

Big Game Allocation Policy Sub-Committee Recommendations to AGPAC

Hunting provides important social, economic and environmental benefits to all Albertans, with approximately 130,000 resident and non-resident hunters participating annually. The allocation of big game hunting opportunity is a significant management consideration, guided by many “working policies” that have been developed and adapted over time to address evolving needs. In 2015 a review of stakeholder perspectives and existing big game allocation practices indicated the need for a renewed, comprehensive, operational policy, guiding the allocation of Big Game hunting opportunities among resource-user groups.

In consultation with the Alberta Game Policy Advisory Council (AGPAC), the Big Game Allocation Policy Sub-committee (APSC) was formed to review existing policies around big game allocation and develop recommendations for renewal. The intent was to collaboratively develop a new policy that fairly accommodates the desires of user groups, is transparent in process and is implemented consistently across Wildlife Management Units. The scope of this policy includes the allocation of big game (black bear, cougar, elk, mule deer, white-tailed deer, moose, pronghorn, bighorn sheep and mountain goat) among resident, non-resident and non-resident alien resource-users. This policy included a review of some aspects of special license draws, but was not intended as a comprehensive review of that system.

Alberta’s Big Game Allocation Policy is founded on the following principles:

- Alberta’s big game populations belong to all Albertans, are held in trust by the Government of Alberta and are allocated to user groups by law
- Hunting in accordance with the law is a right in Alberta, under the Hunting Fishing and Tapping Heritage Act
- Harvesting opportunities will be calculated using the best available knowledge, guided by scientific principles
- Harvesting opportunities will align with species management objectives to ensure viable populations are maintained over the long term
- Harvesting opportunities will align with the constitutional rights of Indigenous Peoples to harvest big game for subsistence and cultural purposes
- Harvesting opportunities will be made available to both resident and non-resident user-groups
- Harvesting opportunities will be made available to support a viable outfitted hunting industry
- The big game allocation process will be objective, transparent and consistently applied throughout the province

Through a series of deliberations over the fall of 2016 and spring of 2017, the Big Game Allocation Policy Sub-committee submits the following recommendations to the Alberta Game Policy Advisory Council.

Respectfully (BGAPSC): Ken Bailey, Jason Caswell, Rob Corrigan, Bob Gruszecki, Dave Kay, Hannah McKenzie, Reg Prostebby, Larry Roy, Ian Stuart, Greg Sutley, Brent Watson.

Landowner Special License for Antlered Mule Deer

The Landowner Special License was introduced in 1991 to promote positive landowner attitudes toward wildlife and hunters. Landowners who were unsuccessful in specific special license draws, were allowed to obtain a license to hunt that animal on their property. Where landowners have more than one certificate of title, this opportunity can be applied to each through designating another unsuccessful draw applicant. Antlered Mule Deer are included as an eligible animal type for these licenses.

Three primary goals were intended for these licenses:

1. To reward landowners for providing land access to other hunters
2. To reward landowners for conserving wildlife habitat on their property
3. To help mitigate losses due to depredation from mule deer

Despite this intent, there was no subsequent process to determine the success of this initiative. Anecdotal evidence, however, suggests that the issue of landowner licenses has not been an effective tool in meeting the above objectives:

1. The issue of antlered mule deer landowner licenses may act as a disincentive, effectively restricting access to a landowner's property to reduce competition for their own harvest success.
2. There is no evidence to suggest that wildlife habitat has been conserved as a result of issuance of antlered mule deer landowner licenses
3. The lack of use of antlerless landowner licenses suggests that depredation control by landowners is not a significant concern.

Further, the liberal eligibility requirements for antlered mule deer landowner licenses have resulted in significant use, particularly in areas where recreational demand for antlered mule deer is highest. The addition of this license, with an unpredictable annual uptake, has made allocation decisions more challenging and resulted in significant reductions in available quotas for both recreational hunters and the outfitted hunting industry. Provincially, 11% of the available antlered mule deer quota are now allocated to landowner licenses. In over 50% of the 91 WMUs where landowner licenses are issued, these licenses exceed 20% of available quotas. In some WMUs, landowner licenses account for up to 38% of all antlered mule deer licenses sold.

Discontinuing the issue of landowner special licenses for antlered mule deer would add over 1200 antlered mule deer back into the special license draw, increasing opportunity for all resident hunters for this high-demand draw choice. This would also reduce the relative number of outfitted hunting allocations significantly, reducing animosity between resident hunters and the outfitted hunting industry. Finally, removing this uncertain and essentially unlimited harvest of antlered mule deer will allow for better management decisions for this important resource.

RECOMMENDATION 1: That AGPAC recommend to Alberta Environment and Parks that Antlered Mule Deer no longer be included as an eligible animal for the Landowner Special License

Non-Resident Access to Special License Draws

Currently, non-resident Canadians are eligible to apply for special license draws in Alberta. Successful applicants can then hunt with an Alberta resident under the authority of a hunter-host license. In 2016, approximately 1000 non-resident Canadian special license draw applications were made, resulting in 300 licenses purchased. Non-resident Aliens are currently prohibited from participating in special license draws in Alberta.

Other jurisdictions reserve their special license draw system for residents. Currently, there are approximately 435,000 draw applications made annually in Alberta, resulting in significant wait times for some high-demand draw choices. Over 84% of non-resident special license draw licenses awarded are for Antlered Moose and Antlered Mule Deer. Removing this option from non-resident Canadians will allow these opportunities to be re-allocated to Resident hunters, potentially reducing draw wait times in some WMUs.

The availability of existing partner licenses for Antlered Moose and the creation of new partner licenses for Antlered Mule Deer, Antlered Elk and Trophy Antelope, would allow for continued hunting opportunities for non-resident Canadians for these animal classes, while retaining the Special License Draw system for resident Albertans.

RECOMMENDATION 2: That AGPAC recommend to Alberta Environment and Parks that Non-resident Canadians no longer be eligible to apply for Special License Draws.

RECOMMENDATION 3: That AGPAC recommend to Alberta Environment and Parks that new partnership licenses be created for Non-resident Canadians for Antlered Mule Deer, Antlered Elk and Trophy Antelope.

Create a Special License Draw for Archery seasons

Currently, archery seasons in many WMUs are under general license regulations. When the archery harvest in any of these WMUs exceeds 15% of the total allowable harvest in that WMU, archery seasons are relegated to the special license draw. There is concern among stakeholders that the resultant increase of applicants in the special license draw may have an effect on draw wait times.

Creating a separate draw for archery special licenses, instead of adding these applicants to the current special license draw, is proposed by stakeholders as a potential solution to increase opportunity for bowhunters, while reducing competition in the special license draw.

RECOMMENDATION 4: That AGPAC recommend to Alberta Environment and Parks that dedicated archery Special License Draws be created when general archery harvest in a WMU exceeds 15% of allowable harvest in that WMU

Allocate hunting opportunity instead of harvest

Currently, Alberta Environment and Parks allocates a portion of the allowable big game harvest to the outfitted hunting industry. This harvest is then converted to OG Allocations using harvest success derived from OG activity reports. The remaining allowable harvest is then converted to recreational special license quotas, using harvest success estimates derived from hunter harvest surveys. Given the differences in harvest success between recreational and outfitted hunters, the proportion of allowable harvest can convert to a much different proportion of hunting opportunity in some WMUs, creating conflict between recreational users and the outfitted hunting industry.

Recreational hunters are primarily concerned with hunting opportunity for those animal classes and WMUs having special license draws. The resulting harvest is more relevant to wildlife managers in achieving population management objectives. Basing our allocation of big game on hunting opportunity for those animal classes and WMUs under special license draws is more transparent and easier to defend to Alberta's hunting community

RECOMMENDATION 5: That AGPAC recommend to Alberta Environment and Parks that big game be allocated as a proportion of hunting opportunity (OG Allocations Held and Special License Quotas available) instead of harvest, for those animal classes and WMUs on special license draw. For animal classes and WMUs under general license seasons, allocation will continue to be calculated as a proportion of harvest.

Standardize the proportion of hunting opportunity allocated to the outfitted hunting industry

Currently, Alberta's policy is to allocate up to 10% of the harvest of antlered big game to the outfitted hunting industry and up to 20% of the harvest of Trophy Bighorn and Trophy Antelope. This allocation is not consistently applied across Alberta's WMUs which, as discussed above, results in conflict between recreational hunters and the outfitted hunting community.

Standardizing the proportion of hunting opportunity allocated to the outfitted hunting industry provides greater transparency and certainty to both recreational hunters and outfitters, and aligns with our need to support a viable outfitted hunting industry.

Outfitted hunting allocations will be reviewed and adjusted at five-year intervals to align with this standard. If significant reductions in harvest are required for conservation purposes, (i.e. a decline of greater than 25% of available special license quotas), outfitted hunting allocations may be reviewed within a 5-year allocation period.

Proportions allocated to the outfitted hunting industry shall be as follows:

- Antlered Moose, Antlered Mule Deer, Antlered Elk and Antlered Whitetail Deer, Trophy Antelope - 10%
- Trophy Bighorn - 20%
- Cougar - 20%
- Black Bear - no restriction

Commercial hunting opportunities and subsequent available allocations will be reviewed and adjusted at five-year intervals. This will provide professional stability and allow for business planning by Outfitters.

RECOMMENDATION 6: That AGPAC recommend to Alberta Environment and Parks that the proportion of big game hunting opportunity allocated to the outfitted hunting industry be standardized across Alberta's Wildlife Management Units as follows:

- **Antlered Moose, Antlered Mule Deer, Antlered Elk and Antlered Whitetail Deer , Trophy Antelope - 10%**
- **Trophy Bighorn - 20%**
- **Cougar - 20%**
- **Black Bear - no restriction**

Standardize the spatial scale at which hunting opportunity is managed

Currently, the big game resource is allocated at the WMU level for recreational hunters, and at the Species Management Area for the outfitted hunting industry. This has resulted in disproportionate hunting opportunity between recreational hunters and outfitted hunters at the WMU level, causing conflict between these user groups.

The Wildlife Management Unit is the scale at which species management objectives are developed and at which hunting activity is most appropriately managed.

RECOMMENDATION 7: That AGPAC recommend to Alberta Environment and Parks that the spatial scale at which hunting opportunity is managed be standardized as the Wildlife Management Unit for both recreational and outfitted hunters

Phased Implementation

Given the potential changes to outfitted hunting allocations resulting from these recommendations (see example spreadsheets for Antlered Mule Deer and Antlered Moose), this policy should be phased in over a five-year period to minimize disruptions to business operations among commercial hunting operations. For the initial five-year review period following the approval of the Big Game Allocation Policy for Alberta, allocations to the outfitted hunting industry will be limited to 150% of the proportions recommended above for each species class at the WMU level, and 100% for the corresponding WMU Series (100s, 200s, 300s, 400s or 500s). For subsequent 5-year review periods, outfitted hunting allocations will not exceed 100% of the recommended proportions by species class in any WMU. During the Five-year Outfitter Allocation Review, new opportunities for Commercial Allocations will be made available where new Recreational Hunting Opportunities exceed 10 Special Licences in any WMU.

RECOMMENDATION 8: That AGPAC recommend to Alberta Environment and Parks that once an approved policy is in place, that it be implemented in a phased approach to minimize disruption to affected business operations within the outfitted hunting industry.