



Director Delegated Petition Summary Sheet

Decision must be made on or before:

2/1/2025

Agenda item:

Morgan petition to adjust deer antler point restrictions

Presenter(s):

Kyle Garrison

Background summary:

This petition requests that the Department adjust antler point restrictions (APR) to allow the take of “any buck” for archery and muzzleloader hunters. That is, this request recommends lifting an APR requirement for all but modern firearm hunters. The petitioner suggests that this change will improve population genetic potential for bucks with more antler points.

Many eastern Washington deer populations are vulnerable to overharvest because of open and highly accessible terrain. In these areas, the Department restricts most antlerless deer hunting to limited entry special permits (i.e., a harvest quota) and uses a 3-point minimum APR to protect one- and two-point bucks, which are typically younger animals, from harvest. This system ensures enough buck survival to achieve a post season range of 15-25 bucks per 100 does. A consequence of this system is that some older bucks with <3 point antlers are protected from harvest.

Harvest by archery and muzzleloader of one- and two-point bucks, as proposed in this petition, will likely result in post-season buck-to-doe ratio falling below objective criteria. Three-point or greater bucks are still exposed to harvest by all hunting methods, while the additional archery and muzzleloader harvest of one- and two-point bucks would reduce the number of bucks moving into the >3-point antler category (though not all bucks achieve >3-point antlers). Over time this harvest pressure would likely result in fewer bucks of all antler point classes and could be compounded by negative impacts on population productivity (i.e., the rut/reproduction).

To meet post-hunt objective criteria under this proposed change, the Department may ultimately need to enact different restrictions on archery or muzzleloader hunting methods to limit harvest. The Department attempts to allocate hunting opportunity among methods to produce harvest generally proportional to participation. For example, from 2020-2022 archers represented about 15% of deer hunters and represented about 14% of total deer harvest. An increase of archery and/or muzzleloader deer harvest (disproportionate to participation), therefore, would likely require reduced general season

hunting opportunity for those methods. Hunters generally desire large antlered bucks, but typically do not want to forgo opportunity.

This proposed change is motivated by a desire to remove mature two-point bucks from the population, thereby minimizing their reproductive success to improve a population's potential to produce bucks with more antler points. Any influence of mature two-point bucks to the gene pool is confounded by environmental conditions (e.g., nutrition; many factors can influence antler development) and because both male and female deer contribute genetic material responsible for antlers. Given that all deer in a population possess these genes while two-point bucks are relatively few overall, their contribution to the population gene pool is likely quite limited. Lastly, increased harvest pressure on one- and two-point bucks while maintaining pressure on >3 point bucks is unlikely to significantly produce more large bucks regardless of underlying genetic potential.

Staff recommendation:

The Department's existing harvest structure efficiently achieves post-hunt buck to doe ratios while providing consistent and sustainable hunting opportunity. This petition proposal is unlikely to improve population genetic potential to produce large antlered bucks and is likely to result in an overall reduction in buck abundance. As such, Department staff recommend denying this petition.

Policy issue(s) and expected outcome:

If denied, no rulemaking or modification of existing general season deer hunting will occur.

Fiscal impacts of agency implementation:

Adjustment of general season structure has the potential to impact revenue. Revenue may increase in the near term if participation increases for archery and muzzleloader methods but may be reduced long term if buck availability and harvest opportunity declines.

Action requested and/or proposed next steps:

None

Post decision communications plan: