

4-30-2022

Hello Sublette County, this is Albert Sommers reporting from interim work of the 66th Legislature, after the 2022 Budget Session. I serve on the Wyoming Wildlife Taskforce, representing the Wyoming House of Representatives. Two members of the House and two members of the Wyoming Senate serve on this 18-member Taskforce, which was created by Governor Gordon.

On April 28, I virtually attended the Taskforce meeting held in Casper. The purpose of the Wyoming Wildlife Taskforce is to study top-priority wildlife policy issues facing the state related to the allocation of hunting opportunity, sportsperson access, and other issues. Over an 18-month period, which started nearly a year ago, taskforce members identified topics for study, with the goal of presenting conclusions and recommendations to the Wyoming Legislature, Game and Fish Commission, and Governor to support decision-making on Wyoming's wildlife resources.

A sub-committee was formed at a previous meeting to examine the issues of landowner licenses and landowner damage compensation. Landowner licenses were originally created to provide an expression of gratitude for landowners who provide wildlife habitat. Any landowner with at least 160 acres that has 2,000 big game use days is eligible for two landowner tags.

However, in areas with coveted, hard-to-draw bull/buck tags, landowner tags have become the primary reason behind some land purchases. Landowners have been subdividing larger properties into 160-acre parcels in high game use areas in order to capitalize on the market for these landowner tags. Limited liability companies have been created to exploit the laws to make more owners eligible for licenses. Testimony has proven that people believe they are entitled to these tags, once they have purchased land that is eligible for the tags. Some have forgotten that hunting licenses are a privilege, not a right. In some of these coveted hunt areas, landowner tags comprise over 70 percent of available bull/buck tags, leaving few for the general public. That was not the original intent.

The sub-committee is proposing that the percentage of landowner licenses in a given hunt area should not exceed the percentage of private land in the hunt area. Further, the sub-committee

recommends that landowner licenses in hard-to-draw bull/buck hunt areas should never exceed a certain percentage that has yet to be determined. They are probably aiming for somewhere between 30 and 50 percent. This would likely create a separate landowner draw in some areas, not guaranteed tags.

The sub-committee is also examining the idea of landowners being eligible for additional cow/doe tags, if their land has more than 2,000 big game use days. They are considering whether these cow/doe tags could be transferable to a landowner's designee. The idea of landowner-transferable tags has never been popular in Wyoming, and I doubt the Taskforce will support this idea. Another idea being examined is a special tag for elk areas that have significantly exceeded population objectives. Elk damage to ranches in portions of eastern Wyoming has become a serious problem, and the current elk damage statutes are so cumbersome that it is virtually impossible for ranchers to be compensated adequately.

Another concern raised by the public was overcrowding in general tag mule deer areas in Wyoming, and the downward trend of mule deer populations. The idea was brought forward to regionalize mule deer general hunt areas, then require prospective hunters to pick their region. The objective was to eliminate hunters moving around to different regions during the same hunt year, which should reduce the impact on regions. However, the public felt this was the first step to making all mule deer areas limited quota. Limited quota would eliminate hunter opportunity, particularly youth hunting opportunity. The Taskforce decided to not recommend choose-your-region for general license mule deer tags. The Taskforce is continuing to examine splitting white tail deer licenses from mule deer licenses, because they are two distinct species, with different management objectives.

The Taskforce will continue its work on May 23 and 24. I encourage all those interested in hunting and wildlife to stay engaged. Comments can be provided to the Taskforce by going to <https://sites.google.com/wyo.gov/wyomingwildlifetaskforce/home/meeting-materials> .

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