

November 24, 2020

Chair Wahl, Commissioners, Director Melcher,

The Oregon Action Team on Ungulate Migration (OAT) respectfully requests the department undertake the critical update and revision to the Mule Deer Management Plan.

OAT is a group of stakeholders working collaboratively to address issues related to “improving ungulate habitat connectivity, ecosystem structure and function, and human/wildlife safety, including addressing barriers to migration and advancing measures to restore degraded and fragmented habitat.” OAT member organizations are diverse yet share strong support for wildlife and habitat conservation.

The existing Mule Deer Management Plan was adopted in 2003. Aged to 17 years, it is far past due for review and update. Included in the current plan are three objectives: 1) Optimize recruitment of mule deer populations and maintain buck ratios at approved levels, 2) Maintain, enhance, and restore mule deer habitat, and 3) Enhance all recreational uses of the resource. While these objectives remain relevant to the success of today’s mule deer herd population, the progress toward meeting these objectives appears to be stalled or, in some cases, moving backward.

Mule deer populations and buck ratios have, overall, dropped significantly in the 17 years since the plan was adopted. Using the latest population estimates for 2019, 92% of the 49 units have population estimates well below the approved objectives with more than half below 50%. The same documentation provides buck ratio numbers with 76% of units below the approved objective or with decreasing numbers. The mule deer population in Oregon is clearly in need of both the commission’s attention and the staff’s action.

Oregon mule deer populations face numerous limitations to herd health. Additionally, the effects of climate change continue to exacerbate the degradation of important habitat. The identification of summer and winter ranges has been beneficial in attempting to protect habitat when addressing county and federal land-management planning. However, additional work to identify greater migration habitat, transitional ranges, bottle-necks, and road crossings are necessary to plan for mule deer sustainability and would further assist managers in prioritizing important habitat.

Reductions in hunting opportunities have become a trend based on the declining population data and have been met with a general acceptance and agreement from the hunting community. In 2009, the department created the Mule Deer Initiative (MDI) to assist in addressing the problems affecting mule deer populations. As a direct result of

the MDI's recommendations, the department has taken steps to reduce hunt opportunities by decreasing unit tag numbers over the last decade. Based on continued decreases in population thresholds, the department has reduced tag allocations on 24 mule deer hunts for 2020, covering both buck and antlerless deer series. The recently approved decision to make the Eastern Oregon Mule Deer Archery Season a controlled hunt for 2021 has been met with support from the hunting community as there is recognition for the need to protect herd numbers and decrease the human-caused mortality through harvest.

An updated Mule Deer Management Plan would benefit from the incorporation of the many substantive studies and aerial surveys that have been conducted by the department, as well as several other entities. Specifically, GPS collaring studies which have identified migration patterns, stopover areas, and complete barriers to animal movement. It would also allow the department to take into consideration the numerous impacts that were not on the landscape 17 years ago, such as power production sites, land development projects, and the effects of climate change. Many of these factors have increased exponentially in the last two decades which makes the decreasing mule deer population an increasingly necessary topic to address.

OAT respectfully requests the commission to instruct department staff to take up the work of updating the Mule Deer Management Plan as it is long overdue and the stark decline in population estimates cannot be ignored. OAT members are willing to assist in the process and request to serve on the ODFW Mule Deer Committee and similar workgroups. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully,
The Oregon Action Team For Ungulate Migration

OAT Members as of November 2020:

Jeremy Austin, Oregon Natural Desert Association

Shannon Crossen, ICF

Tim Greseth, Oregon Wildlife Foundation

Calla Hagle, Burns Paiute Tribe

Ken Hand, Mule Deer Foundation

Suzanne Linford, Protect Animal Migration

Ken McCall, Oregon Hunters Association

Mike Totey, Oregon Hunters Association

Michael O'Casey, Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership

Bill Richardson, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation

Jesse Salsberry, Backcountry Hunters and Anglers

Kyle Smith, Trout Unlimited

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