

6.15.23

Wildlife Policy Recommendations to Support GMP; Prepared for June 16, Wildlife Committee Meeting

Previously, the Wildlife Committee requested that staff take the list of possible wildlife policies and develop a brief description of the scope of each policy. Wildlife Committee also lumped and combined the possible policies resulting in the 8 policies being slimmed down to 4 policies.

The original list was:

1. Game Species Conservation Principles
2. Spring Bear Hunting
3. Cougar Guidelines
4. Predator Prey Management
5. How to structure sustainable hunting opportunity (general season vs. permit)
6. The Non-lead Partnership
7. Classification of Unclassified Wildlife
8. Define “maximizing public recreational hunting opportunities” in the full context of RCW 77.04.012 and associated legislation

The current list is:

1. Game Species Conservation Principles
2. Carnivore management Policy
3. Structuring sustainable hunting opportunity and providing guidance regarding how to maximize public recreational hunting opportunities in the full context of RCW 77.04.012 and associated legislation
4. Consider policy for Furbearer/Beaver Management

1. Game Species Conservation Principles:

Guiding Principles Discussion

The following principles overarch all the Game Management Plans and should be considered in those plans or through Commission policy when warranted. Any other policies developed by the Commission, or the Department would apply to the GMP as appropriate (e.g., POL 5004, any Conservation Policy developed by the Commission, etc.).

Science

- Hunting seasons and regulation recommendations should be based on science. When biological information is lacking or insufficient, management decisions should be sufficiently conservative to ensure protection of wildlife resources. At no time should decisions favor income to the agency or recreational opportunity to the detriment of conservation of wildlife populations.

Ecosystem and Habitat

- The department should only recommend seasons and bag limits after having considered the effects to ecosystem health and harvest rates should not impair the desired long-term functionality of an ecosystem.
- The department should only recommend seasons and bag limits that consider the past, current, and scientifically supported predictions effects of climate change on habitat, weather, and populations.

Population Management

- In general, hunting seasons shall be consistent with species planning objectives and provide maximum recreation opportunity while achieving population goals.
- The migratory bird, small game and upland game regulations shall provide maximum hunting opportunity considering federal guidelines, flyway management plan elements, and Department management objectives.
- The goat, sheep, and moose permit hunting rules shall maintain high quality opportunities consistent with resource availability.
- The hunting season closures, and firearm restrictions shall be sufficient to assure resource conservation and public safety.

Social and Economic

- Consider management objectives that are socially derived, as a valid justification for hunting and trapping season recommendations (e.g., Agriculture damage, quality hunt opportunity, address disease, and social tolerance).
- Private landowner hunting issues such as season length, damage control, and trespass should be given consideration when developing hunting season recommendations.

Allocation of Resource (Note, the WLC has proposed a separate policy on this topic)

- Hunting rules shall provide separate deer and elk general season recreational opportunities for archers, muzzleloaders, and modern firearm hunters.
- Special deer and elk permit hunt opportunities shall be allocated among three principal user groups (archery, muzzleloader, and modern firearm) using the approved formula of success/participation rate.
- Disabled hunter opportunities shall emphasize equal access consistent with the Americans with Disabilities Act.
- For disabled hunters, youth hunters, and hunters over 65, strategies for enhanced opportunity shall include special consideration during general seasons, opportunities for special access, and other incentives rather than special permit hunts.
- Consider other outdoor recreationists when recommending hunting season recommendations.

Fair Chase, Safety, and Regulations

- When setting regulations, the Department should consider high standards of hunter ethics and principles of fair chase.
- In general, hunting seasons and boundaries of game management units should be easy to understand while maintaining hunting opportunity and management options.

- Weapon and Hunting equipment is always evolving. Strive to maintain the primitive aspects of muzzleloaders and archery equipment. Restrictions to all implements should maintain public safety; protect the resource; allow wide latitude for individuals to make equipment choices; be easy to understand and allow effective enforcement.
- Offer the public high quality hunter education and firearm safety training.

Process

- Use a three-year season setting process to address complex issues and provide consistent general seasons from year to year. Annual permit and season changes will be considered to address emergent resource issues; natural disasters; and to meet requirements of federal guideline changes; etc.
- Establishing hunting seasons shall be consistent with the Commission Policy C-3607 regarding cooperatively managing wildlife resources with the tribes.
- The public shall be offered substantial and timely opportunity to make comments on and recommendations for the three-year hunting rules decision-making process. These opportunities must comply with the state's Regulatory Reform Act.
- Public involvement for annual permit season setting shall include at a minimum, a standard written comment period and one public meeting where comments will be considered.
- Continuity in hunting seasons over time is highly valued by the public; therefore, Department recommendations for significant changes to seasons should be adequately explained to the public and should address a resource management need.

2. Carnivore Management:

This policy would direct the department on game carnivore species management. The carnivores currently considered game include black bear, cougar, bobcat and red fox. Fox and bobcat are also considered furbearers and can be trapped as well. This policy could include what biological and social information would be required to set hunting/trapping seasons and bag limits for carnivores. The policy would also need to give the department direction related to carnivore management as it relates to ungulate management (predator prey relationships).

Possible Language:

Carnivores are an ecologically important part of the ecosystem. The Department recognizes that societal values are diverse on this topic, and the public generally views their abundance positively from an ecological perspective. Managing carnivores in the smallest western state in the west with the second highest human population is challenging. Those challenges include maintaining and connecting suitable habitats, maintaining sufficient levels of prey populations, addressing human and pet safety concerns, meeting legal requirements associated with addressing livestock depredation, timber and property damage, and potential carnivore effects on at-risk prey species or populations.

WDFW must effectively manage wildlife to meet population objectives that reflect citizen tolerance and support. The management goals for black bear, cougar, bobcat, and coyote should ensure managing statewide carnivore populations for healthy, long-term viable populations consistent with achieving ungulate population objectives.

3. Structuring sustainable hunting opportunity and providing guidance regarding how to maximize public recreational hunting opportunities in the full context of RCW 77.04.012 and associated legislation:

This policy will have multiple facets. The main policy implication is related to the legislative mandate and how the department will interpret that mandate in its totality. The second is policy direction to the department related to providing a quality hunting opportunity. Often maximizing opportunity comes at the cost of reducing the quality of the experience. This is likely to be a social question rather than biological one and will require extensive human dimensions work to accomplish.

Possible Language:

To most hunters, maximizing hunting opportunity means providing as much opportunity as possible without harming the wildlife population or established management objectives. We currently offer unlimited general season hunting for many of the game species with limits on seasons and bag limits. By doing so, hunters are provided a maximum opportunity in the number of days available to hunt, but their actual take of game is carefully regulated. This is a good model when it comes to small and upland game hunting. There is a tradeoff however between the amount of opportunity and the quality of that opportunity when it comes to deer and elk hunting. To provide maximum opportunity in some deer and elk areas we must find inventive ways to limit harvest. This is due to a deer and elk resource that is sometimes limited by available habitat or other constraints. Most of the general season harvest opportunity is male only and, in some instances, we must limit harvest based on antler characteristics to limit male harvest to maintain a viable male to female ratio. We often hear from hunters that they are dissatisfied with the quality of the opportunity provided. The best way to improve the quality of the experience is to limit opportunity and most hunters oppose that tactic. This is mostly a social issue that has some biological implications. If we choose to move away from the current model extensive public outreach will be required.

4. Furbearer/Beaver Management:

Not yet developed since the Department has discussed next steps for the statewide plan and possible season setting opportunities with the WLC.