

# Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife mule deer assessment

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other wildlife populations. The consequences of all these interconnected factors are gradually causing a decline in overall habitat quality for mule deer.

The suggestion of halting harvest altogether to allow the mule deer population to recover was discussed. However, it was stated that the current mule deer population is already close to or at its likely new capacity. If active management is stopped, mortality rates may increase, and survival rates may decrease due to insufficient resources and space for the deer. It was suggested to focus on improving the landscape's capacity to support mule deer while continuing management efforts for sustainable harvest levels.

## Antler point restriction

Another question was, why doesn't the ODFW implement antler point restrictions in some units, requiring bucks to have three points or better? Could this potentially increase the number of trophy opportunities and lead to higher-quality bucks in some of Oregon's most sought-after units?

Don Whittaker from the ODFW said, the idea behind antler point restrictions is that only allowing the harvest of bucks with a certain number of points on at least one side, would result in more bucks and provide a chance for larger and more mature bucks to thrive. This approach is commonly used in white-tail deer management and has shown success in that context. Mule deer are different. Many western states have experimented with antler point restrictions in the past, and almost all have found that it does not yield the desired results. Instead of increasing buck ratios or producing a higher proportion of larger antlered

bucks, it mainly shifts the heavy harvest from younger bucks to two and three-year-old bucks. In the long run, these restrictions have not led to consistent improvements in buck populations or antler quality. In the rare instances where some positive impact has been observed, it has typically been short-lived and not very effective. Therefore, based on the experiences of other states, implementing antler point restrictions in Oregon is unlikely to produce the desired outcomes in terms of trophy opportunities and higher-quality bucks.

## Cougar Population

Concerns were raised about predator populations, particularly cougars, and their impact on mule deer. It was mentioned that there are around 7,000 cougars across all classes in Oregon. While it is true that a cougar kills a deer every 7-10 days, the number of kills is spread across the landscape and includes cubs and dependent young. In reality, around 3,500-4,000 cougars are responsible for the kills, and they primarily target smaller ungulates like whitetail and mule deer fawns, as well as elk. The highest kill rate occurs just after ungulate birth, which contributes to the overall kill rate on the landscape.

## Limiting doe harvest

In 1960s, 40% of the harvested deer were does, but currently, this number has dropped to less than 10%.

The decision to consider limited and controlled female harvest depends on factors such as the relationship between mortality rates and landscape capacity, and whether the mortality is compensatory or additive to the population. Reproduction of mule deer is currently at a rate of 7 per 100 does.

The consideration of

doe harvest by the ODFW has sparked controversy among some individuals who question its effectiveness in light of already low deer populations. At first glance, it may seem counterintuitive to target female deer for harvest when their numbers are already dwindling. However, there are certain situations where doe harvest can actually yield positive outcomes.

Mule deer populations are incredibly sensitive to mortality rates. If a significant number of deer - say 20 out of 100 - perish each year, the population will either stabilize or decline. However, if only 10 out of 100 does die annually, the population is likely to experience an upward trend. Over the years, Oregon and other western states have observed that when there is no female harvest, the age structure of mule deer populations can skew towards older individuals, negatively impacting reproduction rates. Therefore, it becomes crucial to analyze the mortality factors within a population, assessing whether they are additive or compensatory, and determining the population's proximity to its carrying capacity.

In cases where a population is nearing landscape capacity and data indicates that the mortality rates are predominantly compensatory rather than additive, a carefully regulated doe harvest could potentially improve the age and sex structure of the population. By selectively targeting older females, ODFW aims to revitalize the population and promote healthier reproductive cycles.

## Hunter numbers

The number of hunters has declined over the past few decades, but the decline has not been significant in the last 10 to 12 years in Oregon. The decrease in mule deer hunters is primarily

due to the decline in mule deer population. ODFW has responded by adjusting its conservation framework and reducing harvest levels accordingly.

In 2020, there were 326,663 registered hunters in Oregon, accounting for 7.8% of the state's population. In the same year, ODFW sold 77,000 bear tags with a 37% participation rate and 75,000 cougar tags with a 22% participation rate.

The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) has stated that rifle hunts for mule deer began in the 1930s. However, they have noticed a decline in the number of hunters due to various actions and responses, as well as limited hunting opportunities.

## ATVs and OHVs

During the final webinar on January 9th, concerns were raised by hunters about the widespread use of ATVs, both during hunting season and year-round, which can disrupt wildlife and their habitats. ODFW has responded by closing certain roads to ATV use during specific times of the year to protect winter ranges and create secure habitats for hunting. Public education and outreach are also being used to address the impacts of ATV use on wildlife.

Dereck Broman from ODFW mentioned that he received a question from hunters regarding the frequent sightings and noise of ATVs. While acknowledging that ATVs can be enjoyable, many hunters are worried about the unintended consequences they bring, particularly concerning mule deer. The question arises - what is the recommended approach? Can ATVs be stopped, and is it necessary to stop them, especially concerning mule deer?

According to Jeremy

Thompson, there has been a noticeable rise in the recreational use of off-highway vehicles in various parts of the state. To address this, some roads, including those used by ATVs, are closed during certain times of the year. These closures aim to protect the winter range and create secure habitats for hunting. In the Blue Mountains, designated travel management areas have been established to provide a hunting experience free from ATV disturbances. Thompson emphasizes the importance of educating the public about the impact of vehicular use on wildlife. Collaboration with land management agencies is key in identifying areas where increased vehicle impacts are observed and implementing limitations on their use. The ODFW will continue outreach efforts to work with constituents and partners to mitigate these impacts.

In response to questions regarding the declining mule deer population and the lowered number of desired deer on the landscape, Smith emphasized the importance of setting realistic and attainable goals. ODFW aims for a 44% increase in mule deer population, which would still be a significant improvement. It is worth noting that mule deer populations have been declining across many Western states, not just in Oregon.

## Poaching

Concerns about litigation and political interference in predator management were addressed by ODFW. They stated that they must adhere to the cur-

rent laws and regulations set by the voters of Oregon, which includes the ban on hound hunting for cougar and bear.

During her presentation, Yvonne Shaw revealed that in 2019, the state legislature allocated a significant amount of funding, specifically \$4.4 million, to support an extensive anti-poaching initiative. This effort involves the establishment of three teams, each with a specific role in combating poaching activities. The initiative includes the appointment of a Wildlife Anti-Poaching Resources Prosecutor, who will be based at the Oregon Department of Justice.

ODFW is actively recruiting more troops to combat wildlife crimes and intends to hire additional staff to monitor and track cases through the court system. The lack of adequate prosecutors is recognized as a challenge, with the current ratio falling short of the ideal ratio. Successful cases, like that of Walter Erickson, a notorious poacher, highlight the collaborative efforts of OSP, special investigations, and prosecutors resulting in substantial fines, jail time, bans, and asset forfeiture for offenders.

The draft of the mule deer plan is currently nearing completion, and public input and comments are still being sought. Interested individuals can sign up for email updates on ODFW's website to stay informed about the plan's progress.

It is worth noting that wolves were not extensively discussed in the webinar series.

DEADLINE:  
MONDAYS  
AT 5PM

## Barney Lindsay Memorial

# AUCTION

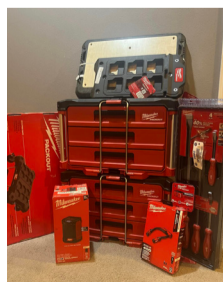
### JANUARY 27, 2024

### Gilliam Bisbee Building



**Doors open at 5:00 pm, dinner at 6:00 pm, live auction begins at 7:00 pm.**

Tickets \$40.00 each sold in groups of two, can be pre-purchased at Murray's Drug in Heppner or sold at the time of the event at the door. Ashley Lindsay is making the meal, Joe Lindsay and sons will be providing the entertainment, Erin Heideman is the emcee and Kenny Grieb is the auctioneer. We lots of amazing live and silent auction items including fishing trips, AirBnB stays, a Lindsay steer and lamb, fertilizer, grass seed, wine cases, many spa baskets and other gift baskets. Over 75 items!



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