

Concise Explanatory Statement 2025 Hunting Season Setting

Rules amended as part of this rulemaking:

WAC 220-412-070	Big game and wild turkey auction, raffle, and special incentive permits.
WAC 220-413-180	Special closures and firearm restriction areas.
WAC 220-415-010	Deer area descriptions.
WAC 220-415-030	2024 Deer special permits.
WAC 220-415-050	2024-2026 Elk general seasons and definitions.
WAC 220-415-060	2024 Elk special permits.
WAC 220-415-070	2024 Moose seasons, permit quotas, and areas.
WAC 220-415-120	2024 Bighorn sheep seasons, permit quotas, and areas.
WAC 220-415-130	2024 Mountain goat seasons, permit quotas, and areas.
WAC 220-416-060	2024-2025 Migratory gamebirds seasons and regulations.

Rules repealed as part of this rulemaking:

N/A

Rules created as part of this rulemaking:

N/A

1. Background/Summary of Project:

The legislative mandate in RCW 77.04.012 requires that the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) provide recreational hunting opportunity and preserve, protect, perpetuate, and manage wildlife populations. WDFW attempts to maximize the public recreational hunting opportunities of all citizens, including juvenile, disabled, and senior citizens. It is this mandate that sets the overall policy and direction for managing hunted wildlife. Hunters and hunting will continue to play a significant role in the conservation and management of Washington's wildlife.

Wildlife staff make changes and adjustments to existing rules in the Washington Administrative Code (WACs) based on the scientific management of the game populations, harvest management, consideration of other significant factors affecting the game populations, and the analysis of public comments received during the rule making process.

Based on the evaluation of the foregoing, department staff recommend rulemaking proposals to the Director based on delegated authority from the Fish and Wildlife Commission, to authorize hunting opportunities in 2025 and to serve as rules to guide hunters and set the season dates, permits and harvest amounts.

2. Reasons for adopting the rule:

WAC 220-412-070 Big game and wild turkey auction, raffle, and special incentive permits.

The reason for this rule is to ensure that WDFW auction, raffle, and special incentive permits are aligned with the Commission's motion to not allow recreational spring bear harvest. It also aligns the fall bear season dates with our current general season regulations for consistent black bear management.

WAC 220-412-090 Multi-season deer and elk tags.

The Director did not approve this rule change.

WAC 220-413-180 Special closures and firearm restriction areas.

This rule change clarifies the Parker Lake firearm restriction area boundary and the area's recreational hunting access. Historically, the Parker Lake area has very limited hunter access due to restrictions needed to accommodate US Air Force training operations. The approved changes require a reservation in the "Hunt By Reservation" system, but expand hunter access greatly relative to historic levels (when a special permit was required). Up to ten hunters per week (both special permit and general season hunters) will be able to reserve the area under the "Hunt by Reservation" system. The area will be open to archery, muzzleloader, and shotgun for all species except bear with ten hunters allowed per week during spring turkey (April 7-May 31) and from September 1 through November 19.

WAC 220-415-010 Deer area descriptions.

This rule change is associated with changes to WAC 220-413-180 (Special closures and firearm restriction areas) and shares the rationale of expanding hunter access and opportunity in the area. The changes to WAC 220-415-010 are necessary to ensure consistency among interrelated rules associated with Deer Area 1031 and use/access restrictions of that area. Specifically, the changes clarify the boundary of the deer area and specify that it is within the WDFW "Hunt by Reservation" system.

WAC 220-415-030 2024 Deer special permits.

Changes to the deer special permit availability (i.e., permit dates, permit levels) are to balance hunting opportunity among user groups (i.e., hunting methodology) and with deer population status (i.e., increased hunting opportunities when populations allow, reduced opportunities when declining numbers warrant reduction), and to retain consistency in season timing (e.g., open/close day of week). Changes to Winston, Lincoln, and Mossyrock antlerless special permits are to fix a clerical mistake that erroneously removed these permits from the hunt tables. Changes to the Parker Lake archery Buck category permits are in association with changes to WAC 220-413-180 and

WAC 220-415-010, which expand access to the greater hunting public and nullify the need for special permits in this category.

WAC 220-415-050 2024-2026 Elk general seasons and definitions.

Adding GMU 334 to the eastern Washington Master Hunter only general season and extending season dates to the end of January are necessary because elk in GMU 334 and 371 fall outside the core herd areas of the Colockum and Yakima populations and are a source of significant agricultural damage in these areas. Elk numbers in these GMUs have increased in recent years and are above management objective. Adding harvest opportunity will help manage the elk population level and mitigate agricultural damage in the area.

Adjusting the legal elk during the late archery general season in GMU 121 from “any bull” to “any elk” is in response to increasing agricultural damage complaints, and other independent data, that indicate an increase in elk numbers in GMU 121. Providing late archery opportunity allows general season hunters to assist in mitigating agricultural damage through an anticipated modest increase in antlerless harvest.

Adjusting the legal elk in general seasons in GMU 407 from “any elk” to “3pt minimum” are necessary due to concerns about harvest sustainability. The North Cascades elk population is no longer exhibiting growth, and this change will reduce antlerless harvest with the goal of increasing the herd’s productivity and promoting stability, while still allowing for general season hunting opportunity.

WAC 220-415-060 2024 Elk special permits.

Changes to the elk special permit availability (i.e., permit dates, permit levels) are to balance hunting opportunity among user groups and with elk population status (i.e., increased hunting opportunities when populations allow, reduced opportunities when declining numbers warrant reduction), and to retain consistency in season timing (e.g., open/close day of week).

Adding GMU 466 to the Region 4 hunter education instructor permit is to improve the incentive value of this permit opportunity by offering additional hunt area with ample public access.

Changes to the hunt categories for Nooksak and Alkali hunts are intended to better match hunter expectations with the hunt experience (e.g., a Quality category hunt should have a higher likelihood of success, etc.) based on harvest information and hunter feedback. The addition of Upper Smith Creek and White River hunts to the Quality category are intended to balance hunting opportunity among weapon types.

The creation of Alkali B and C and Huckleberry special hunts are needed to increase hunter opportunity and commensurate harvest pressure on elk to assist with agricultural damage mitigation efforts in the hunt areas.

WAC 220-415-070 2024 Moose seasons, permit quotas, and areas.

The year change is a clerical change to make the WAC date consistent with the upcoming license year. Elimination of moose area 3 is because the Area is no longer needed due to expanded hunter access in GMU 117 (Parker Lake) and enrollment of the area in the WDFW Hunt by Reservation system.

WAC 220-415-120 2024 Bighorn sheep seasons, permit quotas, and areas.

Pausing (i.e., not offering permits) the “any ram” Manson bighorn sheep special hunts is due to the population being below objective with very low number of mature rams available to harvest. Older age class rams are important for population viability and to meet hunter expectations for a once-in-a-lifetime harvest opportunity. Pausing (i.e., not offering permits) the Mountain View – Black Butte special hunt permit is necessary because this hunt is cooperatively managed and rotates among WDFW, Oregon Dept. of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW), and the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation. WDFW offered the permit in 2024 and the harvest opportunity is offered by ODFW in 2025.

WAC 220-415-130 2024 Mountain goat seasons, permit quotas, and areas.

The reductions in mountain goat special hunt permits are in response to population declines to levels that can no longer support harvest per WDFW Game Management Plan (GMP) harvest guidelines or due to significant and rapid population decline which warrants reduced harvest. Pausing harvest promotes maximum survival of adult mountain goats and eliminates the potential inadvertent harvest of adult female goats, which are the most important drivers of long-term population trajectory.

WAC 220-416-060 2024-2025 Migratory gamebirds seasons and regulations.

Migratory gamebird season frameworks are established through ongoing interagency management programs involving U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and flyway organizations, including input from Canada, Russia, and Mexico. Federal frameworks include maximum bag limits, season lengths, season timing, and other regulations. Pacific Flyway season frameworks follow harvest strategies and management plans that have been developed cooperatively by USFWS and the Pacific Flyway Council. All states adopt waterfowl seasons within federal frameworks, and in many cases, they are more restrictive to address regional conservation needs.

Management agencies utilize Adaptive Harvest Management (AHM) to establish duck season frameworks. AHM relies on annual survey information and population models to prescribe optimal regulation packages each year. The population of ducks in the western part of North America is managed separately from the eastern flyways, as part of the models developed for western mallard AHM. Western mallard AHM uses results from breeding surveys and other information from western areas rather than from the Canadian

prairies, recognizing differences in Pacific Flyway breeding areas. This season packages for western mallard AHM are the same as developed under mid-continent mallard AHM (liberal, moderate, and restrictive), although different models are used to prescribe annual packages.

Surveys of the breeding waterfowl were conducted along traditional survey area transects in Alaska and Canada and were used in combination with aerial surveys conducted by crews in British Columbia, Washington, Oregon and California to help inform season dates and bag-limit structure for the 2024-2025 migratory gamebird seasons. Northern pintail status remained below population objective, however informed by an updated interim Northern Pintail Harvest Strategy adopted by the USFWS in June 2024, with the reported breeding population estimate and updated understanding between pintail populations and harvest rates, the optimal regulatory alternative increases the daily bag limit to three pintail for the 2025-2026 duck season. Based on the most recent scaup status, the optimal regulatory alternative described in AHM protocol, requires a restrictive regulatory alternative, maintaining the daily bag limit to two scaup per day, and maintains the 86-day season length.

Since June 2013, prescriptive guidelines inform sea duck harvest strategies with harvest rate targets of less than 5% or less of the winter index as measured by aerial surveys (PSAMP/PSEMP) conducted by WDFW. In a re-evaluation of the sea duck harvest strategy, 5% or less of the winter index continues to be appropriate for scoters, goldeneye and long-tailed ducks, however, in March 2024 a limited-user entry application process was developed to provide a limited number of permits for harlequin duck. The current indices (most recent three-year average) are as follows: scoter index is 75,093, which is above the 67,500 scoter threshold to allow a “moderate” regulatory alternative which would allow for a 3-scoter daily bag-limit to keep harvest rate below 5%; goldeneye index is 50,504, 17% above the 1996-2024 long-term average for the species, allowing for goldeneye to increase to a 3-goldeneye daily bag-limit to keep harvest rate below 5%; long-tailed duck index is 5,551, nearly identical to the 1996-2024 long term average for the species, requiring the 2-long tailed duck daily bag-limit to be maintained to keep harvest rate below 5%. Harlequin duck winter index is derived from the aerial survey results and the addition of a boat-based composition survey that allows for information on age- and sex-ratios to be considered, as harvest is biased towards adult male harlequin duck. The number of permits, administered through a limited-user entry application process, is derived to keep harlequin duck harvest rate at 3% of the adult males in the population when the winter index is below 4,772 harlequin duck (1996-2018 long-term average), and accounts for wounding loss in determining the available number of permits. Specifically, the most recent harlequin duck index is 4,580 (7.5% increase from 2023 index), with a 0.566 proportion of males and 0.885 proportion Adult males. Since the winter index is below the long-term average a harvest rate of 3% (Goudie et al. 1994) and a wounding loss of 30% (Koneff et al. 2017) are both applied resulting in 52 available harlequin duck permits ($4,580 \text{ winter index} * 0.566 \text{ prop-male} * 0.885 \text{ prop-adult} * 0.03 \text{ harvest rate} * 0.76923 \text{ wounding loss correction} = 52.94$; rounded down to the nearest whole number).

Goose Management Areas in Washington state are structured in part by the presence of different goose species and sub-species wintering populations that are most common to be encountered in that region of the state. Recent status updates for the two primary subspecies of Cackling Goose found in the state, “minima” cackling goose and Taverner’s cackling goose, indicate sustained declines and high harvest rates (in excess of 10%) as indicated by band harvest recoveries. Additionally, recent insights from marked-goose tracking studies, more clearly delineates the breeding range of Taverner’s, which would exclude geese from the Alaska North Slope breeding survey. This has statewide implication, as both of these cackling goose subspecies are harvested regularly in western and eastern Washington. To reduce harvest rate on these geese, the Canada goose (including cackling goose) daily bag limit are to be reduced to 3-geese daily in Goose Management Areas 1, 3, 4, and 5. As directed by Pacific Flyway Management Plan and federal frameworks, Goose Management Area 2- Coast and 2-Inland must be reduced to 2-geese daily, regular season dates may not be offered after Feb. 15, and season length may not exceed 74-days.

White geese, specifically Lesser Snow Geese from the breeding population on Wrangel Island, Russia, have recorded three-consecutive years of low production indicating a high likelihood of entering a declining phase for the population. Based on recent surveys, Goose Management Area 1 (Skagit-Fraser Valleys) will fall below the Pacific Flyway population objective of 70,000 adult (white) geese and is for a reduction in the daily bag-limit structure from 10 to 6 during dates before January 31, and from 20 to 10 during remaining dates. However, white geese have continued to expand winter distribution in the Columbia Basin (Goose Management Area 4), with the first arrival of fall migrants occurring between mid-October to late-October across a broader region of Goose Management Area 4, with six seasons of experience with season dates into late-February and early-March, the greatest opportunity to maintain harvest rates on this flock and to use this harvest as a tool to assist in agricultural depredation concerns in the region, is to shift the closure period later into December, and to shift the late segment later into late-February and early-March to better align resource availability and hunter opportunity across the entirety of this Goose Management Area.

The most recent 3-year average from the Pacific Flyway Fall Brant Survey requires the “Restrictive” Regulation package including Washington, which allows for no more than a 16-day window of harvest opportunity and a 2-brant daily bag limit. This requires Pacific County to start on January 10, 2026. Additionally, the Winter Brant Survey for Skagit County remains below 3,000 brant (3yr-avg. = 2,760) which requires the Skagit County brant hunt start closed until the January 2026 count is available to inform the number of hunt days available.

3. Differences between the text of the proposed rule and the rule as adopted:

WAC 220-412-070 Big game and wild turkey auction, raffle, and special incentive permits.

None.

WAC 220-412-090 Multi-season deer and elk tags.

The Director did not approve this rule change.

WAC 220-413-180 Special closures and firearm restriction areas.

None.

WAC 220-415-010 Deer area descriptions.

None.

WAC 220-415-030 2024 Deer special permits.

Season dates for the any weapon, Quality, Youth, and Hunters with Disabilities categories special hunt Green River was adjusted from Nov. 22-26 to Oct. 25-29 and Nov. 22-26. Season dates for the modern firearm, Youth category special hunt Beezley was adjusted from Oct. 11-26 to Oct. 11-21.

WAC 220-415-050 2024-2026 Elk general seasons and definitions.

None

WAC 220-415-060 2024 Elk special permits.

Season dates for the modern firearm, Quality Category special hunts Blue Creek, Peola, and Couse were adjusted from Sept 23-26 to Sept 22-26. Season dates for the modern firearm, Antlerless Category special hunt Teanaway were adjusted from Oct. 26-Nov.3 to Oct. 29-Nov. 2.

Season dates for the any weapon, Quality Category special hunt Green River was adjusted from Nov. 22-26 to Oct. 25-29 and Nov. 22-26. The permit levels were also adjusted for this hunt from 8 to 4.

Season dates for the any weapon, Quality category special hunt Green River was adjusted from Nov. 22-26 to Oct. 25-29 and Nov. 22-26.

WAC 220-415-070 2024 Moose seasons, permit quotas, and areas.

None

WAC 220-415-120 2024 Bighorn sheep seasons, permit quotas, and areas.

Chelan Butte adult ewe permit was moved from the “Adult ewe” category to the “Youth” category. This is a clerical correction since the hunt was inadvertently placed in the wrong category (Youth is the correct category).

WAC 220-415-130 2024 Mountain goat seasons, permit quotas, and areas

None

WAC 220-416-060 2024-2025 Migratory gamebirds seasons and regulations.

In Goose Management Area 4, shift the closure period for white goose regular season to Monday, December 1, 2025 to Friday, December 19, 2025 (a 19-day closure) and shift the late-period one week later to Saturday, February 21, 2026 to Sunday, March 8, 2026 (16-days), to allow harvest opportunity when white geese are present across the broader distribution of Goose Management Area 4.

For brant, results of the Pacific Flyway Fall Brant Survey became available in late-February 2025, requiring a “Restrictive” Regulation package requiring no more than a 16-day window of harvest opportunity and a 2-brant daily bag limit by federal framework. This requires Pacific County to start on January 10, 2026, rather than January 3, 2026.

4. Public comments, response to comments, and consideration of comments

WAC 220-412-070 Big game and wild turkey auction, raffle, and special incentive permits.

Comment themes: General support, general opposition, strong opposition; Start the fall hunt later; Bring back a spring bear hunt, leave the spring bear dates, extend the spring bear dates; Bring back hound hunting; End hunting of Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN) species, follow the precautionary principle.

Response: Department staff appreciate the feedback received on the changes to the bear hunting dates in the auction raffle permits.

Comment: Start the fall hunt later

Response: Department staff advised that the fall hunt for the raffle permit be aligned with the same updated management framework as suggested for the fall general season.

Comments: Bring back a spring bear hunt, leave the spring bear dates, extend the spring bear dates

Response: In November 2022, the Commission voted to not approve recreational hunting of black bears in the spring. Due to this guidance, the department will not be recommending a recreational spring bear season.

Comment: Bring back hound hunting

Response: Hound hunting has been illegal in this state since 2000 (RCW 77.15.245). This was a legislative decision that cannot be overturned with season setting rulemaking.

Comments: End hunting of Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN) species, follow the precautionary principle

Response: The department manages their wildlife populations for sustainability on the landscape in the face of an encroaching human footprint, increased disease transmission, and many other issues that face wildlife. Harvest is a management tool used across the US to help protect these important species from facing extinction risk and is a primary funder of wildlife conservation.

WAC 220-412-090 Multi-season deer and elk tags.

N/A: This proposed rule was not approved by the Director and will not be adopted.

WAC 220-413-180 Special closures and firearm restriction areas.

Comment themes: General support and opposition, dislike of a reservation system for hunting access.

Response: The department appreciates the feedback on the changes to Special closures and firearm restriction areas.

Comment: Dislike of a reservation system for hunting access.

Response: The intent of this rule change is to expand hunter access in the Parker Lake area, which was historically highly restricted. While a reservation-based system is still restrictive to access, it does provide an expansion and therefore improvement of hunter access and opportunity.

WAC 220-415-010 Deer area descriptions.

Comment themes: General support and opposition, desire to maintain status quo, concern about limits to public access through a reservation system.

Response: The department appreciates the feedback on the changes to deer areas.

Comment: Desire to maintain status quo.

Response: The status quo is a more restrictive access policy to deer area 1031. The department is committed to increasing and enhancing hunting opportunity where feasible consistent with the changes to this area.

Comment: Concern about limits to public access through a reservation system.

Response: The intent of this rule change is to expand hunter access in the Parker Lake area, which was historically highly restricted. While a reservation-based system is still restrictive to access, it does provide an expansion and therefore improvement of hunter access and opportunity.

WAC 220-415-030 2024 Deer special permits.

Comment themes: General support or general opposition, concern for lost opportunity or too little opportunity by user group or specific unit/areas, general desire for increased permit levels, and comments that are unrelated to the specific proposals (e.g., eliminate spike only restrictions, concerns about predation impacts).

Response: The department appreciates the feedback on the changes to elk special hunt seasons.

Comment: Concern for lost opportunity or too little opportunity by user group or specific units/areas.

Response: Hunting opportunity is primarily a function of a population's ability to support harvest. When a population is below objective criteria, restrictions are enacted to promote population rebuilding. When a population rebuilds, the department recommends expanded opportunity in accordance with its mandate and population sustainability. Equity among user groups is an important goal for the department, and biologists work diligently to balance hunting opportunities fairly. Department staff attempt to balance harvest rates with hunter participation by hunting method (i.e., modern firearm, archery, and muzzleloader) and offer hunt opportunities to underrepresented groups, like senior or youth hunters when possible, based on allowable harvest levels and population status.

Comment: General desire for increased permit levels.

Response: Permit opportunity is primarily a function of a population's ability to support harvest. As populations increase, permit levels generally increase but may lag behind depending on survey data or other available information.

Comment: Comments that are unrelated to the specific proposals.

Response: the department has no specific response to comments unrelated to the rulemaking proposals.

WAC 220-415-050 2024-2026 Elk general seasons and definitions.

Comment themes: General support or general opposition, concern about allocation of antlerless opportunity based on user group (e.g., archery, muzzleloader, youth, etc.), concern for lost opportunity, dislike of Master Hunter opportunity or program, and comments that are unrelated to the specific proposals.

Response: The department appreciates the feedback on the changes to elk general seasons.

Comment: Concern about allocation of antlerless opportunity based on user group.

Response: Equity among user groups is an important goal for the department, and biologists work diligently to balance hunting opportunities fairly. Department staff attempt to balance harvest rates with hunter participation by hunting method (i.e., modern firearm, archery, and muzzleloader) and offer hunt opportunities to underrepresented groups, like senior or youth hunters, when possible, based on allowable harvest levels and population status.

Comment: Concern for lost opportunity

Response: Hunting opportunity is primarily a function of a population's ability to support harvest. When a population is below objective criteria, restrictions are enacted to promote population rebuilding. When a population rebuilds, the department recommends expanded opportunity in accordance with its mandate and population sustainability.

Comment: Dislike of Master Hunter opportunity or program.

Response: The department is mandated to address agricultural conflict caused by wildlife. Master hunter opportunities are not offered in the vein of traditional recreational pursuit, however, because master hunter permits are meant to address human-wildlife conflict issues – usually agricultural damage. Master hunters provide WDFW staff with a well-trained and, importantly, readily available group of hunters that can be directed to address specific issues, which usually occur on private land.

Comment: Comments that are unrelated to the specific proposals

Response: The department has no specific response to comments unrelated to the rulemaking proposals.

WAC 220-415-060 2024 Elk special permits.

Comment themes: General support and general opposition, concern for lost opportunity or too little opportunity by user group, general desire for increased permit levels, general support for shifting special hunt categories as, concern for shifting categories, comments unrelated to the specific proposals.

Response: The department appreciates the feedback on the changes to elk special hunt seasons.

Comment: Concern for lost opportunity or too little opportunity by user group.

Response: Hunting opportunity is primarily a function of a population's ability to support harvest. When a population is below objective criteria, restrictions are enacted to promote population rebuilding. When a population rebuilds, the department recommends expanded opportunity in accordance with its mandate and population sustainability.

Equity among user groups is an important goal for the department, and biologists work diligently to balance hunting opportunities fairly. Department staff attempt to balance harvest rates with hunter participation by hunting method (i.e., modern firearm, archery, and muzzleloader) and offer hunt opportunities to underrepresented groups, like senior or youth hunters, when possible, based on allowable harvest levels and population status.

Comment: General desire for increased permit levels.

Response: Permit opportunity is primarily a function of a population's ability to support harvest. As populations increase, permit levels generally increase but may lag behind depending on survey data or other available information.

Comment: General support for shifting special hunt categories as and concern for shifting categories.

Response: The department appreciates the feedback on shifting elk special permit categories. Hunt categories allow permit hunting under specific criteria or are designed to provide a specific experience. The department occasionally creates or shifts hunts among categories as needed to match the category description and hunter expectation.

Comment: Comments that are unrelated to the specific proposals.

Response: the department has no specific response to comments unrelated to the rulemaking proposals.

WAC 220-415-070 2024 Moose seasons, permit quotas, and areas.

Comment themes: General support and opposition, general desire for increased permit levels and in new areas, comments unrelated to the specific proposals.

Response: The department appreciates the feedback on the changes to moose special hunt seasons.

Comment: General desire for increased permit levels and in new areas.

Response: Permit opportunity is primarily a function of a population's ability to support harvest. As populations increase, permit levels generally increase but may lag behind depending on survey data or other available information. Similarly, as populations exhibit declining trends, permit levels also decline. Populations exhibiting stability will generally retain status quo permit levels. The department is committed to maximizing sustainable hunter opportunity and will offer additional opportunity when possible.

Comment: Comments that are unrelated to the specific proposals.

Response: The department has no specific response to comments unrelated to the rulemaking proposals.

WAC 220-415-120 2024 Bighorn sheep seasons, permit quotas, and areas.

Comment themes: General support and opposition, general desire for increased permit levels and in new areas, comments unrelated to the specific proposals.

Response: The department appreciates the feedback on the changes to bighorn sheep special hunt seasons.

Comment: General desire for increased permit levels and in new areas.

Response: Permit opportunity is primarily a function of a population's ability to support harvest. As populations increase, permit levels generally increase but may lag behind depending on survey data or other available information. Similarly, as populations exhibit declining trends, permit levels also decline. Populations exhibiting stability will generally retain status quo permit levels. The department is committed to maximizing sustainable hunter opportunity and will offer additional opportunity when possible.

Comment: Comments that are unrelated to the specific proposals.

Response: The department has no specific response to comments unrelated to the rulemaking proposals.

WAC 220-415-130 2024 Mountain goat seasons, permit quotas, and areas.

Comment themes: General support and opposition, concern for lost opportunity, desire for increased permit levels and in new areas, comments unrelated to the specific proposals.

Response: The department appreciates the feedback on the changes to mountain goat special hunt seasons.

Comment: Concern for lost opportunity or too little opportunity by user group.

Response: Hunting opportunity is primarily a function of a population's ability to support harvest. When a population is below objective criteria, restrictions are enacted to promote population rebuilding. When a population rebuilds, the department recommends expanded opportunity in accordance with its mandate and population sustainability.

Comment: General desire for increased permit levels and in new areas.

Response: Permit opportunity is primarily a function of a population's ability to support harvest. As populations increase, permit levels generally increase but may lag behind depending on survey data or other available information. Similarly, as populations exhibit declining trends, permit levels also decline. Populations exhibiting stability will generally retain status quo permit levels. The department is committed to maximizing sustainable hunter opportunity and will offer additional opportunity when possible.

Comment: Comments that are unrelated to the specific proposals.

Response: The department has no specific response to comments unrelated to the rulemaking proposals.

WAC 220-416-060 2024-2025 Migratory gamebirds seasons and regulations.

Comment themes: General support, suggestions of a pintail hen limit within the 3-pintail daily bag-limit, disagreement about Canada and cackling goose bag-limit restrictions, disagreement with changes to Goose Management Area 4 white goose season dates, desire to move the regular duck season into February, desire for the use of electronic decoys in waterfowl hunting.

Comment: General support.

Response: WDFW acknowledges and appreciates the general support expressed by the majority of commenters for using annual monitoring data and using the flyway management process to inform decision-making.

Comment: A suggestion of a pintail hen sub-limit within the new 3-pintail daily bag-limit.

Response: An updated interim Northern Pintail Harvest Strategy adopted by the USFWS in June 2024, with the reported breeding population estimate and updated understanding between pintail populations and harvest rates, the optimal regulatory alternative increases the daily bag limit to three pintail for the 2025-2026 duck season. Current levels of harvest rate on hen pintails and the current sex-ratios documented in the annual Parts Collection Survey (>2 males per female) do not suggest the need for a hen sub-limit. After three seasons of experience with a 3-pintail daily bag-limit (determined by annual breeding population status) the interim harvest strategy will be reviewed.

Comment: disagreement about Canada and cackling goose bag-limit restrictions.

Response: Goose Management Areas in Washington state are structured in part by the presence of different goose species and sub-species wintering populations that are most common to be encountered in that region of the state. Recent status updates for the two primary subspecies of Cackling Goose found in the state, "minima" cackling goose and Taverner's cackling goose, indicate sustained declines and high harvest rates (in excess of 10% which approaches unsustainable rates) as indicated by band harvest recoveries.

Changes in Goose Management Area 2 were required to be made under Pacific Flyway management plans and federal frameworks. Without restrictions to reduce the current harvest rates being recorded, future harvest opportunity would be impacted due to population status.

Comment: disagreement with changes to Goose Management Area 4 white goose season dates.

Response: WDFW appreciates the comments regarding white goose management in Goose Management Area 4. The presence of white geese throughout the winter in the Columbia Basin is still relatively new. Goose Management Area 4 spans from the British Columbia border to the Oregon border and as such, the distribution of white geese throughout the winter varies based on temperatures and food availability. Based on a number of constructive comments, WDFW modified the proposal to shift the closure later and to shift the late-season segment one week later compared to the previous season.

Comment: A desire to move the regular duck season into February.

Response: WDFW acknowledges there is interest in moving seasons later, however it is illegal under federal law to allow regular season duck hunting days after January 31.

Comment: A desire for considering the use of electronic decoys in waterfowl hunting in Washington.

Response: WDFW acknowledges there is interest in the use of electronic decoys in waterfowl hunting, however this is a topic that is more appropriate for the three-year season setting process, as it requires significant public scoping and input from waterfowl hunters in Washington.