



## Director's Report to the Commission

January 13-14, 2017

### Wildlife Program

#### Winter Conditions for Big Game

##### *Region 1*

Snow depths in Northeast Washington are in the normal range, but temperatures have been lower than usual. Distribution and condition of animals is not outside the norm for this time of year. In the Blue Mountains, cold temperatures and snow have pushed elk down into areas normally occupied by wintering deer. There has been some limited crop and haystack damage caused by elk in Asotin County.

##### *Region 2*

North Central Washington had a mild fall with timely precipitation and good fall green-up. Deer and other big game species benefited greatly from fall conditions. Region 2 experienced light snowfall this week. Currently, it is relatively cold but deer went into the winter in very good condition. Animals are wintering well with no problems observed to date.

##### *Region 3*

Snow came to the east slopes of the central Cascades about the second week of December. Several snowfalls since then have left all of the valley bottoms under a persistent snowpack of several inches to a foot or more. An arctic air mass also produced very cold conditions for a week or more in late December and more very cold temperatures are in the forecast for the second week of January. Deer and elk in the region largely moved to traditional wintering areas by mid-December. Elk are currently being fed at all of the traditional feeding locations in Yakima and Kittitas counties. Feeding was operational at all sites by late December. The numbers of elk being fed are typical for east slope Cascades winters. Department feeding of elk is motivated to assist with distributional control (i.e., keep elk out of agriculture zones), not to prevent starvation. No significant mortality has occurred for elk this winter, and observations of elk at feed sites suggest they are in average condition for this time of year.

Deer are dispersed currently in typical wintering locations at lower elevations. No reports of unusual deer mortality have been received, and Department biologists conducting standard deer surveys across the region in December found deer to be in normal seasonal body condition. Weather conditions the past few weeks have covered winter ranges with snow, but fortunately the dramatic freeze-thaw-freeze cycles that yield hard-crusting snow that is particularly hard on deer have not occurred so far. No

Department feeding of deer is occurring in the region and none is currently proposed. As in every winter, a few members of the public are feeding deer at a small-scale on private land. If snowpack continues to increase and no melting out of south slopes occurs in the next several weeks, some overwinter deer mortality may occur, but currently, deer appear to be faring reasonably well.

Bighorn sheep are currently being fed at the Department feeding station near Clemans Mountain and have been since late December. A few sheep were trapped at this location for transplanting to the Quilomene herd in Kittitas County. The trapped sheep appeared to be in reasonably good condition for mid-winter. Other bighorns in Region 3 are on their historic winter ranges and appear to be faring well.

#### *Region 4*

Recent cold temperatures and increased snow accumulation in the higher elevations has resulted in increased numbers of elk feeding in the valleys and lowlands throughout Region 4. Biologists have not observed any abnormal deer behavior or body condition indicators.

#### *Region 5*

District 9: Current snowpack in the South Cascades is well above normal, indicating a good outlook for spring runoff but difficult conditions for big game. Snow levels in Skamania and Klickitat counties are below 500 feet with accumulations of 32+ inches at 2,000 feet recorded near Trout Lake. Winter conditions for big game at all elevations are currently considered severe, as deer and elk have mostly retreated to heavy cover, or have been seen in crop/agricultural damage situations related to the current winter conditions.

Reports from one of the largest ranches in eastern Klickitat County indicate that snow depths are at 6-8 inches at low elevations. The owner of the ranch indicates that he has not seen these conditions this severe, at this time of the year, in over 30 years. Currently deer are able to successfully forage by pawing through the snow, which hasn't melted or crusted over yet. If snow conditions become unfavorable with increased moisture and/or crusting, big game mortalities will most likely occur in eastern Klickitat County. To date, there have been no reports of deer or elk mortality due to winter conditions. In at least one incident in Klickitat County, deer were observed feeding on food provided by the public as a result of heavy snow. This concern by the public will likely increase throughout the month.

District 10: Unusually cold and wet winter conditions arrived in Southwest Washington near the end of 2016. Snowpack is well above typical accumulations and record-setting low temperatures have persisted during the first part of 2017. Snow has at times accumulated to near sea level along the lower Columbia River, and temperatures in the teens were recorded on several nights.

To date, among 78 study elk currently being monitored by satellite collar in District 10, only two have died since the onset of the severe conditions. However, one of these was due to predation by a cougar and the other was an 18-year-old elk in very poor

condition. Additionally, among six adult black-tailed does and their two associated fawns, none have died during the cold weather.

Elk and deer populations likely entered this severe winter period in good condition following a cool, damp summer and a wet fall. During unusually cold and wet winters, deer and elk typically only succumb later in the winter or even in early spring when energy reserves have been exhausted and little nutritious food is available in the landscape. Study animals will continue to be monitored, and necropsies to determine cause of death will be conducted by Department biologists. Additionally, the annual index survey of elk mortalities on the Mudflow Unit of the Mount St. Helens Wildlife Area will be conducted in April.

### *Region 6*

To date, winter weather conditions in Region 6 have not departed from historical norms and it is unlikely that significant mortality events have occurred thus far associated with winter weather.

Except at the highest elevations in the Olympic and Cascade Mountains, Region 6 winter weather (e.g. snow depth or extended periods of extreme cold) are generally moderated by the influence of the Pacific Ocean, usually cyclical (short accumulation followed by melt), and rarely accumulate snow that would prevent access to forage and contribute to significant winter mortality events.

Winter survival among ungulates is largely dependent upon summer and fall nutrition, which in turn is influenced by summer precipitation and other factors. The summer of 2016 was slightly wetter than recent years, which should give a slight advantage to ungulates for winter survival – forage availability was likely improved and the period in which they could prepare for winter by storing energy reserves (i.e. fat) was also extended (at least, in comparison to the last two or three summers). In our area, what is often termed “winter mortality” is usually associated with the late-winter timeframe of March into early April when surviving ungulates that met the onset of winter with too little accumulated body fat to see them through the winter finally succumb to the limited and often poor quality forage available to them. Although winter weather may contribute, their nutritional condition at the onset of winter is a much greater driver, and for the young the nutritional condition of their mothers is the key factor.

## Enforcement Program

### **Crab Industry Strike**

While the coastal commercial crab fishery typically opens on December 1, concerns over the presence of domoic acid along the Oregon Coast delayed the season for about a month. Another delay was related to price, when fishermen began striking on December 29. As of January 6, the price dispute was settled and fishermen agreed to deploy pots the following morning. Harvest commenced on January 10. This important fishery has become increasingly complex for officers. Numerous challenges must be addressed prior to opening the fishery, such as health concerns, fair start provisions

managed by fishing zones, balancing a competitive coastal environment involving three states, off-shore jurisdiction challenges, and resource sharing agreements linked to treaty rights. The Enforcement Program has been involved in numerous internal and external policy level discussions and invested in crafting regulations that meet the needs of this ever-changing environment. The off-again, on-again nature of this fishery also require field officers to be at the ready to deploy at a moment's notice to navigate the complexity and ensure an orderly fishery.



## **WILDCOMM Update**

The staff in WILDCOMM have been busy responding to calls for service and accomplishing additional training objectives. The Enforcement Program recently hired three new Communications Officers to resolve workload stress and begin a transition toward increasing WILDCOMM availability. For example, during the months of November and December, WILDCOMM responded to 1,119 calls for service. They resolved more than one-third of these calls within the dispatch center, sending the remaining two-thirds to the field for investigation or resolution. In addition to responding to the public, the Communications Officers assist headquarters staff with closing case files, obtaining fingerprints for/conducting agency criminal history checks, maintaining compliance with State ACCESS requirements, and tweaking the new WILD system to ensure it is accessible for investigative queries.

Analysis of information related to calls for service derived from CODY has provided data points that indicate peak call periods and weekly workflows. Calls for service during this past hunting season were particularly high. In fact, the quantity of calls received over a weekend during this period via the TIP (Turn In a Poacher) and Report Poaching hotlines typically exceeded 100 calls. It takes an entire morning to sort through these messages and get the priority calls sent to the field for followup. The Washington State

Patrol dispatch centers have already learned the value of WILDCOMM and have been leaving call for service information on the message lines when they cannot find a Fish and Wildlife Officer on duty.



### **Welcome Quintin Nelson, Fish & Wildlife Officer**

Quintin spent the past three years with Hood River County (Oregon) Sheriff's Office working the Columbia River as the primary Marine Deputy. He previously served in the United States Air Force as a Pararescueman for almost 23 years. He holds a Bachelor's degree in Business Management from George Fox University and a Master's Degree in Diplomacy from Norwich University. Quintin will be stationed in White Salmon, Detachment 6.



### **Welcome Nathaniel Munn, Fish & Wildlife Officer**

Nathaniel grew up in California, attended Humboldt State University of California where he earned a Bachelor's degree in Wildlife Management and Conservation. After college he worked for Idaho Fish and Game for two years, doing various Fisheries Technician positions, including a Salmon Creel technician for Chinook salmon on the Little Salmon River, conducting high mountain lake surveys, lake sport fish surveys, and stream surveys. Nate will be stationed in Forks, Detachment 8.

## **Technology and Financial Management / Licensing**

### **Washington Interactive Licensing Database Replacement Project Update**

We are very pleased to report that on December 19, the Department successfully replaced the Washington Interactive Licensing Database (WILD). The new system was built by a firm in Maryland called JMT Technology Group.

This large-scale IT/business project has been divided into a three-phase approach. This initial phase, which represented the greatest amount of work and included the greatest amount of risk, established online sales, and new Point-of-Sale Terminals were deployed to approximately 600 dealers across the state. This phase included the core functionality of the system the Department has used for the previous ten years, such as creating a customer profile, license sales, harvest reporting, and financial management, only on a much more secure platform that is more user-friendly and easier to make subsequent enhancements.

The second phase will be completed in February 2017, which will include modules for the special hunt drawings and inventory management, and will round out the functionality of the old system, but on the new, improved platform.

Phase 3 development will initiate later this month and will include a variety of new features, including easier field validation for Law Enforcement, a commercial license management module, and a mobile application.

The system is being configured to sell 2017 license privileges that will go into effect on April 1, and a news release will be issued during the week of January 16 letting the public know when those items are available.

## Capital and Asset Management Program

### **Governor's Proposed Capital Budget for FY17-19**

Overall, it is a very encouraging start to the capital budget process – \$87.4 million for 74 projects. We requested \$128 million (88 projects). The proposal includes \$17.6 million for minor works projects and \$69.8 million for major projects. As a comparison, the Fiscal Year 2015-17 biennium governor's budget was \$9.3 million for minor works projects and \$37.3 million for major projects. In addition, the Governor's proposed Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program capital budget includes an additional \$37 million for the Department.