

6-15-2022

Hello Sublette County, this is Albert Sommers reporting to you from interim work of the 66th Legislature. On June 8-9, I participated in the Wyoming Wildlife Taskforce meeting in Casper. On June 13, I attended the Upper Colorado River Commission meeting in Cheyenne.

The purpose of the Wyoming Wildlife Taskforce is to study top-priority wildlife policy issues facing the state regarding the allocation of hunting opportunity, sportsperson access, and other issues. I continue to hear concern over the flood of out-of-staters during the opening days of horn hunting season. As a result, I had the topic added to the agenda of the May 23 meeting. I asked the Wyoming Game and Fish Department to examine if the Department could delay horn hunting season for out-of-staters, which could reduce overcrowding on opening day. The delay would be a simple solution to the flood of horn hunters from other states who cross our borders for the May 1 season opening. On June 9, the Department reported it does not have the authority to delay out-of-state horn hunters, primarily because a shed antler is not the property of the State like other wildlife parts. I will continue to work on this issue.

The biggest challenge before the Taskforce is how to increase resident hunter opportunity, manage the exploding elk herds in eastern Wyoming, and maintain a robust outfitting opportunity. The Taskforce agreed that linking many of the ideas we have discussed into a “Grand Compromise” might allow for broader solutions and acceptance.

The Taskforce will submit its “Grand Compromise” for public comment with the following elements:

- 90-percent resident tag allocation for deer, elk and antelope units in hard-to-draw areas, defined as an area with 30-percent or less draw odds;
 - 85-percent resident tag allocation for all limited quota deer, elk and antelope hunt areas with greater than 31-percent draw odds;
 - 50-percent of non-resident deer, elk and antelope tags would be made available to an outfitter-only draw;
 - 3-year wait period for resident hunters who successfully draw in a “hard-to-draw” area;
- and

- Resident hunters would get a head start in the application process for leftover tags.

The Taskforce will also take public comment on keeping the status quo in place: not changing anything. We heard testimony from some hunters who don't think the system is broken and I have personally heard from local sportsmen who feel this way. I am interested in your feedback.

The Taskforce voted to support removing the 7,250 cap on non-resident elk tags and moving to a regional system for elk. I proposed an amendment to slowly increase the cap, but my motion failed. I ended up voting against removing the 7,250 cap, because it is unlikely to have sportsmen's support. I believe a more measured approach would garner more support.

The Taskforce also decided to submit for public comment a 20-percent cap on landowner deer, antelope, and elk tags in limited-quota draw areas for resident landowners, and a 10-percent cap for non-resident landowners. If landowner tags exceed these caps, then the landowners are put into a landowner draw. Comment can be provided to the Taskforce on these issues at <https://sites.google.com/wyo.gov/wyomingwildlifetaskforce/home/public-input>

On June 13, I attended the Upper Colorado River Commission meeting in Cheyenne. The Upper Colorado River Commission includes one commissioner from each of the upper basin states of Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, and New Mexico. Wyoming Commissioner Pat Tyrrell was the chairman of the Commission, but this was his last meeting, as he is retiring.

Pat has devoted a lifetime to Wyoming public service, including a long stint as Wyoming's State Engineer from 2001 to 2019. As State Engineer, Pat was Wyoming's compact commissioner on three interstate compact commissions: the Upper Colorado River Commission, the Yellowstone River Commission, and the Bear River Commission. He also represented Wyoming on the North Platte Decree Committee. He represented Wyoming on the Western States Water Council and Colorado River Salinity Control Forum and its advisory council. Pat has a remarkable understanding of water policy on the Colorado River. He will be sorely missed, and I suspect he will get many phone calls during retirement to impart his vast knowledge.

My takeaway from the meeting is the hydrology in the basin continues to worsen, based on the Bureau of Reclamation's most recent 24-month study. Due to continuing drought and the danger of not being able to generate power from Lake Powell, the Bureau of Reclamation will release 500,000 acre-feet of water from Flaming Gorge and hold back over 400,000 acre-feet in releases from Powell. The Lower Basin states need to do more to conserve Colorado River usage, but it is difficult in this drought.

If the Upper Basin states can't deliver enough water to Lee's Ferry, which is just below Lake Powell, curtailment would occur according to the Colorado River Compact. Curtailment is a reduction in Upper Basin water use and is based upon the previous year's consumptive use. Consumptive use for industries and towns is relatively easy to calculate based upon in-flow and out-flow. However, consumptive use for agriculture is what plants in an irrigated field utilize, and it is time-consuming to physically evaluate. If curtailment happens, all the Upper Basin states must agree to the same methodology for measuring consumptive use on agricultural fields. At this meeting, the Commission passed a resolution agreeing that all four states use a remote sensing methodology. This methodology could become incredibly important to irrigators in the Green River Valley. I do not have enough details about the methodology to know if I support its use.

Curtailment, if it happens, is still a few years away, according to the experts I have visited with. There were many other interesting facts presented at this meeting. Our valley's Randy Bolgiano is an alternate commissioner for Wyoming, and he has a deeper understanding of these issues than I, but I am learning more at every meeting I attend.

I can be reached at albert@albertsommers.com with questions or comments.