

2019

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**FISH and
WILDLIFE**



DISTRICT 8 HUNTING PROSPECTS

Yakima and Kittitas counties

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DISTRICT 8 GENERAL OVERVIEW

District 8 is located in southcentral Washington. Game management units (GMUs) in District 8 include 328 (Naneum), 329 (Quilomene), 330 (West Bar), 334 (Ellensburg), 335 (Teaway), 336 (Taneum), 340 (Manastash), 342 (Umtaneum), 346 (Little Naches), 352 (Nile), 356 (Bumping), 360 (Bethel), 364 (Rimrock), 368 (Cowiche), 371 (Alkali) and part of 372 (Rattlesnake Hills). Hunters can choose a variety of habitats, ranging from lowland shrubsteppe and farmland to high elevation alpine wilderness.

District 8 is dominated by large blocks of public land and provides abundant hunting opportunities. The district is probably best known for elk. The Yakima elk herd is one of the largest in the state, with over 8,000 animals roaming over 900,000 acres of public land. There are over 4,000 elk in the Colockum herd, which inhabit mostly public land north of Ellensburg.

There is also plenty of upland bird hunting opportunity in District 8. Yakima County is near the top for harvest of many bird species, ranking #1 for quail, #2 for dove and chukar, #3 for pheasant, #4 for duck, and #5 for goose. Bird hunters wanting to wander over large areas with low hunter densities have many options in District 8. Along the breaks of the Columbia, the Yakima Training Center consists of 327,000 acres south of I-90, while WDFW manages another 154,000 acres north of the freeway. There are 9,000 acres on the Wild Horse Wind Farm, which utilizes a [Hunt by Reservation system](#). West of the Yakima River, hunters can roam the 105,000-acre Wenas Wildlife Area. A motivated upland bird hunter with a good dog could pursue grouse, chukar, partridge, quail, and pheasant in the same day.

Turkeys were introduced over 30 years ago, but populations remained low. In the late 1990s, a more extensive effort was made to augment existing pockets of birds. Post augmentation, the spring harvest increased from 60 in 2001 to 413 in 2010. Harvest has recently hovered around 100 birds. The populations in GMU 335 (Teaway) have become large enough to allow for a fall permit season. Turkey densities may never reach those found in northeast Washington, but many hunters are finding decent turkey hunting closer to home.

District 8 is also home to over 70 percent of the bighorn sheep in Washington. While it is still challenging to draw a permit to hunt sheep, bighorns can certainly add enjoyment to a hunting trip in District 8. Rams are in rut mid-October through November, when many hunters are traveling through the area. There are robust populations of bighorns that can often be easily viewed along Highways 821 (Yakima River Canyon) and 410 (Clemans Mountain, north of the junction with Highway 12).

Important Access Changes: Due to low elk populations, early archery antlerless has been reduced to Sept. 14-19 in GMUs 328, 329, 336, 340, 352, 356, and 364. The reduction has understandably upset some hunters. WDFW strives for harvest “equitability” among user groups. When elk populations decreased rapidly in recent years due to extreme summer drought

in summer 2015 and a few hard winters, modern firearm and muzzleloader permits were significantly reduced. In 2017, archery hunters (who made up 24 percent of hunters via tag sales) harvested 47 percent of the elk in the district. The shortened season is an attempt to reduce antlerless harvest so populations can rebound.

In 2016, two significant changes to hunting access occurred in District 8. The first was that access to the Wild Horse Wind Farm northeast of Ellensburg went to a Hunt by Reservation system. WDFW will be issuing the permits. To watch the video and register, go to http://wdfw.wa.gov/hunting/hunting_access/private_lands/hunt/292/. There are three time periods for registration. The number of people is unrestricted for the periods before and after the modern firearm elk seasons. For the modern firearm elk season, registration is restricted to 50 hunters per day. Those failing to get one of the 50 spots can drive through the facility, but they can't stop and hunt the wind farm property.

The second was access to Yakima Training Center (YTC). A Washington driver's license is still required to drive on the post, but it is no longer a valid form of proof of identity for accessing YTC or any other military facility. An Enhanced Washington State Driver License or a passport are among the valid forms of identification. YTC is expected to have limited access during fall 2019 due to heavy military training activity. For more information on approved form of identification, orientation, and other rules on YTC, call 509-577-3208 or 509-577-3209.

ELK



District 8 used to be the best in the state for elk hunting. However, with that distinction comes relatively high hunter densities. Opening weekend is usually crowded. However, a recent trend has been for hunters to pull up camp and head home before the season ends. If you are looking for a higher quality experience, consider hunting the last two or three days of the modern firearm season or switching to archery or muzzleloader. Archery general season success has recently been almost 10 percent compared to 3 percent for modern firearm and muzzleloader. Early archery antlerless seasons have been shortened, but archers will still likely have double the general season success compared to other weapon users.

Surveys this past winter found the Colockum herd declined and was estimated at 4,133 elk. Just a few years ago, the Colockum herd was over 6,000 during March surveys. The Yakima herd was at 8,231 elk. Both herds are below management objectives.

Modern firearm and muzzleloader elk hunting success in this district strongly correlates to number of spike bulls and permits. With the reduction in permits and low spike-bull numbers (few calves the prior year), 2017 and 2018 harvests were among the lowest in modern history (Figure 1). Calf recruitment has not rebounded, and 2019 general season harvest will likely remain low. Harvest and hunter numbers are shown in Table 1. Figure 2 shows the distribution of collared Yakima elk during September and October, whereas Figure 3 is from a recent study on Colockum elk. Hunters will find more elk at higher elevations and away from roads once seasons begin. The wilderness areas in the Yakima herd range can provide excellent hunting opportunity for those willing to invest the effort to chase elk in the high country.

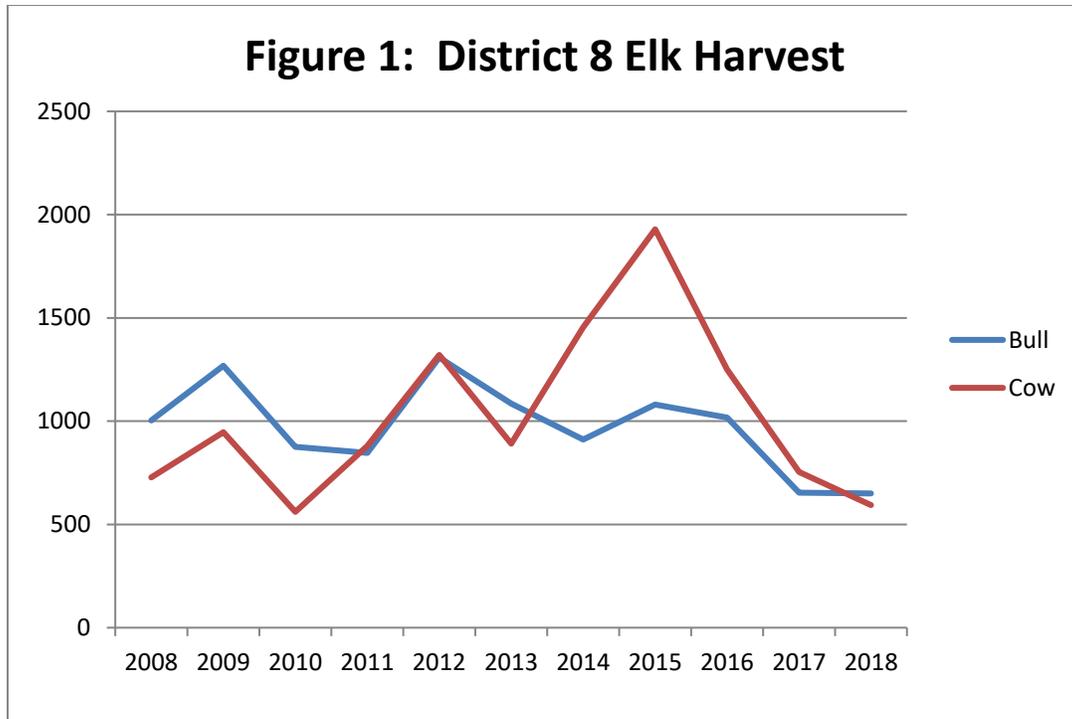


Figure 1. District 8 elk harvest.

Table 1: Elk General Season Average 2016-18

GMU	Antlerless	Spike	Total	Hunters	Success
328	178	108	287	3556	8%
329	43	91	134	1730	8%
334	12	9	21	381	5%
335	19	9	28	727	4%
336	18	15	33	1367	2%
340	10	46	57	2307	2%
342	13	24	37	1666	2%
346	6	45	51	1752	3%
352	56	23	79	1717	5%
356	27	26	53	1246	4%
360	0	40	40	1427	3%
364	32	17	49	1253	4%
368	37	69	106	1903	6%
Total	452	522	974	21033	5%

Figure 2

A Sample of Yakima Elk Herd's Fall Distribution from 140 Collared Females during Sept. & Oct. 2004 - 2006

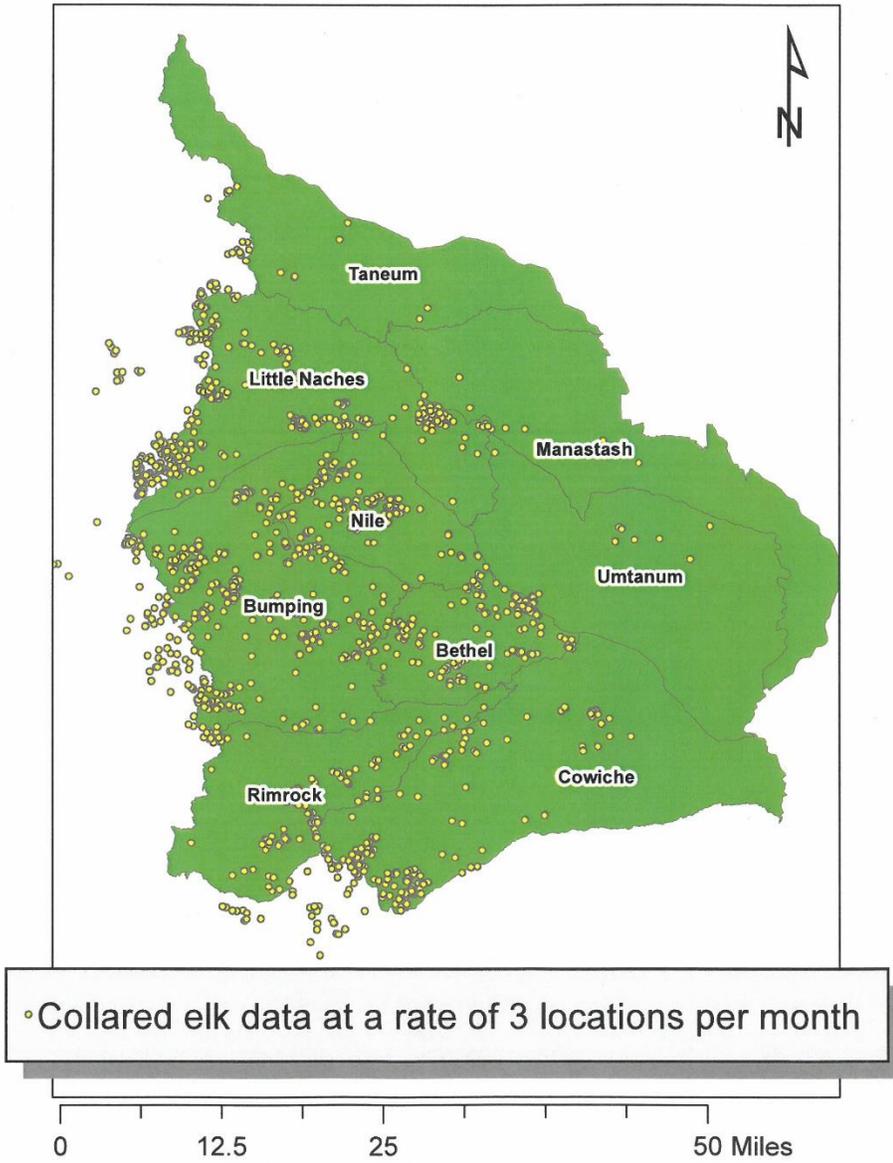
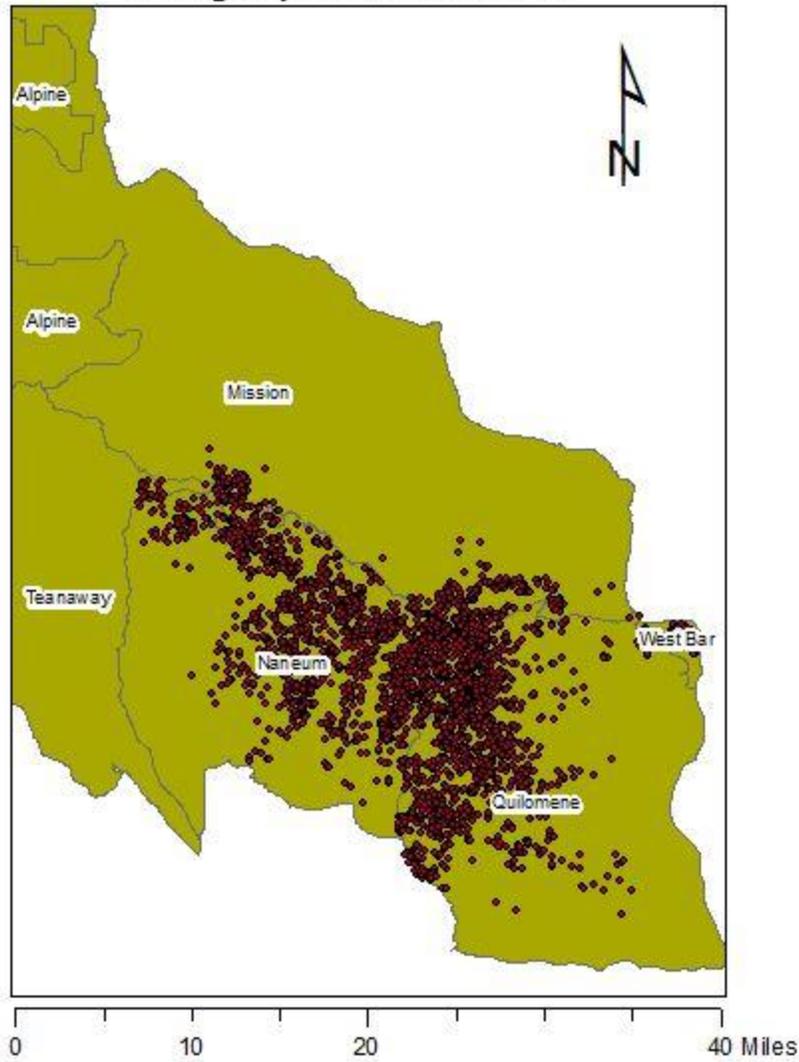


Figure 2. Yakima elk herd collared female elk locations during September and October.

Figure 3

Colockum Elk Herd, Collared Female Elk Locations during September & October



DEER



Deer harvest in District 8 hit its lowest levels in 2018 since records have been maintained (Figure 4). The average general season hunter success in 2017 and 2018 was 5 percent compared to a statewide average of 23 percent. No major rebound is expected for 2019. Population surveys in spring 2019 found the deer population has changed little. Harvest and hunter numbers by GMU for the last three years are shown in Table 2.

Hunter numbers have declined with the reduced deer population. Many of the remaining modern firearm hunters set up camp and claim their favorite spot for elk season. If you are looking for relatively low hunter densities, consider the higher elevations of District 8. Harvest and hunter numbers are typically highest in GMUs 335 (Teaway), 340 (Manastash), and 342 (Umtanum).

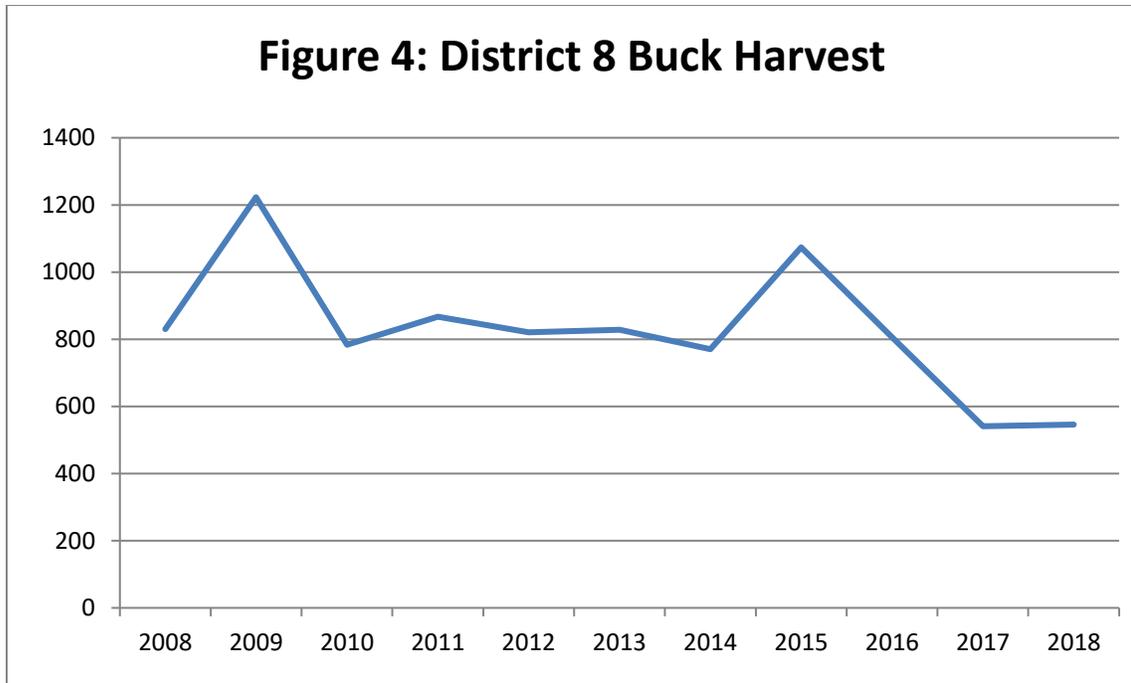


Figure 4. District 8 buck harvest.

Table 2: District 8 General Season Deer
Average 2016-18

GMU	Buck Harvest	Hunters	Success
328	99	1370	7%
330	1	23	6%
334	29	328	9%
335	136	1409	10%
336	49	891	5%
340	76	1261	6%
342	79	1096	7%
346	24	761	3%
352	22	719	3%
356	9	357	3%
360	9	516	2%
364	8	434	2%
368	44	1179	4%
Total	584	10345	6%

COUGAR

The majority of cougar in the district are harvested by deer and elk hunters who opportunistically cross paths with a cat during general deer/elk seasons. However, more hunters are finding that cougar hunting is a fun and challenging experience. The early season is open September 1 – December 31. The late starts January 1 and continues until harvest guidelines are reached (closes April 1). Male cougars are territorial and use broader range when deer and elk are dispersed in summer and early fall. Deer and elk typically migrate back to winter range by mid-November. Cougars will follow, and highest cat densities can be found during late fall and winter in lower elevations. One popular hunting technique is to use calls. This is most successful when there is snow on the ground and tracks can be found. Rather than following the cougar hoping to “run it down”, hunters call, trying to get the cat to come to them. A number of calls work. During deer and elk seasons, hunters might consider a fawn bleat call, which typically won’t spook deer or elk. Without snow, it can be difficult to know where to start. Rather than working large blocks of timber, consider timbered stringers. Cougars do inhabit open terrain, but prefer cover. Cats hunting open shrub-steppe will likely be hiding in timber stringers during the day. Cougars inhabit nearly every portion of the district, but online groups post where cats have been seen recently. Checking those sites may improve your success.

WATERFOWL

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) flyway has not yet published the 2019 breeding population estimates. Since 2014, estimates for the flyway had been well above the long-term average, but declining in recent years. Harvest in District 8 has been relatively stable around 30,000 since 2013 (Figure 5). For local hunters, total ducks in the flyway probably isn’t as important as local weather conditions and available food.

Yakima County has averaged over 30,000 ducks harvested in the last five years, which is the fourth best in the state. The unfortunate crop trend has been away from corn and toward hops, vineyards, and orchards. Farmers also have a tendency to till stubble shortly after crop harvest.

An El Niño is predicted to fade over the fall, but the fall-early winter temperatures are predicted to be above normal. If there isn’t a prolonged heavy freeze, harvest is typically good in the Yakima Valley.

The best waterfowl hunting is in the lower Yakima Valley. Public hunting can be found on the Sunnyside-Snake River Wildlife Area (SWA) and Toppenish National Wildlife Refuge (TPNWR). A Marsh Master was recently purchased by WDFW for improving waterfowl habitat and hunting access on the SWA. Marshes previously choked with vegetation will hopefully be opened up in 2019. Waterfowl hunting should be better than in the past on the SWA and hunters should explore wetlands that were previously hard to hunt.

Toppenish National Wildlife Refuge has had difficulty filling wetlands in October. Water cannot be pumped from Toppenish to fill wetlands in the Robins Unit unless flows are greater than 30 cubic feet per second. The Pumphouse wetlands are dependent on Toppenish Creek side channels to fill at higher creek levels. Flows in those side channels have been a bit unpredictable in recent years. It appears that at a gauge height of 3 feet, the channels should fill. Hunters can check flow/levels at <https://waterdata.usgs.gov/wa/nwis/uv/>. Summer 2019 has been dry and creek flows are low. If significant rain does not fall, don't expect water in the refuge until sometime in November. Before making a trip to Toppenish National Wildlife Refuge, it would be best to call the refuge at 509-865-2405 for conditions.

The Yakama Nation maintains a public hunting program and there are great duck hunting opportunities on the reservation. The Yakama Nation is consistently expanding waterfowl hunting opportunity along the Yakima River. Review their Feel Free to Hunt map annually.

Band returns suggest many locally produced ducks are staying in the Yakima Valley. Early season success is likely tied to regional production. The past spring saw good moisture with a late melting snowpack, but observations suggest a late if not poor hatch for unknown reasons.

Late season success is probably more dependent on naive northern migrants. The first cold wave is typically around Thanksgiving. Once ponds and sloughs freeze over, the Yakima River can be productive. For the best late season hunting, watch for significant changes in weather. If there is a quick thaw and rain, new ducks enter the valley and a week or so of good hunting can be had before the birds find the safety of private land and the reserves. A freeze and thaw may also fill wetlands that had been dry earlier in the year.

For an excellent introduction to waterfowl hunting, see [Let's Go Waterfowling](#). New for 2019-2020 is a youth/military day on February 1. In the past, organizations like Washington Waterfowl Association have offered mentored hunts. Hunters should check <https://wdfw.wa.gov/hunting/requirements/hunting-clinics> if interested.

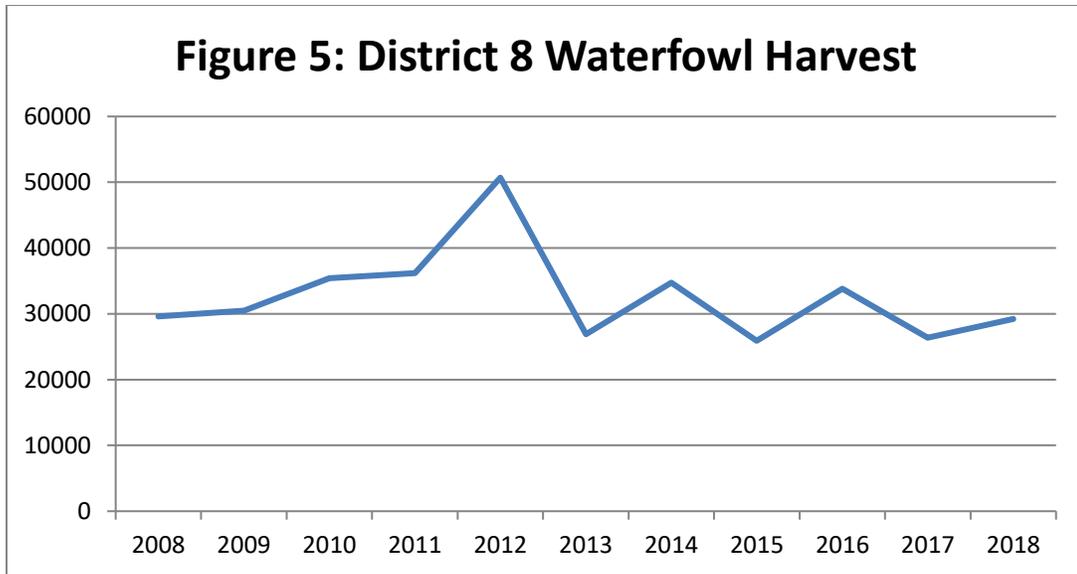


Figure 5. District 8 waterfowl harvest.

DOVE

Yakima County typically ranks second in the state for dove harvest, but harvest has been declining for the past 10 years (Figure 6). Banding efforts in 2019 suggest low populations again this year.

The best success is in the lower Yakima Valley on private land. Public hunting can be found on the Yakima Nation Reservation. Yakama Nation grows wheat on portions of their Satus Wildlife Area. For information on hunting on Yakama Nation land, visit ynwildlife.org.

No wheat was grown on the Sunnyside Wildlife Area in 2019. Registration boxes on Sunnyside suggest relatively poor harvest the last 2 years, with hunters averaging 0.55 birds per day in 2017 and 0.93 in 2018. Attempts were made to improve hunting in 2017 by mowing weeds/unsuccessful food plots. As soon as doves concentrated, raptors arrived and dispersed the doves. Large dove concentrations quickly dispersing has been seen frequently while banding. This suggests hunters should locate numerous fields and scout only a day or 2 before the season.

Dove numbers in the area often depends on the weather pattern. Warm weather is needed to keep the majority of birds from migrating out of the valley. Cooler weather often hits the area by late August or early September. Despite a 30-day season, the average dove hunter only spends three days (opening weekend) pursuing doves. .

Many hunters ask about Eurasian collared dove hunting opportunities, as the season extends year round, without bag limits. Eurasian collared dove numbers have increased dramatically in the last seven years. No information is collected on harvest, but collared doves are now very common. The problem for hunters is that the majority of collared doves are in urban areas.

Collared doves seem to behave more like rock doves (pigeons) than mourning doves. Some hunters occasionally find some opportunities at roost sites and in a few fields, but good hunting is rare. Eurasian collared dove harvest is more of a bonus while hunting other birds, rather than a target for most hunters. Making a trip hoping to find Eurasian collared dove opportunity may be frustrating.

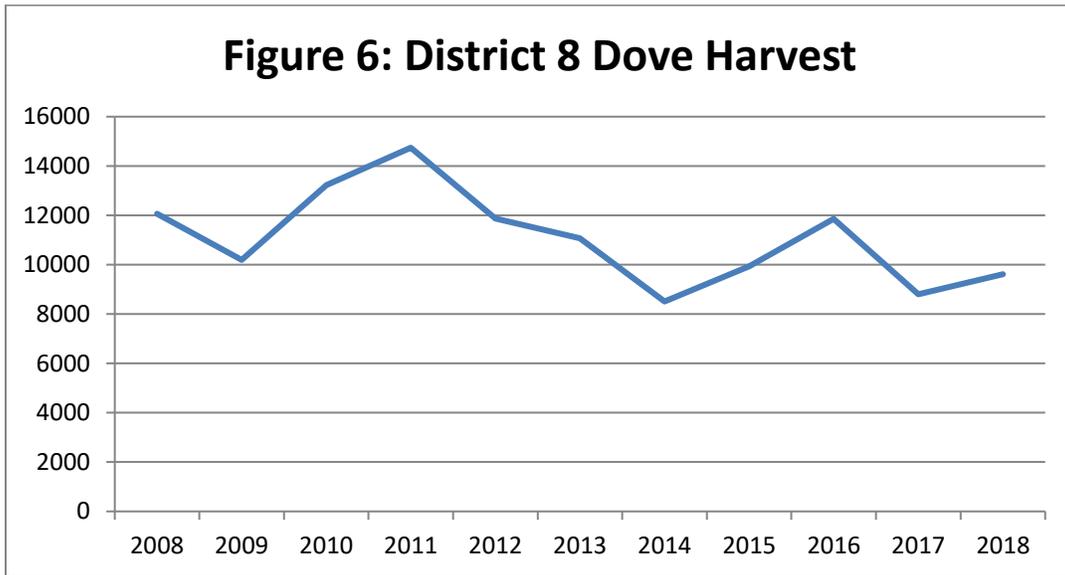


Figure 6. District 8 dove harvest.

FOREST GROUSE



Grouse harvest in District 8 has been fairly stable over the last seven years (Figure 7) despite fewer hunters and days reported. Harvest per day has been increasing the last few years. There

was no real change in estimated total harvest in 2018 despite total wings deposited in barrels declining. No data are available on the 2019 hatch, but there was no unusual weather.

Many grouse hunters drive roads morning and evening, especially when the season first opens. Research suggests brood hens and young are the most vulnerable in early September. Hunters serious about finding grouse should look for areas with low densities of open roads and hike.

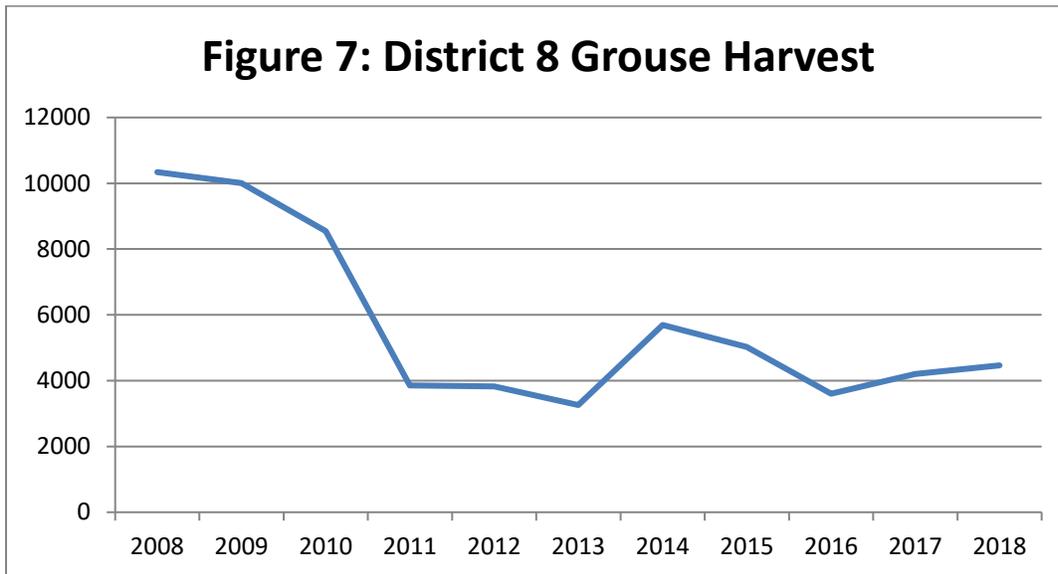


Figure 7. District 8 grouse harvest.

PHEASANT

Pheasant harvest in District 8 has leveled out at very low levels due to few wild birds (Figure 8). The only place to find huntable numbers of wild birds is on the Yakama Nation Reservation. Pheasant numbers have been declining for decades on Yakama Nation due to conversion from fallow land to crops. There has been no change in this trend. Even if grain prices declined, farmers switch to crops like hops rather than leave fields idle.

Predicting changes in pheasant numbers based on weather is difficult, and winter 2018-19 was very unusual. No significant snow fell until early February, but persisted until almost April. Snow often increases soil moisture and results in a good hatch, but such late snow cover likely resulted in delayed nesting. Summer is always dry in the valley, by the time birds hatched, there may not have been enough green growth and insects. Irrigation water can make up for dry conditions, but summer drought conditions reduced available water. Wild pheasant probably contribute little to the total harvest in the district. The best guess is that pockets of wild birds probably decreased over 2018.

No pheasant surveys are conducted in District 8. Yakama Nation conducts production surveys and posts their data in late summer. For information on surveys and hunting the Yakama Nation Reservation, visit ynwildlife.org.

Released pheasants are becoming a significant source of recreation for many hunters. About 1,600 roosters will be released in District 8. The 2019 allocation will be about 800 birds at the Sunnyside Wildlife Area, 500 at Cottonwoods, and 300 at Whiskey Dick. A fire burned the eastern portion of the Cottonwoods release site this summer. Birds will be released off the Durr Road and pointed west.

For the youth hunt, birds will only be released at Sunnyside and Cottonwoods. Historically, turnout in September had been low and kids have had a difficult time finding released birds. The last few years, WDFW switched to mentored hunts and releasing when kids arrive on Saturday morning. Volunteers from the local chapter of Pheasants Forever run the events. To sign up for Saturday, September 21 at Cottonwoods or Sunnyside, visit [WDFW's website](#). Watch the site for clinics during school breaks later in the year that are open to all first time hunters.

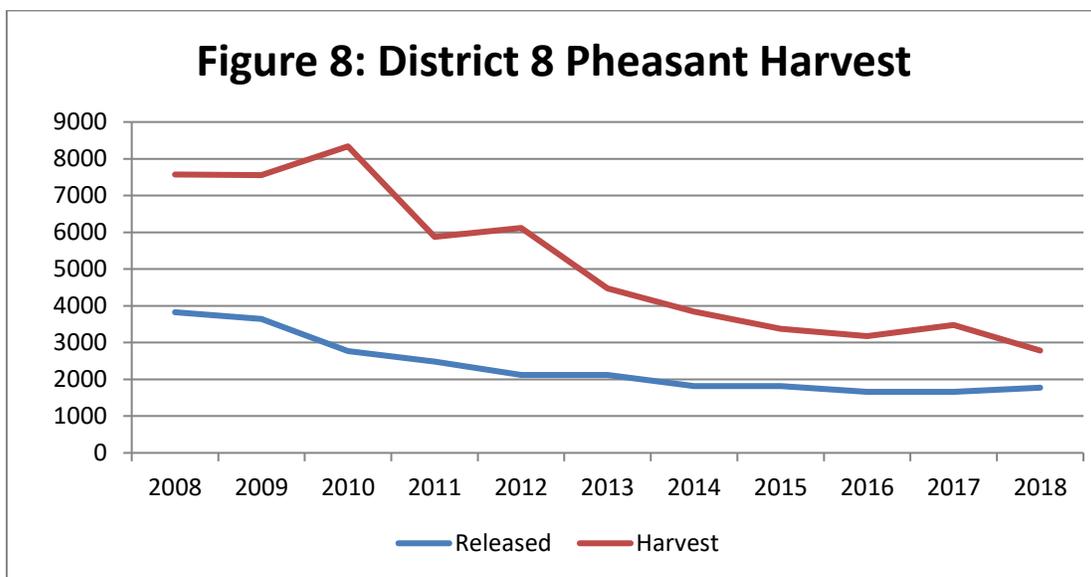


Figure 8. District 8 pheasant harvest.

QUAIL

California quail can be found in most non-timbered portions of the district. The best habitat and highest number of quail are typically in the lower Yakima Valley. This is evident in the harvest statistics where Yakima County leads the state in quail harvest with an average of 15,000 birds over the last five years. In Kittitas County, the average quail harvest is only 1,900.

The trend has been for declining total quail harvest (Figure 9). This trend may not represent actual quail populations, as surveys on the Yakama Nation Reservation have found increasing

numbers of birds until the winter of 2016-17 reduced populations (Figure 10). There was a rebound in 2018, but not universally. Quail numbers in some of the historically best areas along the Yakima River failed to increase significantly. Instead, pockets of birds that survived 2016-17 near homes, feedlots, and grain fields were the places to hunt.

The quail population in 2019 is hard predict. No significant snow fell until early February, but persisted until almost April. Quail in natural habitat likely had high mortality. Areas near artificial food sources (houses, cattle feed lots) have the highest probability of good bird numbers. Yakama Nation will post quail survey numbers later this summer.

WDFW owns various parcels along the lower Yakima River that hold good numbers of quail that are part of the Sunnyside-Snake River Wildlife Area. Yakama Nation runs an excellent hunting program and has great quail hunting opportunity. For information on surveys and hunting Yakama Nation land, visit ynwildlife.org.

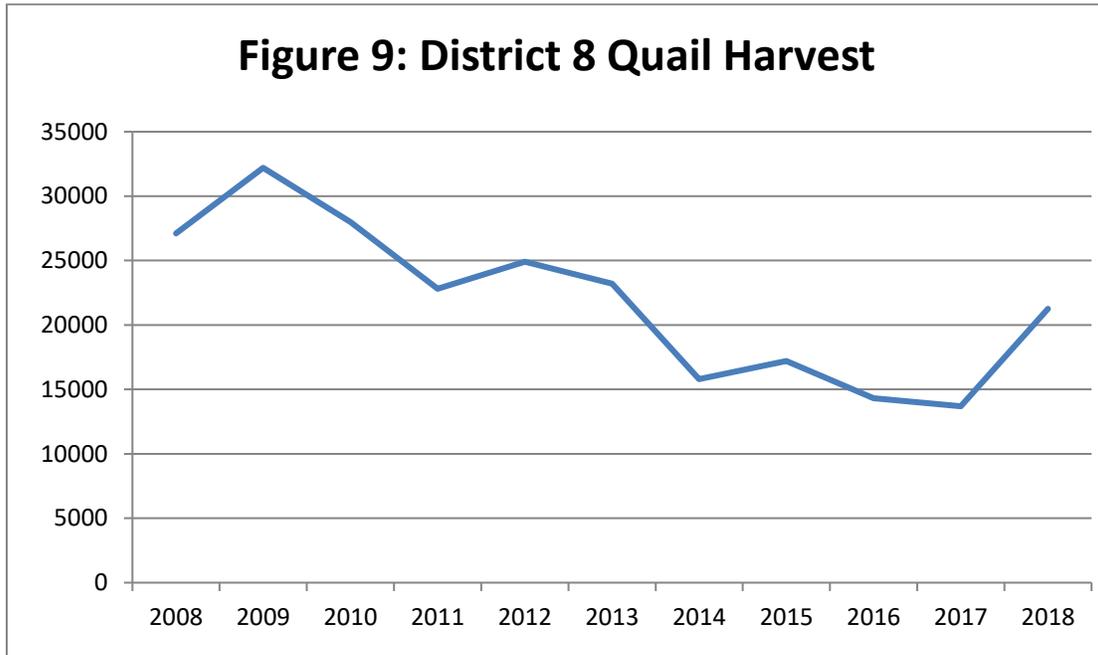


Figure 9. District 8 quail harvest.

Average number of quail per mile observed during brood counts on the Yakama Reservation

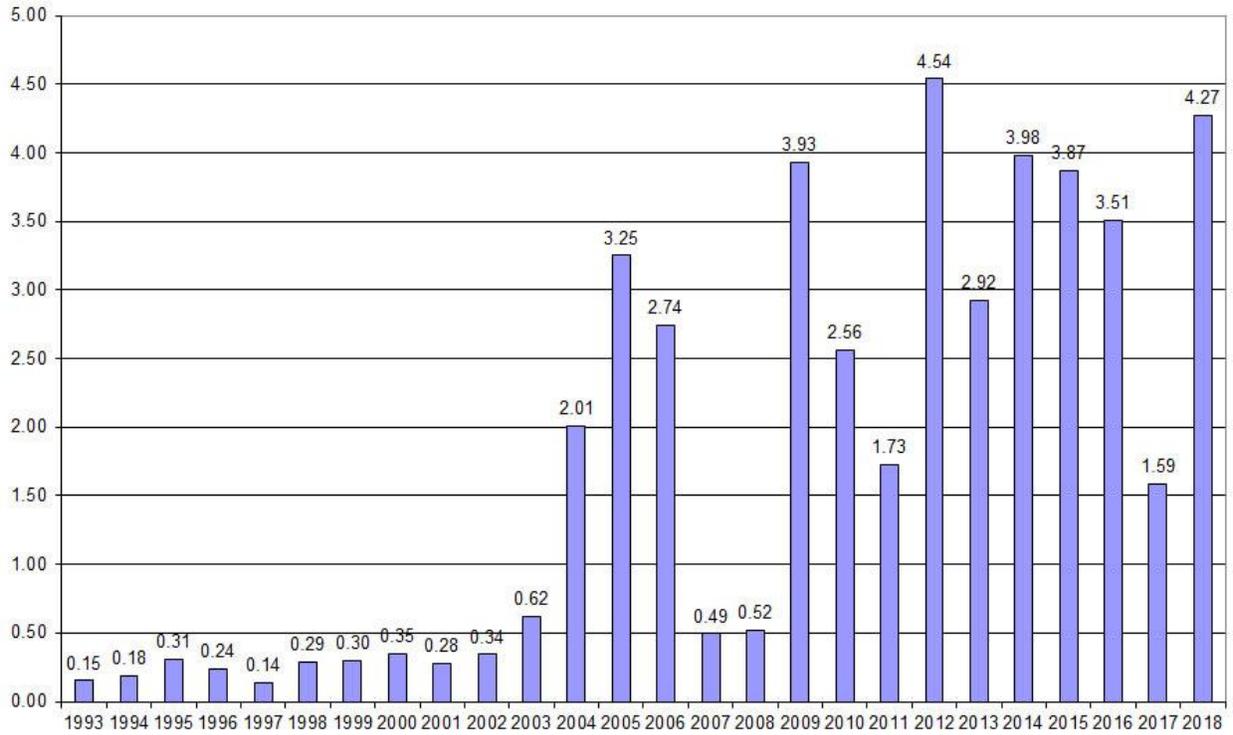


Figure 10. Average number of quail per mile observed during brood counts on the Yakama Nation Reservation.

TURKEY



Turkey populations peaked in 2010 following releases in the late 1990s and appear to have settled at lower levels (Figure 11). About 50 percent of the district harvest typically comes from GMU 335 (Teaway). The best hunting early in the spring is on private lands in the lower elevations of GMU 335. By May, some birds will be moving into higher elevations on the Teaway Community Forest. GMUs 328 and 329 sometimes produce a decent (>20 birds) harvest. Outside of those areas, turkeys are in very small pockets. Fewer than 10 birds are typically harvested annually in any of the 340-372 GMUs.

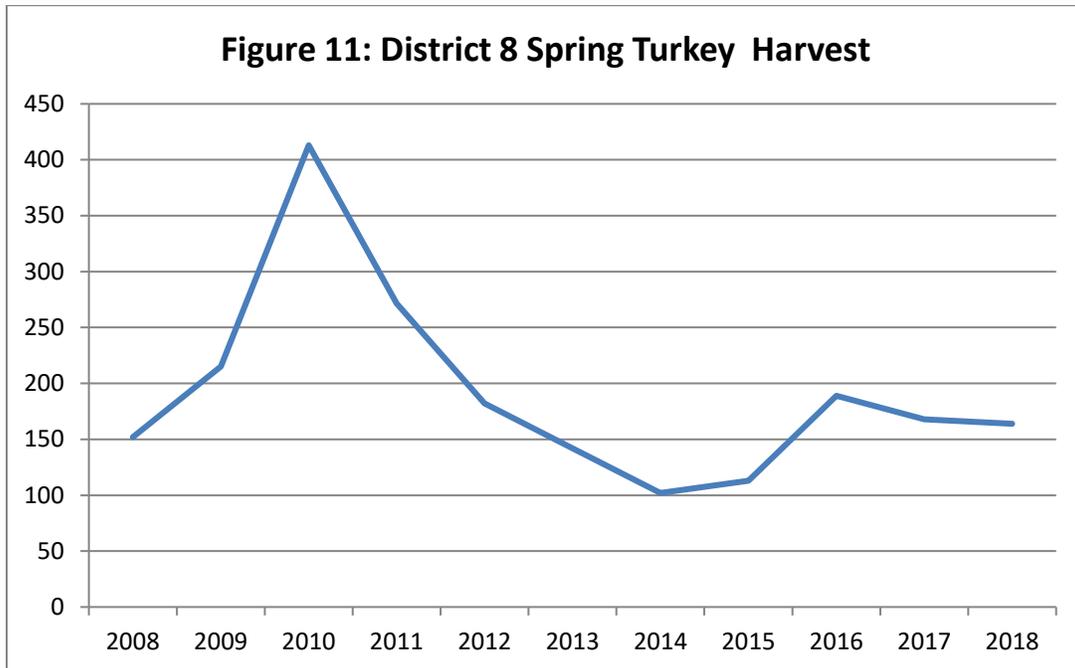


Figure 11. District 8 spring turkey harvest.

PARTRIDGE (CHUKAR/HUNGARIAN)



Partridge harvest in the district has been increasing the last few years despite a very hard winter in 2016-17. Winter 2017-18 was again of concern with snow cover lasting until April. However, history has shown that abundant snow and a wet, cold spring produces a lot of vegetation and birds. Anywhere chukar and partridge found open ground and survived winter should have good numbers of birds in 2019. Bird numbers have actually been best in the north and western portions of the district where the snow was deepest and spring temperatures the lowest.

Little information is available on the 2019 hatch, but the recent trend should continue based on staff field observations. There is plenty of public land for partridge hunting in the district. The best populations are expected on the Quilomene and Colockum wildlife areas, where birds may have found more open terrain during winter near the Columbia River. Clemans Mountain, on the Oak Creek Wildlife Area, and the upper Wenas should also have decent bird numbers. Populations were not as good in 2018 on the Yakima Training Center (YTC). Large fires continue to reduce habitat quality on YTC, but at 300,000 acres, there are bound to be good pockets of birds.

The Yakima Training Center is very popular with long-time chukar hunters. Access can be limited when military training is heavy. Access to Yakima Training Center in fall 2019 will likely be limited until at least November based on communication with the US Army. A number of large operations are planned, so expect few training areas open to the public. Note that

identification requirements have changed. Hunters must go through a brief orientation, pay a \$10 fee, and register their firearms with Yakima Training Center. For more information on the orientation and rules on Yakima Training Center, call 509-577-3208 or 509-577-3209.

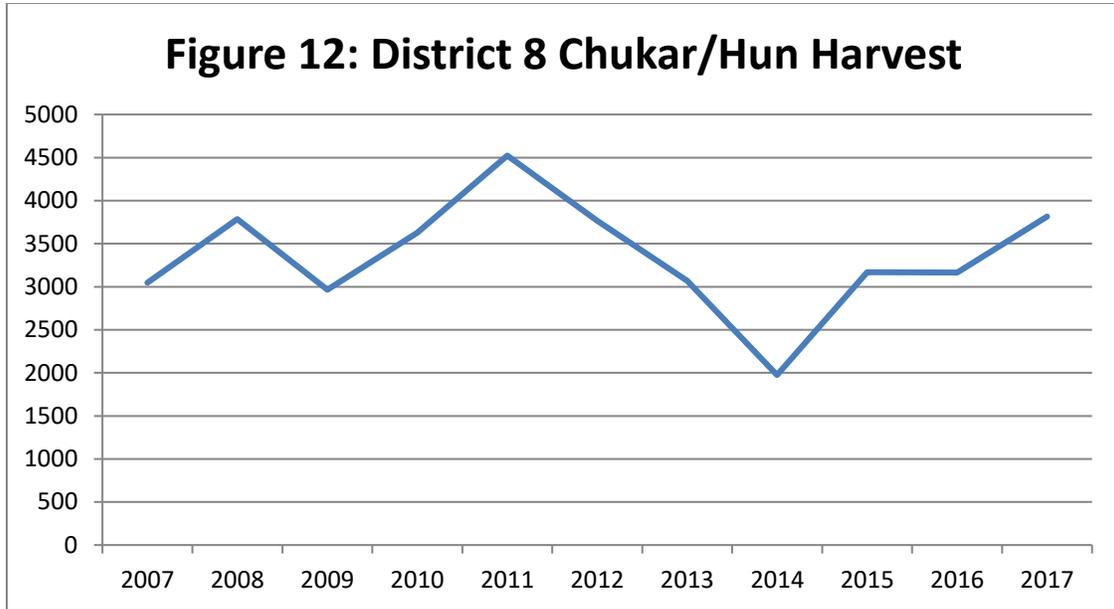


Figure 12. District 8 chukar/hun harvest