

**WASHINGTON DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE
MASTER HUNTER PERMIT PROGRAM
2021 ANNUAL REPORT**

Introduction

Master Hunters are ambassadors of safe, ethical, responsible, and legal hunting in Washington state. Their dedication helps promote and strengthen our hunting heritage.

Master Hunters help achieve Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) Wildlife Program goals and initiatives by:

- Strengthening the conservation ethic, image of hunting, and hunting heritage
- Improving landowner relations
- Helping resolve human/wildlife conflicts
- Removing deer and/or elk causing damage to property
- Increasing hunter access to private lands through volunteer efforts
- Participating in hunter education classes, hunting clinics, and mentoring new hunters
- Protecting and enhancing important habitats
- Participating in WDFW Citizen Science wildlife data collection
- Serving in an administrative or coordination capacity for a volunteer network
- Providing accurate information about WDFW's management activities to the public



Participant Update

As of March 30, 2021, WDFW has 1,361 certified Master Hunters. The table below summarizes the number of certified Master Hunters at year's end since 2015. WDFW postponed the open enrollment period in 2019 due to budgetary uncertainty. Once the budget was finalized and funding was available for the Master Hunter Permit Program (MHPP), WDFW opened enrollment on July 1, 2019 and closed the open enrollment period on August 15, 2019. Applicants were given until May 15, 2020 to complete the requirements for certification. The open enrollment period and completion period are the same length of time applicants had in previous years. WDFW believes that continued budget uncertainty and the mid-year open enrollment are two reasons for the low number of Master Hunter applicants in 2019.

On March 16, 2020, WDFW closed its offices and halted use of volunteers due to COVID-19. Most of the 2019 applicants had not completed their certification requirements before the shutdown. Since the shutdown, the MHPP has not been able to open testing at regional offices and has not determined a safe way to allow volunteer test proctors to test applicants. Also, WDFW has only been able to use volunteers in an extremely limited capacity due to COVID-19 protocols.

Certified Master Hunters by Year

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019*	2020**
Applicants	375	317	350	310	110	0
Applicants certified	97	89	85	104	6	0
Percent certified	26%	28%	24%	34%	5%	0%
Total Master Hunters	1,650	1,648	1,632	1,671	1,454	1,361

* Data for the 2019 application period as of March 1, 2020.

**The 2020 open application period was cancelled due to COVID-19 restrictions

Master Hunters renewing their certification rebounded in 2020. This could be due to the program being funded.

Master Hunter Renewal Rates by Year***

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Certification renewals	250	198	124	162	140	251
Non-renewals	169	104	86	69	214	97
Renewal Rate	60%	66%	59%	70%	40%	72%

*** These numbers are approximations due to the fluidity of the Master Hunter renewals.

To recertify, Master Hunters are required to provide 40 hours of volunteer service in the past five years. Collectively, Master Hunters and Master Hunter applicants provide approximately 15,000 hours per year on volunteer projects. These volunteer hours are valued at roughly \$450,000.

Master Hunter Advisory Group

The Master Hunter Advisory Group (MHAG) advises WDFW on issues and opportunities affecting Master Hunters and the MHPP. They also help identify and foster meaningful volunteer opportunities for Master Hunters statewide. The volunteer opportunities promote the conservation ethic and address WDFW needs.

The MHAG consists of 15 members who serve three-year terms. Five members are appointed by the director each year, with the goal of maintaining at least two Master Hunters per WDFW administrative region. MHAG members appoint a chair and vice-chair to one-year terms, and a secretary to a two-year term.

Director Kelly Susewind appointed five members to the MHAG in March 2021 for terms beginning in April 2021. The director appointed Ray Boone (Region 2), John McAuliffe (Region 3), Ian Stewart (Region 4), Keith Pfeifer (Region 5), and David Ward (Region 6) to three-year terms. Region 1 did not have any applicants for 2021. John McAuliffe (Region 3) was placed in the Region 1 seat. During 2020, Jeff Larsen (Region 4) served as chair and Ian Stewart (Region 4) served as vice-chair.

The MHAG met four times in 2020. The first meeting was held via Skype call and the other three meetings were held via Teams call. Meeting dates were March 13, June 12, August 21, and December 11. All meeting notices, agendas, and notes are posted on the MHAG webpage (see <http://wdfw.wa.gov/about/advisory/mhag/>). In 2021, MHAG plans to meet four times. Meeting dates for 2021 are March 12, June 11, August 20, and December 10. These meetings will take place via Teams until COVID-19 restrictions are eased and in-person meetings can resume.

Program Refinements

The MHPP replaced the Advanced Hunter Education Program in 2008. In 2013, the Wildlife Program began administering the MHPP. The Wildlife Program created a MHPP Policy Statement (https://wdfw.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2019-05/2013_mh_policy_statement.pdf) to guide the MHPP, which describes the role and use of Master Hunters.

At the start of the 2019 application period, the Master Hunter exam materials were posted to the MHPP webpage. The information consists of an Excerpt from the 2015-2021 Game Management Plan, Master Hunter Handbook, Big Game Hunting Seasons & Regulations, Migratory Waterfowl & Upland Game Seasons, and the Washington Hunter Education Online Study Guide. Since March 1, 2019, the Master Hunter handbook has been downloaded 1,937 times as of February 20, 2021.

When WDFW offices closed for COVID-19 protocols, the MHPP adopted a less rigid renewal timeframe for Master Hunters whose permits were expiring in 2020. This was adopted due to

lack of volunteer projects during the spring of 2020. In July 2020, it became obvious that the pandemic was not going to allow for volunteer opportunities during the summer and early fall like in past years. WDFW and the MHAG came up with a virtual volunteer option to allow Master Hunters whose permits were expiring in 2020 to accumulate volunteer hours at home by educating themselves more on what WDFW does and how WDFW uses Master Hunters so they can be better ambassadors for WDFW. At the time of this report, WDFW is allowing Master Hunters whose permit expires before December 31, 2021 to partake in the virtual volunteer option. This may change based on COVID-19 restrictions. The MHPP may, in the future, allow Master Hunters who are renewing their permits to complete some virtual volunteer hours for educational purposes.

Communications and Outreach

MHAG members serve as a communication link between WDFW and Master Hunters in their region. Email contact information for each MHAG member is on the MHAG webpage for use by Master Hunters.

Six bi-monthly Master Hunter Permit Program Newsletters were distributed to Master Hunters, applicants, and WDFW staff in 2020. Newsletters give Master Hunters and Master Hunter applicants information about WDFW projects, Master Hunter success stories, and volunteer opportunities. The newsletter has been widely accepted by the MHAG and Master Hunters alike.

Policy and Programmatic

In 2019, WDFW changed the timeframe to apply to the MHPP to July 1 through August 15. This change aligns the programs application period to the fiscal year calendar. It will allow WDFW to know if the program is funded before accepting applications, which is one of the reasons WDFW believes the applications were down severely in 2019. Applicants have until May 15 of the following year to complete the requirements.

The 2020 application period was suspended after 8 days in 2020 due to COVID-19 restrictions. All applicants were refunded their application fees. In 2021, WDFW is planning to accept applications starting July 1. However, this may change based on COVID-19 restrictions.

Program Integrity

Chapter 77.15.760 RCW and WAC 220-412-030 dictate the actions of WDFW relative to Master Hunter suspensions. During 2020, three Master Hunters were suspended for two years due to

paying a fine for a Title 77.15 infraction. One Master Hunter was suspended while their case is adjudicated.

Future Direction

Master Hunters and Master Hunter applicants have had increased volunteer opportunities to address WDFW needs thanks to Hunter Education Division staff and the Volunteer Program Manager. Priority projects include:

- Game damage control
- Improving private lands access
- Hunter recruitment, retention, and re-engagement
- Wildlife area habitat and facility improvements
- Water access site improvements
- Scientific data collection
- Hunter education classes
- Continuing to improve the image of the MHPP

Master Hunters and Master Hunter applicants can volunteer with other wildlife organizations and agencies to fulfill their Master Hunter volunteer obligations on projects beneficial to WDFW's mission.

Emphasis in the future will be on continuing to engage Master Hunters in:

- Proctoring Master Hunter exams
- Assisting with private lands access (particularly for youth hunters)
- Utilizing their knowledge and skill during WDFW's hunting clinics
- Expanding mentoring activities