be discussed at the discretion of the Commission. As part of second phase of the 2005-2009 season setting process, the Division of Wildlife will work to establish a systematic process for the simplification of wildlife regulations. A template or "filter" will be developed to enable the ongoing pursuit of regulation simplification.

I. Relationships between Disease Management Policy, 5-year Big Game Season Structure (BGSS) policy and Data Analysis Unit (DAU) planning

Background:

Currently, three fundamental decision processes impact the management of big game populations and hunting opportunity. These processes are the development/revision of Commission policy for the management of chronic wasting disease, the development/revision of policy and implementation strategies for the 5-year big game season structure, and the development of Data Analysis Unit (DAU) plans for individual herds. Disease management policy may substantially influence decisions made with regard to the 5-year big game season structure and BGSS in turn influences the development of DAU plans.

Overlap among these processes exists in terms of the biological and social elements considered. This overlap has, in recent years, caused confusion for the public and has contributed to conflicting objectives for wildlife managers. It is important, therefore, to identify the biological parameters that will be addressed and the relationship/impact of each process on the others.

With an increasing emphasis on more localized management, the following policy recommendation combines two of the draft alternatives and describes statewide parameters for sex ratios while directing that other biological and social issues be addressed through the enhanced DAU planning process endorsed by the Commission in 2003. The enhanced process was designed to increase the utility of DAU plans in meeting management objectives. Disease management policy will be a consideration in the development of biological parameters and management strategies at the DAU level.

Policy:

Over the next five-year period, deer and elk will be managed to achieve population objectives within the carrying capacity of their habitat and to move on a statewide basis toward 15-20 males per 100 females. Specific objectives for individual data analysis units may vary and will be established considering reproductive capacity, hunter preferences, economic effects and land accessibility among other appropriate factors. In any individual unit, if the two-year average post-hunt male/female ratio falls or is predicted to fall below 15/100, the Division will evaluate, and report annually, the factors which may be contributing to the decrease and will implement management actions where possible to increase the ratio as quickly as practicable. The Division of Wildlife recognizes that density and age structure-related reductions in productivity and survival can occur in big game populations. In such cases, female harvest and reduced male/female ratios may increase productivity and survival and should be considered as possible management tools at the DAU level.

II. General Guidelines for Season Setting

Background:

Historically, wildlife managers have strived to meet biological harvest objectives through the use of a wide variety of tools. These tools have been implemented in accordance with a series of policy guidelines that define the range of “tools” (e.g. licenses types) available, the management philosophies for season types, and general parameters for season dates.

These guidelines have slowly evolved over many years as much out of practicality as design. It is important to note that the guidelines focus not only on the achievement of biological management outcomes, but just as importantly, recreational outcomes. Perhaps as a result of this slow evolution and the consideration of both biological and recreational objectives, the majority of internal and external feedback supports continued use of existing guidelines.

Policy:

Definitions of early, regular and late seasons:

The Wildlife Commission will utilize the following distinctions to describe the general framework for big game hunting seasons:

Early seasons are designed primarily to enhance the variety of hunting opportunities that are available rather than achieve a particular biological outcome.

Regular seasons are designated as such to communicate that these are the regular or primary seasons to accomplish biological control of big game populations and the primary period to offer hunting opportunity to the public.

Late seasons are established primarily to achieve management objectives rather than provide substantial quantities of additional recreational opportunity.

These distinctions do not preclude the approved use of any management tool, e.g., cow elk hunting during the early season period, when necessary to achieve a specific management or biological outcome or to provide a specific recreational outcome.

Hunts during the rut

The Wildlife Commission will continue to carefully manage hunting during the peak of the breeding seasons for deer, elk, pronghorn and moose. However, additional restrictions will be imposed in circumstances where there is credible evidence of negative impact on pregnancy rates and/or survival of young.

Parameters for season dates

The Wildlife Commission will continue to utilize the following guidelines in development of the big game season structure for the years 2005-2009:

- A. Female animals are not hunted earlier than the last week of August.
- B. Regular rifle seasons begin no earlier than the first Saturday after October 9.
- C. Regular rifle seasons do not extend beyond mid-November.

These guidelines do not preclude the approved use of management tools, e.g. rifle elk prior to October 9, when necessary to achieve a specific management or biological outcome or to provide a specific recreational outcome.

Guidelines to facilitate harvest

The Division of Wildlife will continue to utilize programs (such as landowner preference, HPP, and varied hunting seasons) and strategies (such as allowing the take of multiple animals, distribution hunts, disease hunts, etc.) to facilitate the fulfillment of harvest objectives on public and private land. These programs and tools focus primarily on harvest of female animals and may include, in addition to other strategies, the use of private land only (PLO) and/or either-sex licenses.

III. Types and Proportions of Hunting Opportunity

Background:

Defining the types and proportions of hunting opportunity is one of the major underpinnings of the 5-year big game season structure. Addressing this issue requires managers to consider the inextricable link between biological constraints/capabilities and hunter demand for recreational opportunities.

Different types of hunting opportunities can be described in terms of the characteristics of the hunt, such as method of take, hunter density, frequency of availability, cost, location, timing and species hunted, and in terms of the characteristics of the animal pursued (sex and/or age). Furthermore, pursuing a particular type of hunting opportunity in a given DAU has an impact on local economies. While these factors were considered in the development of 2000-2004 BGSS policy, the definition of terms such as "quality" and "limited" continue to be inconsistently applied. In addition, the process to fulfill statewide objectives for different hunt types remained unclear.

The following recommendation is designed first to simplify the definition of hunt types by describing only two types, maximum and limited. The definition of "limited" opportunity includes any hunt where male licenses are restricted and it extends to "premier" hunts as previously defined. Second, the recommendation addresses hunter demand for recreational opportunity by providing a statewide cap on the proportion of limited opportunity that will be available. This is most relevant with respect to elk. Currently, an estimated 17% of the elk resource is managed for what will be defined as limited opportunity. The recommendation below allows up to 30% of the resource to be managed as limited. Lastly, the recommendation defines how two related decisions will be made. First, what new units, if any, will be designated for limited opportunity management, and secondly what is the desired extent of limitation, i.e. what is the predominant male age class available for harvest in those units?

Policy:

The Wildlife Commission recognizes that Colorado's hunting public desires a variety of big game hunting opportunities including ease of participation, enhanced quality of experience (i.e., less crowded conditions), increased success rate, and the opportunity to harvest animals with well-developed secondary male characteristics (i.e., antlers, horns, body size).

Methods to achieve these various opportunities include offering readily available licenses, spatial and temporal distribution of hunters, and limiting licenses to various extents. These different hunting opportunities/types are often mutually exclusive and therefore must be balanced among the desires of local hunters, landowners, and economic interests; affected non-local resident hunters; and affected non-residents.

Definition of hunt types

Maximum opportunity – These hunts provide the best opportunity to hunt every year with greatest likelihood of harvesting any age class male and females in the population. Constraints on season lengths and antler-point restrictions are used to prevent excessive harvest of male animals and both over-the-counter and/or limited licenses are used to focus needed harvest on female animals to control populations. These hunts have higher hunter densities than other hunt types.

Limited opportunity – These hunts provide significant opportunity, but are available less frequently with draw success occurring every 1 to 3+ years. Limited opportunities are designed to increase the likelihood of harvesting older age class males (4-5 point bulls; 4 point, <25" bucks). As license numbers are further reduced and/or other constraints are placed on the hunts, the likelihood of harvesting a 6+ point bull or 4 point >25" buck increases. Male licenses are more limited and are used to manage hunter pressure, prevent excessive harvest of male animals and to focus needed harvest on females for population control. These hunts have lower hunter densities than maximum opportunity hunts.

Proportions of Hunt Types

Hunting opportunities for male animals will, to the extent possible, be provided according to the following distributions: (Distributions are described in terms of the percentage of the statewide animal resource to be managed for a particular classification.)

Elk: Up to 30% Limited Opportunity
(remaining proportion managed for maximum opportunity)

Deer - West of I-25: 100% Limited Opportunity

Deer - East of I-25: 100% Limited Opportunity

Pronghorn: 100% Limited Opportunity (Some over the counter archery hunting will be available)

Moose: 100% Limited Opportunity

Black Bear: Vary by DAU

Designating Units for Limited Hunting Opportunity

Decisions to manage for Limited Opportunity have implications for local economies, landowners, and the achievement of management objectives in surrounding units. Therefore, proposals for the designation of units to be managed for limited hunting opportunity should be initiated by local interests. The second phase of the process to develop the 5-year big game season structure will include an opportunity for citizens to propose the designation of additional DAUs for limited opportunity within the proportions established above and the related extent of limitations. Proposals will be presented for review and approval by the Wildlife Commission as a part of finalizing the 5-year season structure. The Commission's review will consider, in addition to other factors, input from hunters, landowners, local businesses and other interested citizens.

IV. White-tailed Deer Hunting

The Wildlife Commission chose to implement white-tailed deer hunting seasons and management practices through the normal implementation process rather than provide an over-arching policy direction at this time.

V. Allocation of Hunting Opportunity

Background:

Following the definition of hunt types, allocation of opportunity among hunters receives the greatest attention during the development of the 5-year big game season structure. Discussions about allocation revolve primarily around perceived equity. In the past, allocation has also been discussed as it relates to hunter density (crowding) and impacts of hunter density on wildlife. Equity is discussed in the context of allocations between resident and nonresident hunters, between hunters who prefer different methods of take, and as it pertains to allocations between public and private land licenses.

Historically, allocation decisions have considered not only the opportunity available to an individual hunter, but also impacts on hunting related businesses (e.g. outfitting), private landowners, local economies, agency revenues and hunter recruitment. Potential legal issues have also been considered.

A. Allocation among methods of take

It is the policy of the Colorado Wildlife Commission that allocation of hunting opportunity by method of take can be determined by any of several methods as long as first choice application rates, harvest success rates or a combination of application and harvest success rates are used to determine the allocation of licenses to each method of take.

B. Limits on non-resident participation

It is the policy of the Colorado Wildlife Commission that 60% of all limited deer and elk licenses, except Private Land Only (PLO) and Ranching for Wildlife (RFW), will be made available to resident hunters on first choice applications. Licenses not allocated to resident hunters on first choice may be allocated to non-resident hunters.

C. Youth opportunity

The privilege and tradition of big game hunting is part of Colorado's rich outdoor heritage. Actions by the Division of Wildlife provide the foundation for the promotion, recruitment and retention of future generations of hunters and wildlife program supporters. Similarly, partnerships and the involvement of private property owners, other agencies, local governments, public and private groups, citizens and volunteers are critical to the success of division initiated programs.

Licensing should support an aggressive state recruitment program which encourages youth opportunities and external partnerships to assist in outreach efforts.

Therefore, it will be the policy of the Wildlife Commission to promote and expand youth hunting opportunities through a licensing system which encourages responsible participation, outreach efforts dedicated to the recruitment of new hunters, and a support system which enhances mentoring opportunities. The primary focus of youth big game hunting programs and strategies will be to provide maximum hunting opportunity through flexible licensing and season participation strategies. The Division will consider, on a case-by-case basis, limited opportunities for youth.

D. Private Land Only Licenses

The Wildlife Commission acknowledges the importance of wildlife management on private lands both in terms of the significance of private land harvest toward meeting overall harvest objectives, and of developing additional hunting opportunity. The implementation of existing tools (e.g. PLO licenses) and programs (e.g. Ranching for Wildlife, statutory landowner preference) and the development of new tools and programs must create benefit for landowners, equity among hunters and facilitate achievement of biological management objectives.

E. Preference Points

The Wildlife Commission at their June 3, 2004 meeting in Pueblo voted to maintain the existing preference point system for the 2005 hunts. Staff was directed to conduct an additional one year review of the preference point issue for reconsideration and the implementation of any changes that result from the review no later than the 2006 deer, elk and pronghorn seasons.

F. Limited Licenses

Background:

Totally limited licenses are used to limit harvest of a specific age or sex component of a big game population. Limited licenses have been used to control antlerless elk and deer harvest for many years. Since 1999, all deer licenses have been limited.

Limited licenses give managers more control of hunter harvest, but may be viewed by some hunters as an impediment to continued participation. Harvest success for the hunters who do participate in units with significant limitations, usually increases. Total limitations do not automatically require reductions in the number of available licenses. However, if limited licenses are used to significantly change the sex or age component of a population, it may be necessary to decrease the number of licenses available in a unit.

1. Deer and Elk

The Wildlife Commission will continue total limitations for deer licenses throughout the season structure for the years 2005-2009. Elk license limitations will be used in individual DAUs, when necessary to manage toward biological objectives (i.e. limits on female licenses) and/or to fulfill the Commission's policy with regard to the providing limited hunting opportunity (i.e. limits on male licenses).

2. Black Bear

Background:

Current black bear season issues include preventing over harvest, reducing regulation complexity, and equitable distribution of hunting opportunity.

Some early season licenses have been totally limited in individual DAUs to reduce harvest. In other DAU's, where the risk of over harvest is insignificant, unlimited early

season archery and muzzleloader licenses can be used. This inconsistency has led to confusion among some hunters. In some DAUs, limiting early season licenses alone may not be adequate to prevent over harvest.

The current black bear seasons are also complicated by season participation restrictions. The primary purpose of these restrictions as they apply to unlimited bear licenses is to reduce the opportunity for party hunting during deer and elk seasons.

The current bear seasons may not equitably distribute bear hunting opportunity among seasons and methods of take. Currently, if reductions in harvest are needed the only means available is to reduce early season bear licenses by limiting archery and muzzleloader licenses and/or reducing the number of early rifle licenses. This can be viewed as favoring over-the-counter regular rifle season hunters over archery, muzzleloader, and early rifle hunters.

Policy:

Current regulatory structure

G. Constraints on Individual Hunter Participation

Background:

Constraints on individual hunter participation take the form of restrictions on the number and types of licenses one hunter may possess. These constraints exist to manage harvest of different population segments and to manage hunter distribution across various seasons.

Policy:

Constraints on hunter participation currently exist in specific Wildlife Commission regulations rather than policy. As such the Division recommends that this issue be addressed during the second phase of the season setting process rather than through a policy statement.

VII. Restrictions on OHV use during the hunting seasons

Background:

In recent years, the Division has received a variety of complaints related to OHV use on public lands and specifically during the hunting seasons. Complaints center on concerns about use of OHVs to road hunt, illegally access areas otherwise closed to motor vehicles, and herd game animals. The most frequent complaint centers on noise disturbance. The desired outcome for many who provided input, was a complete ban or severe restrictions on OHV use on public lands. Many of the remedies suggested by the public would require policy action by land management agencies. This type of policy change falls outside the Wildlife Commission's authority with regard to OHV use.

The Division provides input on travel management plans developed by land management agencies to identify possible impacts to wildlife and wildlife related recreational opportunity. The Wildlife Commission also has in place regulations which define acceptable use during the hunting seasons.

Policy:

The Wildlife Commission will petition the Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation and the federal land management agencies with general regulatory authority over the use of OHVs, to consider and adopt regulations to reduce the adverse impacts that OHVs may have on wildlife populations and hunting opportunity in Colorado. Further, the Wildlife Commission will seek more effective enforcement mechanisms, including direct enforcement authority for the Division of Wildlife, to ensure compliance with these state and federal regulations regarding OHV use. Alternatively, the Wildlife Commission may seek explicit regulatory and enforcement authority over the use of OHVs as an aide in hunting.

VIII. Deviations from the Established Season Structure

The Wildlife Commission shall maintain sufficient flexibility in the setting of season structures to allow for deviations from previously established decisions. Such changes shall be allowed when reasonably necessary to protect or manage big game populations. Changes will be made with adequate public notification and thorough consideration of public input using the Commission's 3-step decision making process.