

Public Access Management on WDFW Lands PAM

Wildlife Area/Access Site: Methow Wildlife Area

Closure Location: The closure area encompasses 5 units of the Methow Wildlife Area, which is located in Okanogan County: The Texas Creek Unit is closed west of Hwy 153. The Golden Doe Unit is closed west of Twisp-Carlton Road. The Big Buck Unit is closed east of Frost Road, but Frost Lake is excluded from the closure. The Methow Unit is closed except for lands west of East Chewuch Road, including Upper and Lower Bobcat campgrounds and Boulder Creek campground. The Beaver Creek campground, Lloyd Ranch, and Bowen Mountain would also be exempt from the closure. The Rendezvous Unit is closed around Lewis Butte and Rizeor Lake.

Type of Closure: Short Term - Resource Seasonal 1-5 months Permanent

Closure is: One-time Annual

Closure Dates: 12/15/2024 to 3/31/2025.

Reason for Closure: Health or Safety Resource Protection Planned
 Budget Other _____

Describe need for closure:

The Methow Valley is home to one of the largest migratory mule deer herds in Washington state. Many of these deer take up wintertime residence on the Methow Wildlife Area. Much of the Methow Wildlife Area was purchased specifically for the protection of migratory corridors and mule deer winter range. Several factors including climate change, wildfire, land development/conversion, have resulted in both temporary and permanent reductions in mule deer winter range habitat quality and quantity, and the magnitude of these impacts has accelerated in recent decades. In addition, winter and early spring recreation has increased significantly in the watershed including on mule deer winter range. The displacement effects of human activity on deer are well documented in the literature. Increasing human use is also impacting habitat effectiveness (the ability/willingness of animals to use an area). Consequently, this closure is intended to conserve and perpetuate mule deer populations by reducing human pressure in critical habitat during the months when mule deer are most challenged by food scarcity and energetic demands. The proposed closure areas are centered on quality winter/spring range and known mule deer activity areas.

This PAM decision is a one-time seasonal closure to close on December 15th, 2024 and reopen on April 1st, 2025. It is one of three possible winter closures that WDFW sometimes describes as a “three-year pilot”. The same parts of the Methow Valley Wildlife Area were closed winter 2023-24. Initial information on the effect of a winter closure was gathered in 2023-24, but due to technology challenges and unusual weather conditions last winter, WDFW staff believe a second, consecutive winter closure is merited to gather more information on how a winter

closure impacts the migratory mule deer herd in the region. WDFW will likely also consider a third closure the following winter, December 15, 2025 through March 31, 2026. That future one-year closure decision would consider the information gathered both last winter and this winter. Depending on information gathered during 2023-2024, 2024-2025 and 2025-2026 winter closures, WDFW anticipates that it will consider whether to put in place an annual winter closure that would occur each year at approximately the same time (mid-December to end of March).

Access Restriction

Vehicular/Motorized Entry All Public Entry Other _____

Describe:

The 5 Methow Wildlife Area Units listed for partial closure include Texas Creek, Golden Doe, Big Buck, Methow, and Rendezvous. See map below. Areas to be closed within those units will be thoroughly delineated with closure signs and maps detailing the closure boundaries. No public access will be permitted within the closure boundaries. The closure will begin at 12:01 a.m. on December 15th, 2024 and end at 11:59 p.m. on March 31st, 2025. U.S Forest Service and Okanogan County roads within the wildlife area remain open and are not impacted by this closure.

Impact of Closure on Public (such as timing of closure in relation to recreational use, number of users/site capacity, alternate sites, etc.):

Estimated size of area or miles of road: ~ 23,396 Acres

Describe:

The closure area encompasses approximately 2.2% of the total public land in the Methow Watershed. Additionally, the Methow Valley is home to one of the most extensive cross-country groomed trail systems in North America. The majority of winter recreationists utilize the groomed trail system managed by Methow Trails and these groomed trails are not impacted by this closure. Similarly, the closures do not impact groomed routes for other winter activities (fat bikes, snowmobiles). The Big Valley and Early Winters Units are not closed due to their low value winter range and high value recreational trails. The Hunter Mountain Unit is not closed to ensure people in the lower Methow Valley have access to fish and wildlife recreational activities. The remaining 5 units that do have partial closures also have high value recreation areas left open for the public to enjoy. The areas that are excluded from the closure were selected because of their ability to provide excellent fish and wildlife related recreational experiences during the closure months, including sites that are snow-free in the early spring.

Please complete reverse side

How Will You Restrict Access? Signs Gates Barriers Other

Explain:

Closure signs will be posted around the perimeter of the closure. Gates that already exist within the closure boundaries will be locked during the closure dates. Game cameras will be mounted throughout the closure areas to monitor wildlife and the effectiveness of the closure.

Summarize Comments District Team and Citizen’s Advisory Group Comments:

On August 28, 2024 a Wildlife Area Advisory Committee (WAAC) meeting was held via Teams. An update on the 2023/2024 winter closure was given and the proposal for a 2024/2025 closure announced. Members generally supported closure.

On September 11th, 2024 a meeting of the District 6 team was held at the Winthrop Library. All members in attendance supported a Winter Closure for the 2024/2025 season.

On November 5, 2024 emails were sent to members of the District 6 district team and the Wildlife Area Advisory Committee (WAAC) soliciting additional feedback on the proposed 2024/2025 closure. The few comments received from the District 6 team were generally grammar edits and alternate verbiage suggestions but all supported the closure. Two members of the WAAC responded and both support the closure, including the Colville Tribes.

Summarize Public Notification of Closure and Response (if completed at time of PAM – otherwise describe procedure to be used for public notification):

Upon official approval to proceed, Regional CAPE staff to do public media notifications.

In addition to process described above for notifying the public about the closures, there has been public notification of the proposed closure prior to approval. An article was written by the Methow Valley News with information about this year's closure. The news article provided information about WDFW’s SEPA review process and how the public could submit comments between Nov. 26 and Dec. 10. Note: at the time of writing, the closure had not been made. Due to some language in the article, some in the public may incorrectly believe the closure decision was made in November or early December. We do not see this a detail that necessitates a request that the news organization publish a correction if the Regional approves the proposed closure for winter 2024-25.

A SEPA threshold determination of non-significance (DNS) was issued on Nov. 26. The DNS, SEPA checklist and accompanying maps were made available via Ecology and WDFW’s websites for a 14-day public comment period. We received 34 public comments. The majority of comments support the proposed closure. A few commenters opposed the proposed closure, primarily based on reduced outdoor recreation opportunities. A table of the comments with responses considering the comments have been provided to the Regional Director for Region 2. The DNS is retained because none of the comments provide a basis to reconsider the determination that there will be no probable significant adverse environmental impacts from the proposed closure.

Wildlife Area Manager or Access Area Manager requesting closure:

Name: Brandon Troyer
Title: Assistant Regional Wildlife Program
Manager, Region 2 North
Signature: *Brandon Troyer*
Date: 12/12/2024

Approval Signature(s):

Name: Brock Hoenes
Title: Region 2 Director
Signature: *Brock Hoenes*
Date: 12/13/2025

Name: _____
Title: _____
Signature: _____
Date: _____

Distribution and Record Keeping

This form should be completed by the Wildlife Area Manager or Access Area Manager for approval by appropriate person(s). Copies of all closure requests must be sent to the Regional Wildlife Area Program Manager, and Lands Division Manager. Approved forms should also be provided to the Regional Enforcement Captain and the Regional Lands Agent.