

MASTER HUNTER PROGRAM PROGRESS REPORT
JUNE 2008

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Commission Policy C-6005, approved 12/7/07, requires the Director to report on the Master Hunter Program implementation and performance twice annually or as otherwise requested by the Commission.

Background

The former Advanced Hunter Education program (AHE) was created by the Department in 1992. Since then, about 10,000 hunters have applied, and approximately 2,450 of them have successfully completed all necessary requirements and been certified as AHE members.

The AHE program was generally successful in that likely hundreds of thousands of dollars of potential game damage claims were averted through the targeted harvest of depredating game by AHE hunters. Thousands of hours of volunteer time were also provided to the Department and many other agencies and non-profit organizations, by AHE applicants, and by AHE graduates completing re-certification requirements every 5 years. Many of these volunteer conservation projects had direct benefits to the fish and wildlife resources of the state.

However, there were also highly visible and publicized problems with the AHE program. There were too many lapses of ethical judgment by AHE hunters leading to wildlife rule violations, convictions, and landowner complaints. There also was insufficient direction and guidance being provided by the Department to the AHE effort due to existing workloads and insufficient staffing levels. Accountability for AHE members was also deemed to be inadequate. As a result, there was a consensus on the part of the Commission, Department, AHE Focus Group, and the general hunting public to make significant changes to strengthen the program. The application process for AHE was

suspended for about 9 months in 2007 in order to allow Hunter Education staff to undergo a planning process, prepare amendment options for WAC 232-12-073, and to make necessary refinements in study materials.

On December 7, 2007, the Commission approved Commission Policy C-6005, Master Hunter Program (posted on Master Hunter web site). This policy clearly outlined expectations and guidance to the Department for the development and implementation of the new Master Hunter program. On January 11, 2008, the Commission amended WAC 232-12-073, Master Hunter Program (posted on Master Hunter web site). The amended rule effectively terminated the former AHE program and launched the transition into the new Master Hunter program.

Policy and Programmatic Changes in the New Master Hunter Program

- The goals and objectives of the new program include: 1) Promote safe, ethical, responsible, and legal hunting; 2) Promote support for hunting with the general public; 3) Promote the highest standards of hunting; 4) Improve landowner-sportsmen relations; 5) Engage applicants and participants in volunteer conservation project work that benefits wildlife, wildlife habitat, and the associated priorities of the Department; and 6) Develop a Corps of Master Hunters that can be engaged in addressing highly sensitive wildlife depredation issues.
- Because of workload issues, the open enrollment period for the Master Hunter program was restricted to the January-March period, annually.
- The accountability for Master Hunters was increased substantially. The Commission adopted a “zero tolerance policy” for wildlife convictions. Applicants who have prior wildlife or trespassing-while-hunting convictions within the last 10 years, or prior felonies prohibiting the possession of firearms (unless firearm possession is reinstated), or who have a current hunting license suspension in another state, cannot apply for the Master Hunter program. Certified Master Hunters who are convicted of wildlife misdemeanors, gross misdemeanors, or felonies; trespassing-while-hunting; or reckless endangerment involving hunting weapons, will be removed from the Master Hunter program for life. Accordingly, all Master Hunter applicants must be subjected to a criminal background check.
- Master Hunters are required to sign and abide by a Master Hunter Code of Ethics Agreement, in addition to all Department laws and regulations.
- Master Hunters in the former AHE program were required to apply to be Master Hunters in the new Master Hunter program as part of the transition process. Each was asked to sign a new application allowing for a criminal background check to be conducted, and to sign and submit a Master Hunter Code of Ethics Agreement. No application fees were required.
- Qualifications and standards for certification were increased substantially. The level of required conservation work for new applicants was increased from 12 hours to 20 hours, and for certified Master Hunters was increased from 30 to 40

- hours in order to renew every 5 years. Also added was the requirement to attend a Criminal Observation and Reporting Training (C.O.R.T.) session conducted by Eyes In The Woods. The shooting proficiency, criminal background check, and written examination elements were retained.
- Study materials and background information provided as part of the new applicant packet were consolidated and streamlined, with most being made available in electronic format.
 - Two new Master Hunter tests based upon updated study materials were developed for use beginning in 2008. Each has 75 questions. A passing score of 80% is required. A study guide is being prepared that will be posted on the Master Hunter web site.
 - New Master Hunter certification cards were created and distributed.

Commitment to Improved Communications

- A new Master Hunter web site was developed in January as part of the Department Internet site (<http://wdfw.wa.gov/hunting/masterhunter/>). It is routinely updated and is being used as the primary information source for the public regarding the Master Hunter program. Major elements include: Master Hunter News; Special Hunt Updates; Master Hunter Orientation; Master Hunter Application Package; Requirements (schedule your exam, and lists of proctored testing sessions); Re-Certification Requirements; Conservation Projects (general pre-approval guidelines and specific projects available); C.O.R.T.; Master Hunter Policies and Procedures (WAC, special notices, annual reports); Master Hunter Advisory Group (members, meeting notes, roles, bylaws, vision); F.A.Q.s; and Related Links. All Master Hunter news releases direct readers to the web site.
- At least two Master Hunter Orientation public meetings, targeting individuals interested in applying, will be held annually. The Department, in partnership with the Master Hunter Advisory Group, conducted two such meeting during 2008. About 50 people attended an Orientation session held in Ellensburg on February 23rd, and approximately 120 people attended an Orientation session held on March 22nd in Olympia.
- At least two Master Hunter Information and Outreach public meetings, targeting existing certified Master Hunters, will be held annually. One is currently scheduled for June 14th in Spokane. Others will take place this summer in Snohomish and Chelan counties. These meetings will also be conducted by the Department in partnership with the Master Hunter Advisory Group. The Department will utilize statewide news releases to announce these meetings.
- The Master Hunter Advisory Group and Department plan to conduct Special Hunt Management public meetings in specific areas where significant issues exist regarding Master Hunter seasons. During 2008, a partnership with the Big Game Round Table will be pursued to jointly hold a special public meeting in Ellensburg concerning Elk Area 3911. This meeting is expected to occur before August.

- Routine statewide news releases about the Master Hunter program have been utilized. Three have been circulated to date (2/10, 2/28, and 5/30), focusing on the two Orientation meetings; the open enrollment period; changes in the program; requirements to transition from the former AHE program; and the Spokane Information and Outreach meeting. All news releases are posted and remain on the Master Hunter web site while still news worthy.
- Briefings on the new Master Hunter program were given to all Enforcement personnel at the Enforcement In-Service-Training sessions on March 7th, and March 14th in Yakima.
- Two briefings on the new Master Hunter program were given at the Hunter Education Instructor In-Service-Training session on April 12th in Yakima.

Creation of Master Hunter Advisory Group

A Master Hunter Advisory Group was created to work in full partnership with the Department in the successful development and implementation of the new Master Hunter program. The primary role of the Advisory Group is to represent certified Master Hunters statewide while advising the Department.

- The Director formally appointed 12 members to the Master Hunter Advisory Group on March 15th. Since that time, one of those individuals has resigned due to his inability to provide sufficient time to the associated obligations. The goal for the future is to have 2 Master Hunter Advisory Group members from each of the 6 Administrative Regions plus three at-large members, for a total of 15. The at-large members will likely be recruited from those counties where the highest number of Master Hunters reside (Yakima, Spokane, King, Pierce, Kittitas, and Clark Counties). There are currently 6 members residing on the Eastside and 5 members residing on the Westside. Leadership now includes: Mike Estes, Chair from the Tri-Cities; Bill Vincent, Vice-Chair from Camano Island; and George Coulbourn, Secretary from Black Diamond. Detailed contact information by Region is posted on the Master Hunter web site.
- Formal Bylaws, and Roles and Responsibilities have been adopted. Both are posted on the Master Hunter web site.
- Formal Vision and Motto statements have been adopted. Vision Statement: Develop a Corps of sportsmen dedicated to preserving the heritage of hunting by giving back to the sport, displaying the highest standards of conduct, and working to conserve wildlife habitat and hunting opportunity. Motto: Giving Back. Both are posted on the Master Hunter web site.
- A new Master Hunter logo/shoulder patch has been developed. It is based upon the WDFW logo and has Washington Master Hunter within the upper curvature, and Giving Back within the lower curvature. See attached.
- Meeting notes from every meeting of the Master Hunter Advisory Group are posted on the Master Hunter web site. Meeting notes are also forwarded to the Department Liaisons for the Enforcement Advisory Group and Game Management Advisory Group, plus to Commission members and the Director's Office. Meetings are held in Ellensburg and have occurred on March 27th and

May 15th. The next meeting is scheduled for June 26th. A minimum of 4 meetings will be conducted each year.

- Elk Area 3911 has been particularly problematic to the image of the Master Hunter and Master Hunter program in the past. At the request of the Department liaison to the Master Hunter Advisory Group, an evaluation of Elk Area 3911 will be conducted. Recommendations will be submitted to the Department by the end of November.
- Potential future discussion items include: 1) Partnering with the Department to engage Master Hunters in the Register-To-Hunt program, Wildlife Area program, and Wildlife Access program; 2) Working in partnership with the Department and Big Game Round Table to develop initiatives that may lead to the reduction of Master Hunter issues for the 3911 Elk Unit (property maps, posting of selected boundaries and ownership); 3) Partnering with the Washington Hunter Education Instructor's Association (WHEIA) to mentor first time hunters, and persons of disability—especially returning military men and women; 4) Strategies for improving the image of hunting; 5) Strategies for better interface between the Master Hunter Advisory Group and Master Hunters statewide; and 6) Development of Master Hunter clothing items, decals, pins, etc, which can be ordered and paid for by certified Master Hunters.

Wildlife Focus for Conservation Projects

Volunteer work to meet certification and recertification requirements must now focus on wildlife related activities associated with Department initiatives or that complement Department private and public partnerships. Broad categories of acceptable projects involve but are not limited to: depredation/nuisance wildlife problems; recreational hunting access; landowner-sportsman relations; wildlife habitat enhancement; hunter safety training; wildlife surveys; promotion of safe, ethical, and responsible hunting; mentoring of first time hunters and persons of disability; assistance with coordination and administration of Master Hunter program; and related volunteer work with state and federal resource agencies (DNR, USFS, USFWS, etc.) and with conservation nonprofit organizations (RMEF, DU, MDF, SCI, WHEIA, HERO, Wenatchee Sportsmen, INWC, etc.).

- Projects meeting the general categories and specific projects posted on the Master Hunter web site are considered pre-approved and only require support and direction from WDFW field personnel or from a person of authority from one of the Department's private or public wildlife resource management partners. Project exceptions may be granted if suitable wildlife related projects cannot be located, or when restrictive medical conditions exist.
- DNR Regional Managers, USFS Supervisors, and USFWS Refuge Complex Managers within Washington have been contacted and given the opportunity to have pertinent volunteer opportunities posted on the Master Hunter web site.
- Lists of certified Master Hunters, sorted by County, have been provided to all Enforcement Captains and Sergeants so that local Master Hunters can be

contacted in a timely manner to help address elk damage issues involving herding, hazing, and fence repair.

- Eyes-In-The-Woods volunteer recruitment notices for Biological Check Stations and Property Watch/Land Access Program have been posted on the Master Hunter web site.
- Examples of projects undertaken include: flood damage repair at the Bob Oke Pheasant Farm; elk herding/hazing/fence repair; proctoring of the Master Hunter test; guzzler/upland bird habitat drip irrigation systems; salvage of deer and elk for needy families; Department elk drift fence repair in Yakima and Kittitas Counties; posting of Game Management Unit Boundaries; teaching/training at Hunter Education classes; repair of flood damaged farm fencing along the Chehalis River; Wenatchee Highway wildlife fencing to minimize vehicle/wildlife collisions; maintenance of Clear Creek Trail in Kitsap County; winter feeding of game birds; development of shooting ranges; and work on the Sinlahekin Wildlife Area.

Results of the Transition Process from the Former AHE Program

The transition process set in motion by the amendment of WAC 232-12-073 was basically accomplished with current level staffing during the February 1-May 15th time frame. At the beginning of the process, there were 1,800 members of the former AHE program. During February, attempts were made to directly contact each of them via mail explaining the new requirements necessary to be retained within the new Master Hunter program. Notices were also included in numerous statewide news releases and posted on the Master Hunter web site. Follow up written notices were provided to those not initially responding. Hunter Education Division staff handled hundreds of phone conversations and e-mail/written inquiries. Criminal background checks were completed for all those submitting necessary information and signed forms. Summary results as of May 15, 2008 follow.

- 1,439 met all conditions and were entered into the W.I.L.D. System as being Master Hunters in good standing. New Master Hunter cards were issued. All will receive a new Master Hunter shoulder patch when the order is received. An interim list of Master Hunters in good standing was sent to each Enforcement Captain and all Sergeants.
- 51 failed to meet criminal background check standards and were excluded from entry into the new program and given their administrative appeal rights. Their future status will depend upon the disposition of the formal appeals process. Of those notified of their right to appeal, 24 have chosen to do so.
- 251 failed to respond or to provide necessary signed forms and were excluded from entry into the new program.
- 46 submitted necessary signed forms, and passed the criminal background check, but it was determined that their membership certification had expired during the period 1/07-3/08. Each was excluded from entry into the new program pending their ability to meet outstanding recertification requirements within set time frames.

- 13 were unable to be contacted because valid addresses could not be determined by cross checking with the W.I.L.D. system or via phone directory assistance.
- Approximate certified Master Hunters by Region (sample size 1,378) = Region One—231; Region Two—73; Region Three—359; Region Four—269; Region Five—161; and Region Six—285.

Results of Recent Open Enrollment Period

Due to work load issues, the Department has implemented a 3 month open enrollment period from January 1-March 31 each year. During 2008 the closing date was extended to April 16 because amendments by the Commission to WAC 232-12-073, Master Hunter Program, were not approved until early January.

- During the 2008 open enrollment period a total of 1,035 hunters applied to be certified as Master Hunters. Each was provided a study material packet to prepare them to take the written examination. All certification requirements must be completed within 9 months of registration. The number of applicants was about double the normal level, probably due to the Orientation Public meetings held, the web site, news releases, and overall support for changes made in the program.

Test Proctoring Partnership with Regional Offices

Certified Master Hunters are being identified to work in partnership with the 6 Regional Offices to provide test proctoring services to applicants. These volunteers will proctor tests at the Regional Offices during working hours Monday-Friday, and will also offer testing sessions in the evenings at other nearby locations. The primary role of Regional staff will be to handle the registration role for testing sessions offered in close proximity to offices. Alpha lists of 2008 Master Hunter applicants will be provided to all test proctors in order to verify that individuals are eligible to take tests. Specific dates, times, locations, and registration information is posted routinely on the Master Hunter web site.

Staffing and Funding Status

The Director approved funding enhancements for the Enforcement Program, Hunter Education Division, to fully implement staff restructuring moves recently made to adequately coordinate and administer the new Master Hunter program. The funding base utilized was Section 4 (c) Pittman Robertson, effective July 1, 2008.

- Customer Service Specialist II--.30 FTE.
- Master Hunter program Coordinator--.25 FTE.
- Temporary Master Hunter Advisory Group Liaison/Policy Lead--.45 FTE. These responsibilities are set to transition to the Hunter Education Division Manager and Master Hunter program Coordinator by December 2009.

At this time, .50 FTE of additional support is also being provided by other Hunter Education staff positions, at current funding levels.

Opportunities and Challenges

- The Department has not yet taken sufficient advantage of a ready volunteer pool to address significant wildlife related priorities. The new applicants alone could potentially provide 20,000 hours of focused work during 2008. And those Master Hunters recertifying every 5 years could provide as much as 12,000 hours of additional donated labor to the agency, annually. Renewed efforts to address needs on Wildlife Areas and Wildlife Access Areas using Master Hunters should occur.
- Near the completion of the transition process, an Administrative Hearings Officer requested an opinion from the State Attorney General's Office regarding the meaning of the term "wildlife conviction" as used in amended WAC 232-12-073. It was determined that regardless of the clear intent of the Commission and Department to include convictions related to fish, shellfish, game, non-game, agency lands, and access decals under the umbrella of "wildlife", the statutory definition did not include fish or marine invertebrates classified as food fish, and likely not lands or access decal violations. Thus the decision was made to only include terrestrial wildlife (hunting) related convictions, as the standard when conducting required criminal background checks. The end result was that 48 out of the 99 AHE members originally determined to have failed the background check using the intended broad application of "wildlife convictions" were subsequently reinstated and included within the 1,439 individuals recognized as Master Hunters in good standing. The Department needs to consider more clearly defining the meaning of "wildlife conviction" as part of any future amendments to WAC 232-12-073.
- Strengthening of statutory authority for the Master Hunter program should be considered.
- There is currently no authority in WAC 232-12-073 to administratively suspend Master Hunter privileges during the judicial processes following the issuance of a citation related to Title 77.15 violations. Consideration should be given to providing the authority to administratively suspend the privileges of Master Hunters.
- The Peer Review process described in WAC 232-12-073 needs to be further clarified, and simplified. An alternate approach should be considered requiring Master Hunters to appear before a Peer Review Committee to justify their behavior when the Department receives a formal written complaint. Failure to comply would lead to privileges being revoked for a period of 2 years.
- Recruitment strategies for Master Hunter applicants need to be considered that emphasize "giving back" to the hunting heritage and wildlife resource as opposed to joining in order to take advantage of additional hunting opportunity.

- A recruitment process to fill vacancies on the Master Hunter Advisory Group needs to be developed.
- Development of 2 new validated Master Hunter tests and a study guide for use in calendar year 2009.
- The orderly transition of Master Hunter duties and roles amongst Hunter Education staff needs to occur on the short and long term. Responsibilities for receiving, processing, and entering applications and certification materials; as well as conducting criminal background checks needs to be consolidated. Primary staff contacts for the public, by subject area, need to be established.
- Implementation of a Master Hunter designator on license documents.
- Elimination of the ability of License Dealers to remotely access and modify W.I.L.D. database for Master Hunters.
- Improved accuracy of information in existing Master Hunter database. Design systems to better track volunteer conservation work by category.

Attachments

- New Master Hunter logo/shoulder patch design.
- Recent article from Yakima-Republic Newspaper.