

2018

JEFF BERNATOWICZ, District Wildlife
Biologist



Washington
Department of
**FISH and
WILDLIFE**



DISTRICT 8 HUNTING PROSPECTS

Yakima and Kittitas counties

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DISTRICT 8 GENERAL OVERVIEW	1
ELK	2
DEER.....	7
WATERFOWL.....	8
DOVE	10
FOREST GROUSE	11
PHEASANT	12
QUAIL.....	13
TURKEY	15
PARTRIDGE (CHUKAR/HUNGARIAN)	17

DISTRICT 8 GENERAL OVERVIEW

District 8 is located in south central Washington. Game management units (GMUs) in District 8 include 328 (Naneum), 329 (Quilomene), 330 (West Bar), 334 (Ellensburg), 335 (Teanaway), 336 (Taneum), 340 (Manastash), 342 (Umtaneum), 346 (Little Naches), 352 (Nile), 356 (Bumping), 360 (Bethel), 364 (Rimrock), 368 (Cowiche), 371 (Alkali) and part of 372 (Rattlesnake Hills). Hunters can choose a variety of habitats, ranging from lowland shrubsteppe and farmland to high elevation alpine wilderness.

District 8 is dominated by large blocks of public land and provides abundant hunting opportunities. The district is probably best known for elk. The Yakima elk herd is one of the largest in the state, with over 8,000 animals roaming over 900,000 acres of public land. There are over 4,000 elk in the Colockum herd, which inhabit mostly public land north of Ellensburg.

There is also plenty of upland bird hunting opportunity in District 8. Yakima County is near the top of the list in the harvest of many bird species, ranking #1 for quail, #2 for dove and chukar, #3 for pheasant, #4 for duck, and #5 for goose. Bird hunters wanting to wander over large areas with low hunter densities have many areas to go. Along the breaks of the Columbia, the Yakima Training Center consists of 327,000 acres south of I-90, while WDFW manages another 154,000 acres north of the freeway. There are 9,000 acres on the Wild Horse Wind Farm, which has gone to a [Hunt by Reservation system](#). West of the Yakima River, hunters can roam the 105,000-acre Wenas Wildlife Area. A motivated upland bird hunter with a good dog could pursue grouse, chukar, partridge, quail, and pheasant in the same day.

Turkeys were introduced over 30 years ago, but populations remained low. In the late 1990s, a more extensive effort was made to augment existing pockets of birds. Post augmentation, the spring harvest increased from 60 in 2001 to 413 in 2010. Harvest has recently hovered around 100 birds. The populations in GMU 335 (Teanaway) have become large enough to allow for a fall permit season. Turkey densities may never reach those found in northeast Washington, but many hunters are finding decent hunting closer to home.

District 8 is also home to over 70 percent of the bighorn sheep in the Washington State. While it is still difficult to draw a permit to hunt, bighorns can certainly add enjoyment to a hunting trip. Rams are in rut mid-October through November, when many hunters are traveling through the area. There are robust populations of bighorns that can often be easily viewed along Highways 821 (Yakima River Canyon) and 410 (Clemans Mountain, north of the junction with Highway 12).

Important Access Changes: Due to low elk populations, early archery antlerless has been reduced to Sept. 15-20 in GMUs 328, 329, 336, 340, 352, 356, and 364. The reduction has understandably upset some hunters. WDFW strives for harvest “equitability” among user groups. When elk populations decreased rapidly in recent years, modern firearm and

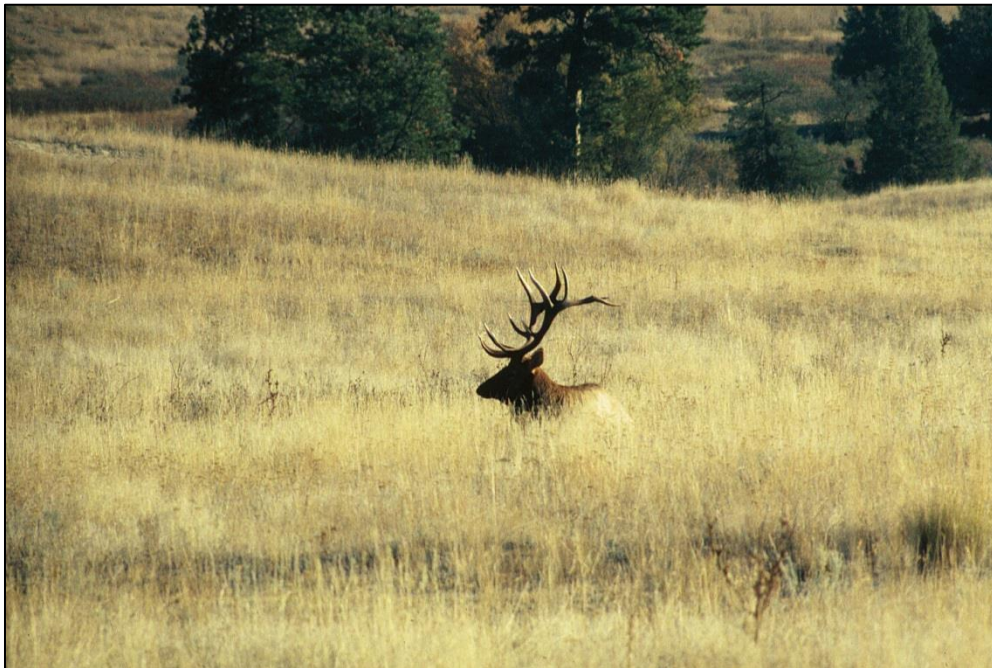
muzzleloader permits was significantly reduced. In 2017, archery hunters (who made up 24 percent of hunters via tag sales) harvested 47 percent of the elk in the district. The shortened season is an attempt to reduce antlerless harvest so populations can rebound. Archers are still expected to harvest well over 24 percent of the available elk.

In 2016, two changes occurred. The first was that access to the Wild Horse Wind Farm northeast of Ellensburg went to a Hunt by Reservation system. WDFW will be issuing the permits. To watch the video and register, go to

http://wdfw.wa.gov/hunting/hunting_access/private_lands/hunt/292/. There are three time periods for registration. The number of people is unrestricted for the periods before and after the modern firearm elk seasons. For the modern firearm elk season, registration is restricted to 50 people per day. Those failing to get one of the 50 spots can drive through the facility, but can't stop and hunt.

The second was access to Yakima Training Center (YTC). A Washington State driver's license is still required to drive on post, but it is no longer a valid form of proof of identity for accessing YTC or any other military facility. An Enhanced Washington State Driver License or a passport are among the valid forms of identification. For more information on approved form of identity, orientation, and other rules on YTC, call 509-577-3208 or 509-577-3209.

ELK



District 8 used to be the best in the state for elk hunting. However, with that distinction comes relatively high hunter densities. Opening weekend is usually crowded. However, a recent trend has been for hunters to pull up camp and head home before the season ends. If you are looking

for a higher quality experience, consider hunting the last two or three days of the modern firearm season or switching to archery or muzzleloader. In 2017, archery general season success was almost 10 percent compared to 3 percent for modern firearm and muzzleloader. Early archery antlerless seasons have been shortened, but archers will still have much higher success than any other user group in the district.

Surveys this past winter found the Colockum herd continued a decline and was estimated at 4,289 elk. Just a few years ago, the Colockum herd was over 6,000 during March surveys. A full population survey of the Yakima herd was not completed due to elk not concentrating on winter range. A survey of 3,900 elk on or near the feed sites found lower than expected calf ratios. Based on recruitment and last year's harvest, the Yakima herd is likely around 8,300 total elk.

One of the main reasons for the initial decline was the drought of 2015 that left elk in poor fall condition. The result was low calf recruitment and higher than normal late winter mortality in 2015-16. Higher than optimal antlerless harvest has kept populations low.

Modern firearm and muzzleloader elk hunting success in this district strongly correlated to number of spike bulls and permits. With the reduction in permits and low spike-bull numbers (few calves), 2017 harvest for both groups was one of the lowest in modern history (Figure 1). Calf recruitment did rebound somewhat from lows seen in March 2017, so spike-bull harvest should increase slightly. Antlerless permit numbers for both user groups are low. There has also been a hangover effect from the 2015 drought. Low calf recruitment in 2016 meant few spike-bulls in 2017. Branched bull permits were reduced because of record low spike-bull recruitment.

Although a few hunters seem to believe the elk move to Mount Rainier during the fall hunting season, the reality is that most stay within units open to hunting. Figure 2 shows the distribution of collared Yakima elk during September and October, while Figure 3 is from a recent study on the Colockum elk. Hunters will find more elk at higher elevations and away from roads. The wilderness areas in the Yakima herd range can provide excellent hunting opportunity for those willing to invest the effort to chase elk in the high country.

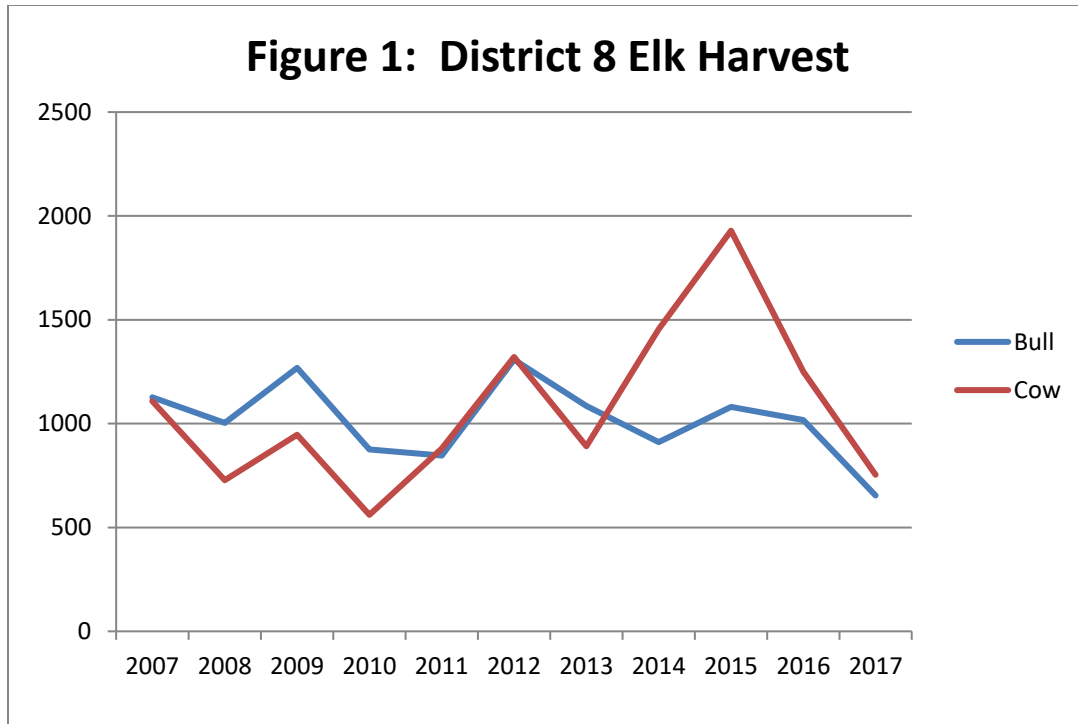


Figure 1. District 8 elk harvest.

Figure 2

A Sample of Yakima Elk Herd's Fall Distribution from 140 Collared Females during Sept. & Oct. 2004 - 2006

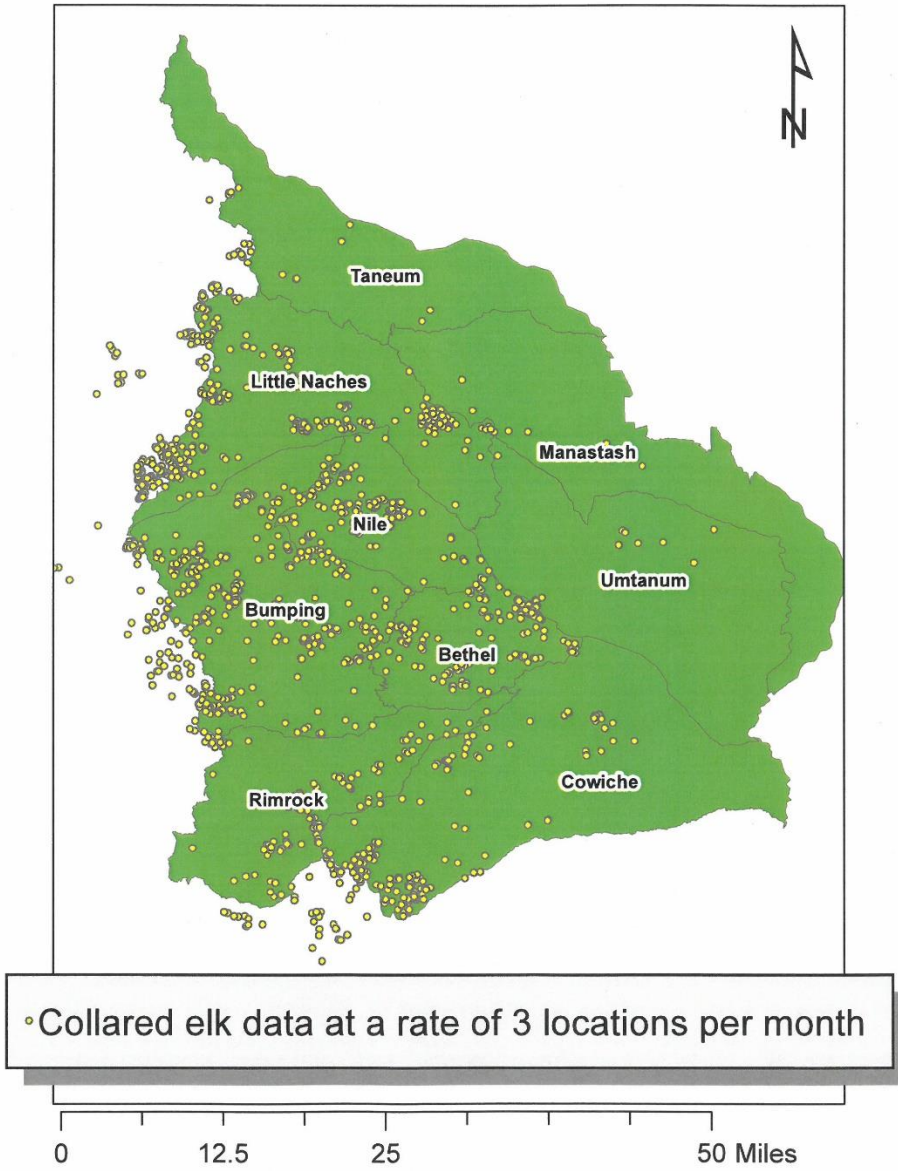
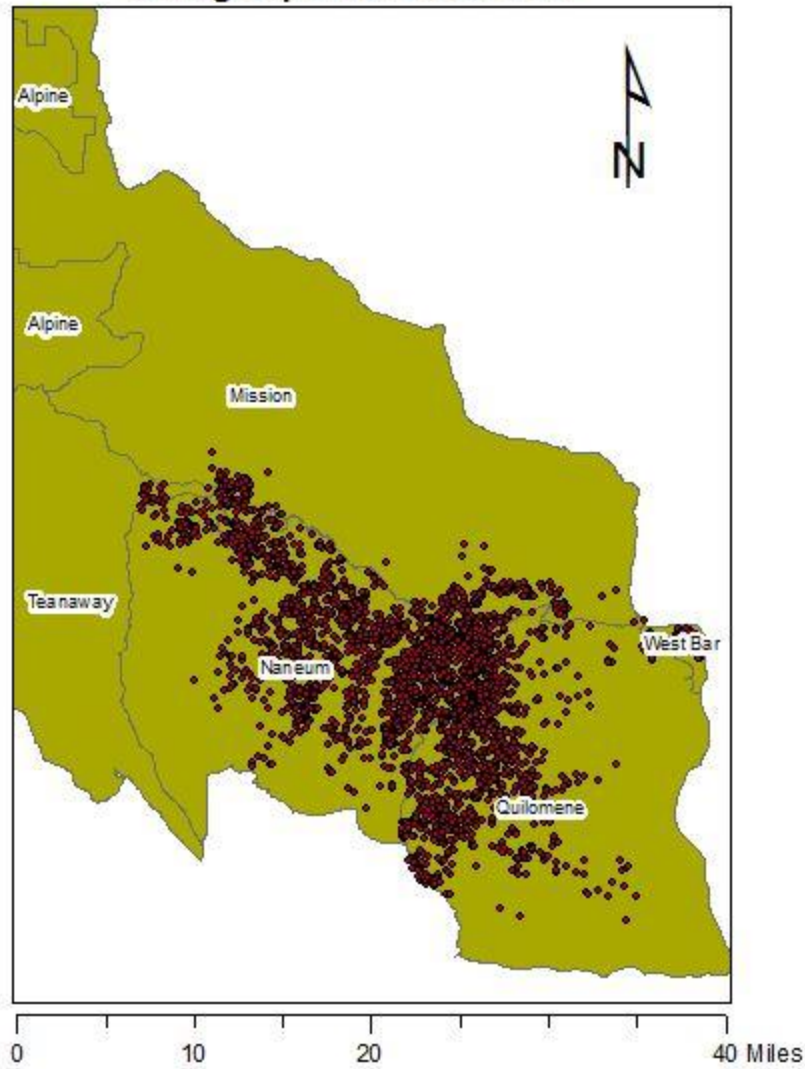


Figure 2. Yakima elk herd collared female elk locations during September and October.

Figure 3

Colockum Elk Herd, Collared Female Elk Locations during September & October



DEER



Deer harvest in District 8 hit its lowest levels since records have been maintained (Figure 4). The average general season hunter success in 2017 was 5 percent compared to a statewide average of 23 percent. No rebound is expected for 2018. The majority of harvest is 2-3 year old bucks, and that age class is missing due to the 2015 drought and 2015-16 winter mortality.

Hunter numbers have declined with the reduced deer population. Many of the remaining modern firearm hunters set up camp and claim their favorite spot for elk season. If you are looking for relatively low hunter densities, consider the higher elevations of District 8. Harvest and hunter numbers are typically highest in GMUs 335 (Teaway), 340 (Manastash), and 342 (Umtanum).

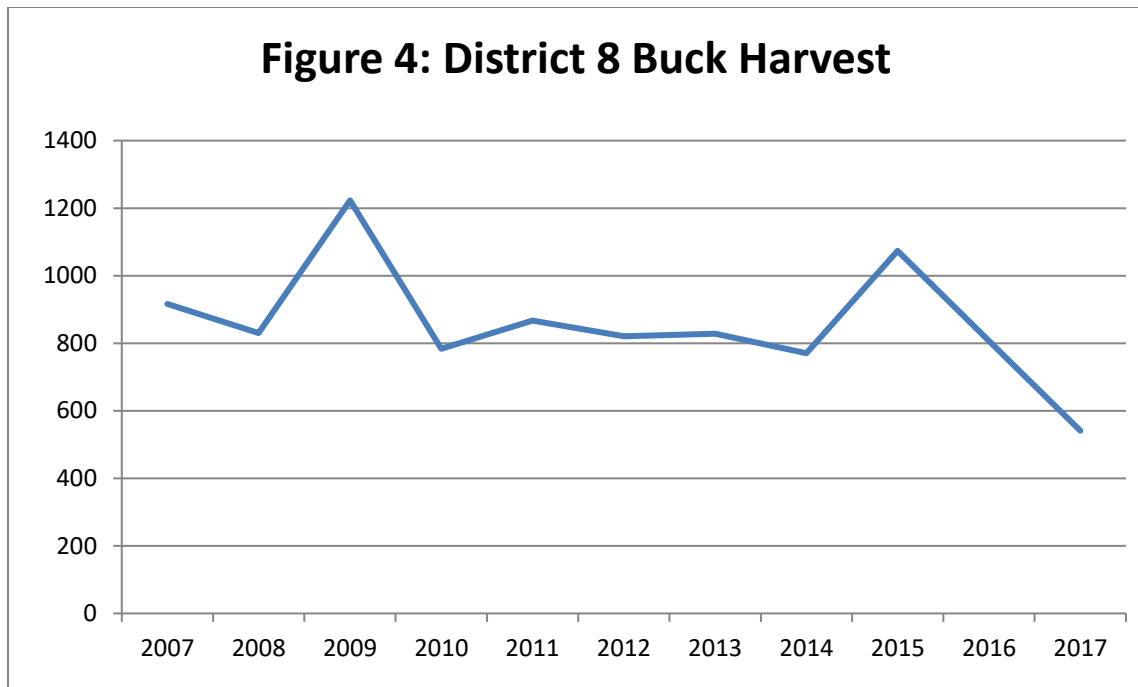


Figure 4. District 8 buck harvest.

WATERFOWL

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) flyway has not yet published the 2018 breeding population estimates. Since 2014, estimates for the flyway have been more than 43 percent above the long term average, yet harvest in District 8 was below average (Figure 5). For local hunters, total ducks in the flyway probably isn't as important as local hunting conditions and available food.

Yakima County has averaged over 30,000 ducks harvested in the last five years, which is the fourth best in the state. The unfortunate crop trend has been away from corn and toward hops, vineyards, and orchards. Farmers also have a tendency to till stubble shortly after harvest.

An El Niño is predicted for this season, with above normal temperatures and close to normal precipitation. This weather pattern can result in excellent hunting conditions for the entire season.

The best waterfowl hunting is in the lower Yakima Valley. Public hunting can be found on the Sunnyside-Snake River Wildlife Area (SWA) and Toppenish National Wildlife Refuge (TPNWR). A Marsh Master was recently purchased by WDFW for improving waterfowl habitat and hunting access on the SWA. Marshes previously choked with vegetation should be opened up in 2018. Waterfowl hunting should be better than in the past on the SWA and hunters should explore wetlands that were previously hard to hunt.

Toppenish National Wildlife Refuge has had difficulty filling wetlands in October. Water cannot be pumped from Toppenish to fill wetlands in the Robins Unit unless flows are greater than 30 cubic feet per second. The pumphouse wetlands are dependent on Toppenish Creek side channels to fill at higher creek levels. Flows in those side channels have been a bit of mystery in recent years. It appears that at a gauge height of 3 feet, the channels should fill. Hunters can check flow/levels at <https://waterdata.usgs.gov/wa/nwis/uv/>. Summer 2018 has been dry and creek flows are low. If El Niño forecasts are correct, don't expect water in the refuge until sometime in November. Before making a trip to Toppenish National Wildlife Refuge, it would be best to call the refuge at 509-865-2405 for conditions.

The Yakama Nation maintains a public hunting program and there are great duck hunting opportunities on the reservation. The Yakama Nation is consistently expanding waterfowl hunting opportunity along the Yakima River. Review their Feel Free to Hunt map annually.

Band returns suggest many locally produced ducks are staying in the Yakima Valley. Early season success is likely tied to regional production. The past spring saw average moisture. Local production should have been good, but below 2017. Late season success is probably more dependent on naive northern migrants. The first cold wave is typically around Thanksgiving. Once ponds and sloughs freeze over, the Yakima River can be productive. For the best late season hunting, watch for significant changes in weather. If there is a quick thaw and rain, new ducks enter the valley and a week or so of good hunting can be had before the birds find the safety of private land and the reserves. A freeze and thaw may also fill wetlands that had been dry earlier in the year.

For an excellent introduction to waterfowl hunting, see [Let's Go Waterfowling](#). Any youth interested in trying waterfowl hunting should check <https://wdfw.wa.gov/hunting/huntered/clinics/>. The local Washington Waterfowl Association is hoping to provide mentored hunts for youth the weekend of September 29.

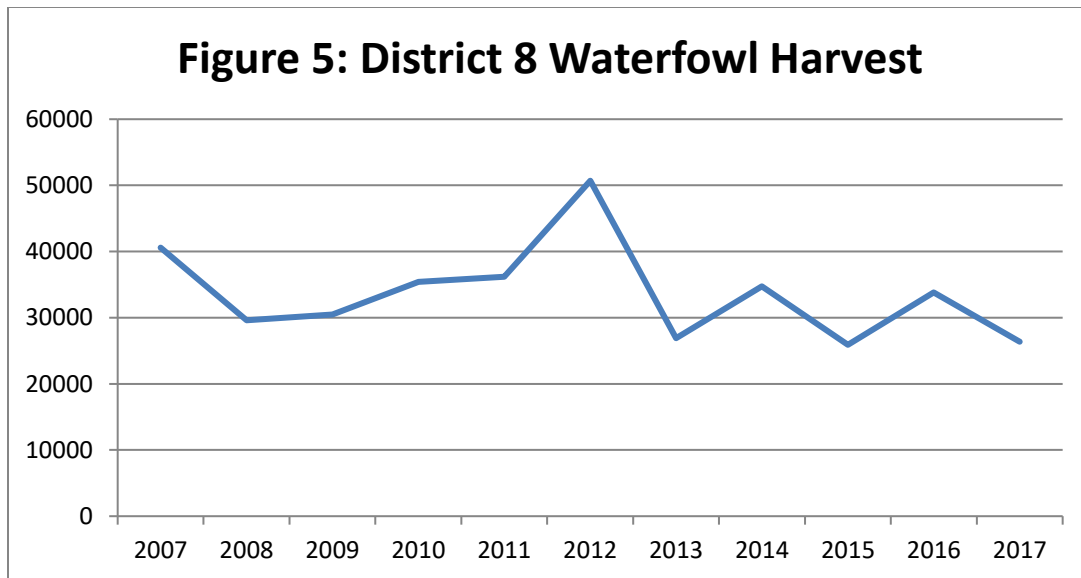


Figure 5. District 8 waterfowl harvest.

DOVE

Yakima County typically ranks second in the state for dove harvest. The best success is in the lower Yakima Valley. Public hunting can be found on the Sunnyside-Snake River Wildlife Area and the Yakima Nation Reservation. Yakama Nation grows wheat on portions of their Satus Wildlife Area. For information on hunting on Yakama Nation land, visit ynwildlife.org.

Dove hunting success typically depends on the weather pattern. Warm weather is needed to keep the majority of birds from migrating out of the valley. Cooler weather often hits the area by late August or early September. Despite a 30-day season, the average dove hunter only spends three days (opening weekend) pursuing doves. Harvest and hunter numbers have generally been declining since 2011 (Figure 6).

The prospects for 2018 do not appear to be good at this time. A banding program started in 2003 has found most harvested birds are produced locally. Observations and trapping success indicate below average production in 2018. The reasons are unknown. There was also a “canker” outbreak in the Selah area in June. The disease killed both adults and juveniles, but did not appear to be widespread.

Many hunters ask about Eurasian collared dove hunting opportunities, as the season extends year round, without limits. Eurasian collared dove numbers have increased dramatically in the last seven years. No information is collected on harvest, but collared doves are now very common. The problem for hunters is that the majority of collared doves are in urban areas. Collared doves seem to act more like rock doves (pigeons) than mourning doves. Some hunters occasionally find some opportunities at roost sites and in a few fields, but good hunting is rare. Eurasian collared

dove harvest is more of a bonus while hunting other birds, rather than a target for most hunters. Making a trip hoping to find Eurasian collared dove opportunity may be frustrating.

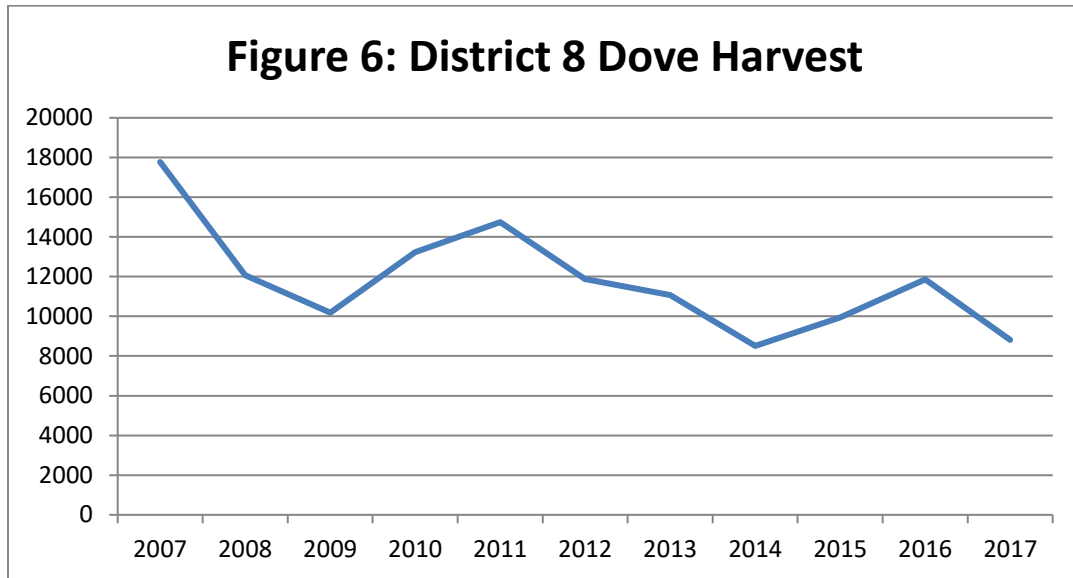


Figure 6. District 8 dove harvest.

FOREST GROUSE



Grouse harvest in District 8 has been fairly stable the last six years (Figure 7) despite fewer hunters and days reported. Harvest per day has been increasing the last few years. There was no real change in estimated total harvest in 2017, but most hunters reported excellent numbers of birds. No data are available on the 2018 hatch, but there was no unusual weather.

Many grouse hunters drive roads morning and evening, especially when the season first opens. Research suggests brood hens and young are the most vulnerable in early September. Hunters serious about finding grouse should look for areas with low densities of open roads and hike.

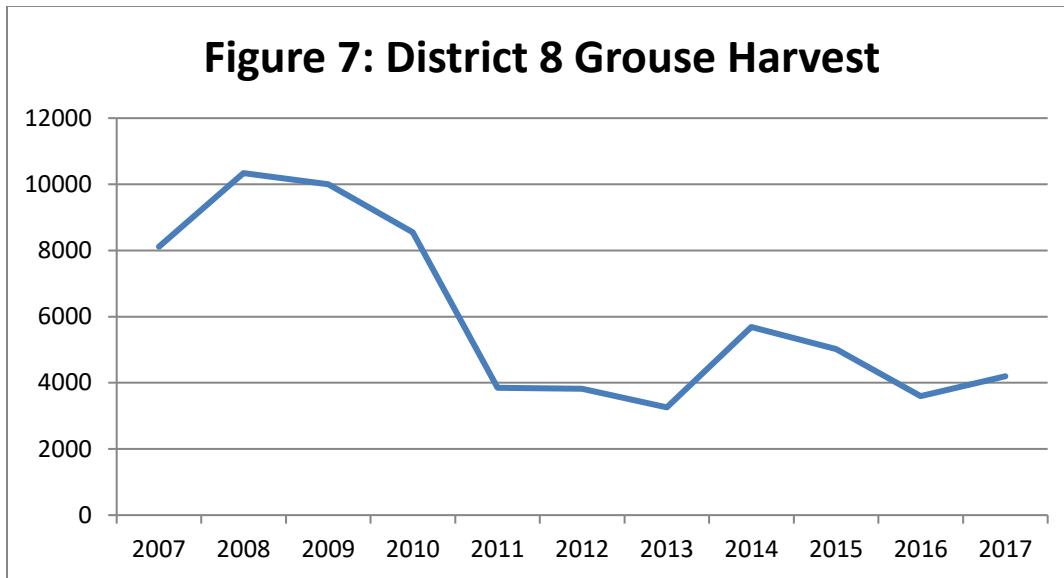


Figure 7. District 8 grouse harvest.

PHEASANT

The 2017 pheasant harvest in District 8 has leveled out at very low levels due to few wild birds (Figure 8). The only place to find hunt-able numbers of wild birds is on the Yakama Nation Reservation. Pheasant numbers have been declining for 10 years on Yakama Nation due to conversion from idle land to crops. There has been no change in this trend. Even if grain prices declined, farmers switch to crops like hops rather than leave fields idle.

Predicting changes in pheasant numbers based on weather is difficult. More moisture is usually better than less. Despite a very severe winter in 2016-17, the hatch in 2017 was excellent where birds survived, making for pockets of decent hunting. There was no severe winter weather in 2017-18. Spring 2018 started with average moisture, but fields dried quickly in late spring through early summer. Irrigation water can make up for dry conditions. The best guess is that pockets of wild birds probably increased slightly over 2017.

No pheasant surveys are conducted in District 8. Yakama Nation conducts production surveys and posts their data in late summer. For information on surveys and hunting the Yakama Nation Reservation, visit ynwildlife.org.

Released pheasants are becoming a significant source of recreation for many hunters. About 1,600 roosters will be released in District 8. The 2018 allocation will be about 800 birds at the

Sunnyside Wildlife Area, 500 at Cottonwoods, and 300 at Whiskey Dick. For the youth hunt, birds will only be released at Sunnyside and Cottonwoods. Historically, turnout in September had been low and kids had a difficult time finding released birds. In 2017, WDFW switched to mentored hunts and releasing when kids arrive on Saturday morning. Volunteers from the local chapter of Pheasants Forever run the events. To sign up for Saturday, September 22 at Cottonwoods or Sunnyside, visit: <https://wdfw.wa.gov/hunting/huntered/clinics/>. Watch the site for clinics during school breaks later in the year.

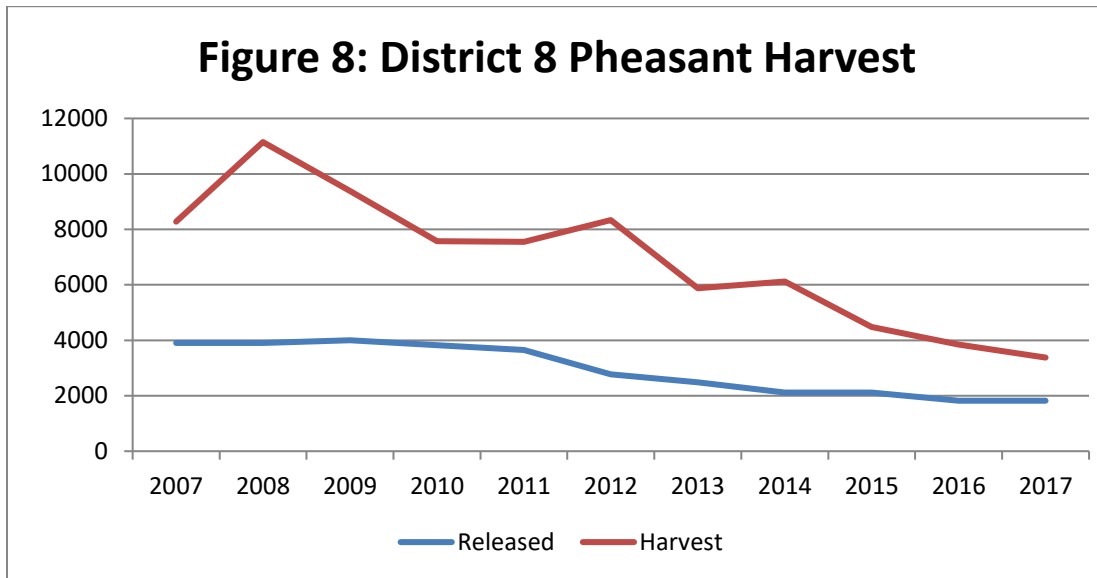


Figure 8. District 8 pheasant harvest.

QUAIL

California quail can be found in most non-timbered portions of the district. The best habitat and highest number of quail are typically in the lower Yakima Valley. This is evident in the harvest statistics where Yakima County leads the state in quail harvest with an average of 15,000 birds over the last five years. In Kittitas County, the average quail harvest is only 1,900.

The trend has been for declining total quail harvest (Figure 9). This trend may not represent actual quail populations, as surveys on the Yakama Nation Reservation have found increasing numbers of birds until the winter of 2016-17 reduced populations (Figure 10). Quail are often secondary quarry to pheasant hunters. The lack of pheasant and pheasant hunters might be contributing to the decline in total harvest. Yakama Nation will post quail survey numbers later this summer.

The quail population in 2018 will likely be higher than 2017. The winter of 2017-18 was generally light. Unfortunately, the best quail habitat along the riparian of lower Yakima Valley was hit hardest 2016-17. Those populations are recovering, but had been driven very low and are

still well below average. Areas near artificial food sources (houses, cattle feed lots) have the highest probability of good bird numbers.

WDFW owns various parcels along the lower Yakima River that hold good numbers of quail that are part of the Sunnyside-Snake River Wildlife Area. Yakama Nation runs an excellent hunting program and has great quail hunting opportunity. For information on surveys and hunting Yakama Nation land, visit ynwildlife.org.

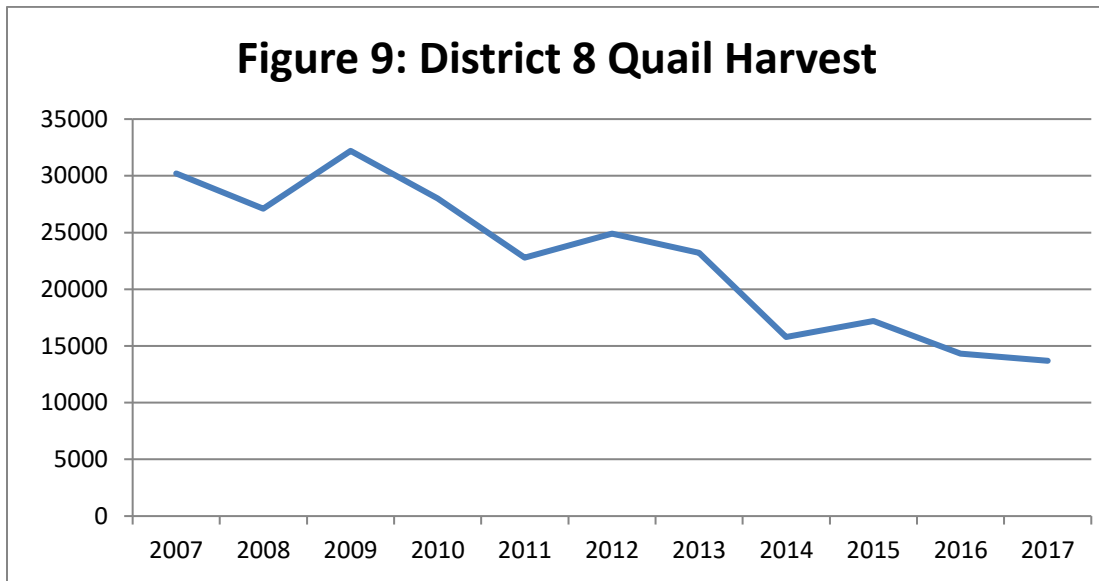


Figure 9. District 8 quail harvest.

Average number of quail per mile observed during brood counts on the Yakama Reservation

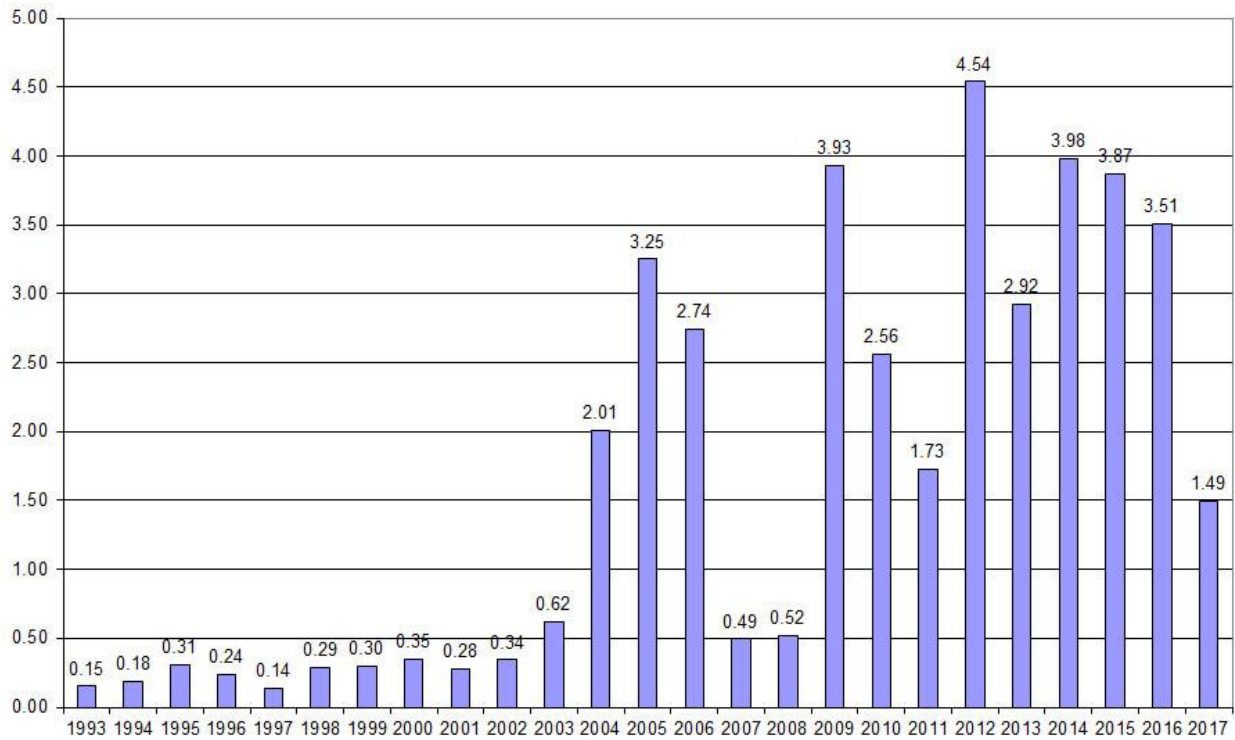


Figure 10. Average number of quail per mile observed during brood counts on the Yakama Nation Reservation.

TURKEY



Turkey populations peaked in 2010 following releases in the late 1990s and appear to have settled at lower levels (Figure 11). Over 50 percent of the district harvest is in GMU 335 (Teaway). The best populations early in the spring are on private lands in the lower elevations of GMU 335. By May, some birds will be moving into higher elevations on the Teaway Community Forest. Decent numbers of birds can also be found in the northeast portion of GMU 329 on the Colockum Wildlife Area. Outside of those areas, turkeys are in very small pockets. Fewer than 10 birds were harvested in spring 2017 in any of the 340-372 GMUs.

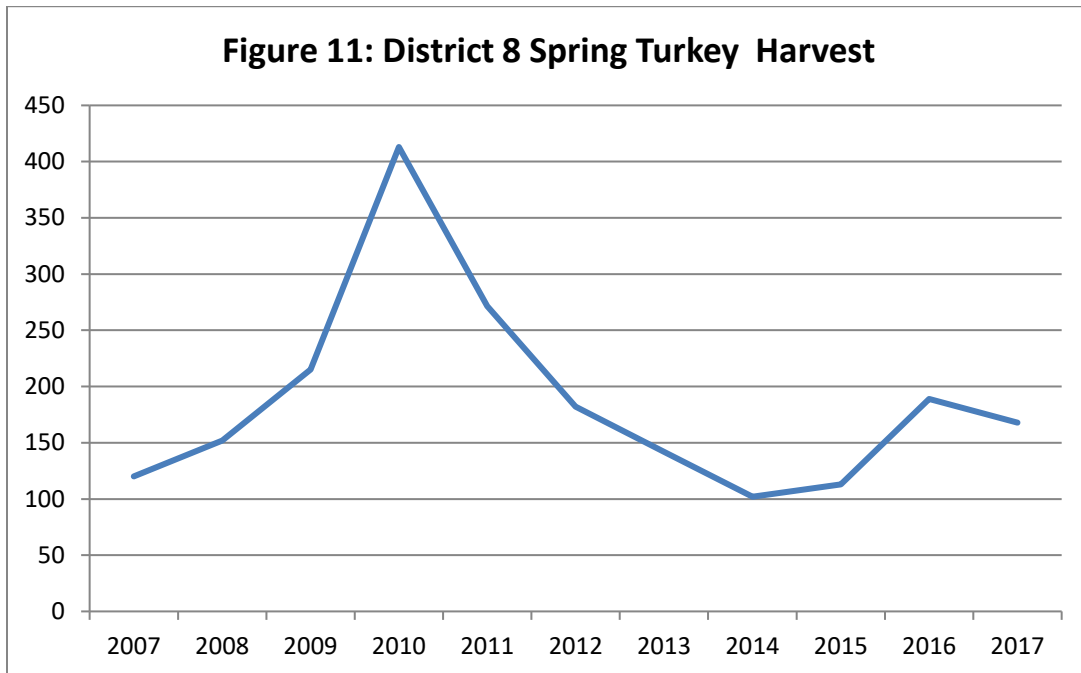


Figure 11. District 8 spring turkey harvest.

PARTRIDGE (CHUKAR/HUNGARIAN)



Partridge harvest in the district has been increasing the last few years despite a very hard winter in 2016-17. Abundant snow and a wet, cold spring produced a lot of vegetation and birds in 2017. Anywhere chukar and partridge found open ground and survived winter had good numbers of birds in 2017. There was minimal snow in 2017-18, so carry-over should be high. Soil moisture stayed good in early spring, but soil/vegetation dried rapidly in June through July.

No information is available on the 2018 hatch, but it probably was not as good as 2017 based on vegetation and moisture. However, even with few chicks per hen, there should have been enough hens nesting to produce a population equal to or better than 2017. There is often a carry-over effect for a year after good moisture.

There is plenty of public land for partridge hunting in the district. The best populations are expected on the Quilomene and Colockum wildlife areas, where birds may have found more open terrain during winter near the Columbia River. Some birds are expected to have survived on Clemans Mountain on the Oak Creek Wildlife Area. Populations were also good in 2017 on the Yakima Training Center (YTC). Another large fire on the north end of YTC will reduce overall opportunity in 2018, but there is still plenty of room to roam on the 300,000 acre installation.

The Yakima Training Center is very popular with long-time chukar hunters. Access can be limited when training is heavy. Access to Yakima Training Center in fall 2018 is unknown at this

writing. Note that identification requirements have changed. Hunters must go through a brief orientation, pay a \$10 fee, and register their firearms with Yakima Training Center. For more information on the orientation and rules on Yakima Training Center, call 509-577-3208 or 509-577-3209.

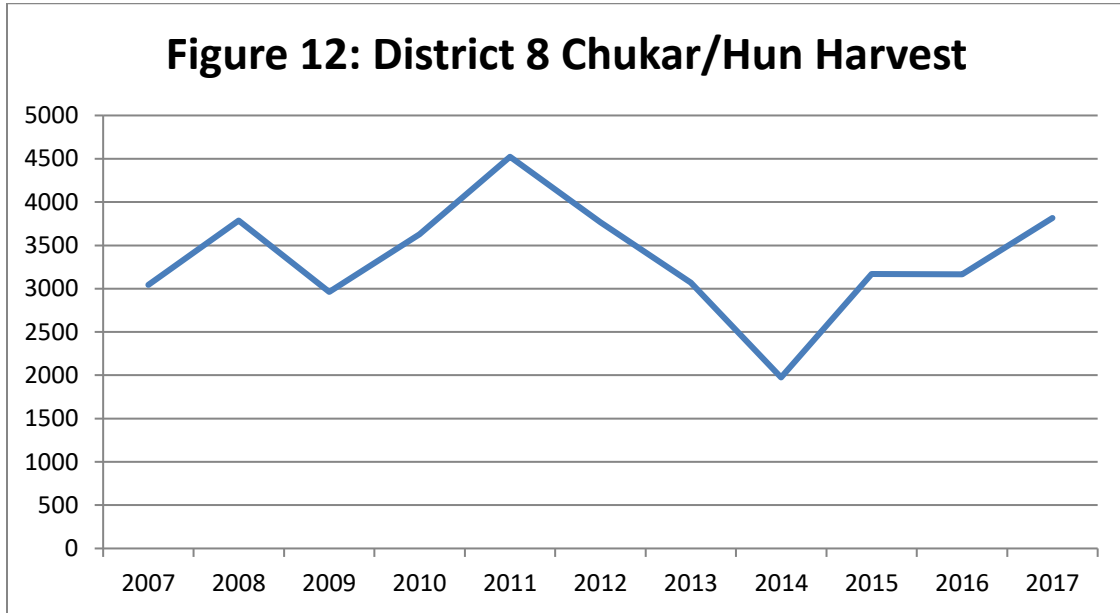


Figure 12. District 8 chukar/hun harvest