

Staff recommendation on a petition to implement an east-west deer tag

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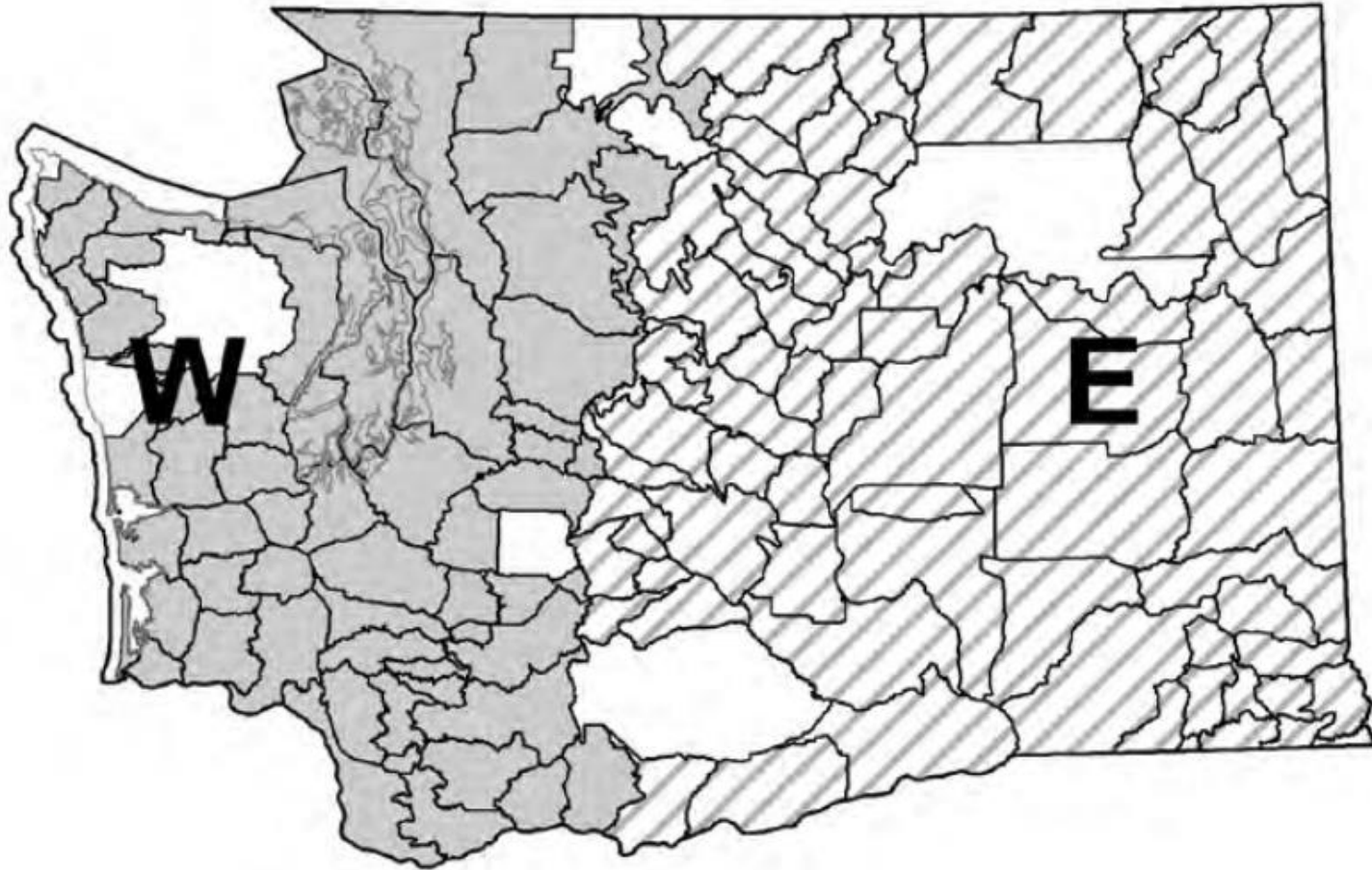


Petition summary

- The petitioner requests that the Department implement an east-west deer tag, like the existing system for elk.
- The petitioner's identified purpose of the proposal is to reduce eastern Washington deer harvest, primarily in the northeast part of the state.
- The petitioner's identified need for this change is because "deer numbers in NE Washington are approaching, or are at, unsustainable numbers."



Background



Background – elk

- The Department has used area-specific elk tags since 1979 to manage hunter density and equity, not necessarily elk harvest.
- Elk hunters have higher potential for unacceptable crowding
 - More hunters per animal, more discrete populations
- Unlike deer, east/west elk season dates did not historically overlap 1:1, and neither do today's modern firearm seasons.
 - Potential to first hunt east-side, then again on west-side, which provides an opportunity advantage to W. WA residents
 - Current special permits specify a tag type, promoting equity in draw odds for highly desired permits



Background – deer

As with elk, an east-west deer tag would influence hunter distribution and therefore has the potential to influence east-side deer harvest, but it is unlikely to achieve the petitioner's desired increase of deer abundance:

- Deer harvest is mostly restricted to males, whereas population trajectory is mostly a function of female survival
- WDFW research in the petitioner's area of interest, northeast Washington, has not identified harvest as a limiting factor of white-tailed deer
- An east-west tag system would only influence the hunting behavior of a small proportion of all deer hunters



Background – deer

Deer population trajectory is most sensitive to variation in adult female survival.

- Most hunting opportunity is restricted to antlered males (“bucks”)
 - Buck:doe ratios in E WA management zones are mostly stable at objective levels
- Antlerless opportunity is conservative and a function of population status
- In northeast WA, GMUs 101-121, white-tailed deer harvest has been buck-only since 2019
 - Further restrictions on buck harvest are unlikely to influence the population’s trajectory



Background - deer

A recent WDFW research effort of northeast white-tailed deer did not identify harvest as a limiting factor.

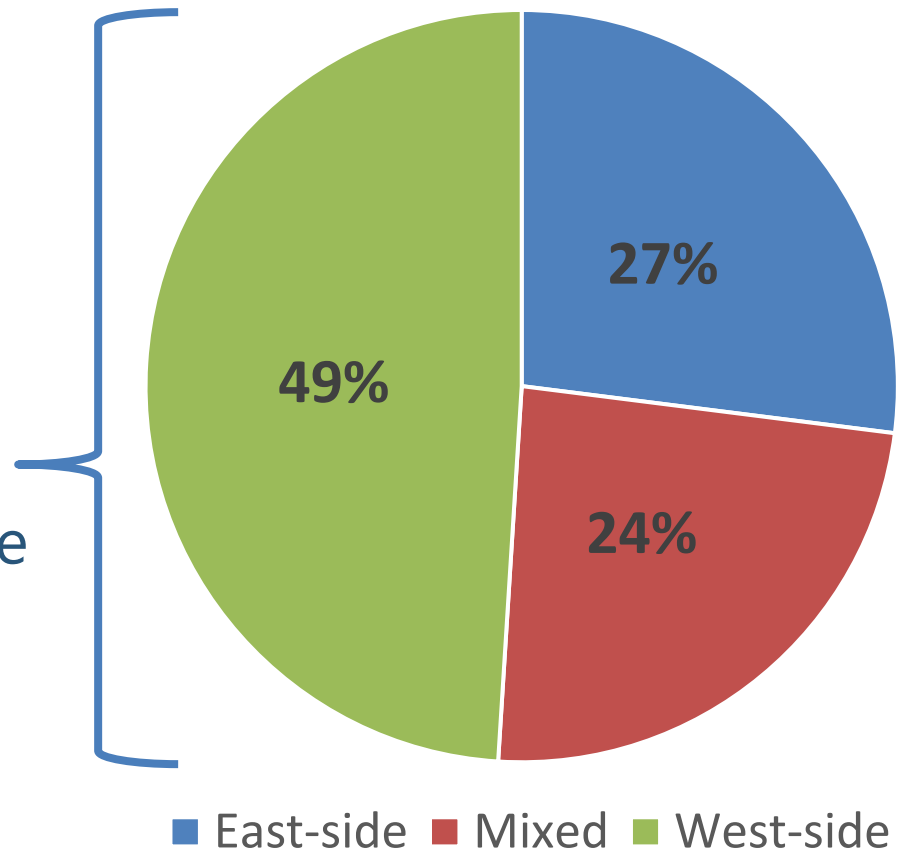
- However, the study did identify a stable to declining trend
- Disease outbreaks (e.g., EHD in 2015 and 2021), changing land use practices, human encroachment, non-human predation, and changing climatic conditions (e.g., more frequent drought) are likely acting together to influence deer dynamics in the northeast and elsewhere in Washington



Background – deer

- More hunters on the east side, ~60/40 split
- Few hunters hunt both sides (<4%)
- East-side hunters only hunt east (97%)
- West-side hunters vary, but an east-west tag would only influence the ~24%
- Small potential impact on hunter choice and harvest

W. WA resident deer hunter
hunt-area choice (2018-2022)



Summary

Area-specific tag systems are useful structures to achieve management objectives, like the system used for elk to manage hunter density.

However, an east-west deer tag is unlikely to increase deer abundance.

- Deer harvest is mostly restricted to males and there is no indication males are being overharvested (e.g., acceptable buck:doe ratios)
- No indication of harvest as a limiting factor in NE white-tailed deer
- An east-west tag system would only influence the hunting behavior of a small proportion of all deer hunters

An east-west deer tag is a significant change to hunting opportunity. The Department must conduct formal public scoping to appropriately evaluate this proposal, which is not feasible prior to the current three-year package rulemaking process.



Staff recommendation

Department staff recommend denying this petition because

- a) The requested rule change is unlikely to result in increased deer populations.
- b) The requested rule change has statewide implications and therefore requires extensive public scoping to evaluate its acceptability to all deer hunters.



Questions?

