



Game Commission Report

Sept. 1, 2010

Game Department postpones decision on antelope license allocation

Extra time could be used to formulate better options for resident hunters

Sportsmen who were hoping to see viable alternatives to the lopsided allocation of antelope hunting opportunity in New Mexico came away disappointed from last Saturday's marathon State Game Commission meeting in Albuquerque.

First, the Department of Game and Fish **failed to offer concrete options on how to increase the overall percentage of licenses going to NM residents.** Neither Option 1 (the department's preference) nor Option 2 offer any significant change in resident hunting opportunity.

And second, the Commission itself **failed to ask the department how the state could make Option 3A (a straight draw) work in New Mexico** for landowners as well as sportsmen and return some of the hunting opportunity that has steadily been taken from resident hunters over the last 20 years. After taking testimony from more than 30 individuals and group representatives on the issue, the Commission did not provide any direction to the Department at the meeting Saturday.

However, **there is still time for the Department to provide some leadership on this contentious issue** and give the Commission adequate information on Option 3A and how it could be successfully implemented to address the concerns of A-PLUS enrolled landowners. Due to the high volume of public comments on all the issues before the commission, **the Sept. 30 meeting in Ruidoso where the final decision on A-PLUS was to be made has been postponed.** No date or time has been set for a new meeting, but check www.nmwildlife.org regularly for updates.

In the meantime, hunters need to keep letting commissioners and others know that the Department's preferred option does little to improve hunting opportunity for New Mexico residents and that Option 3A is a responsible alternative that can benefit resident hunters as well as landowners — if implemented properly. (See below on how to contact your Game Commission member.)

Long day, but sportsmen leave their mark

Dozens of sportsmen attended the meeting — the only Saturday meeting this year — hoping to explain their support for Option 3A. But the agenda was packed with hot-button issues and it took the Commission more than six hours to get through the first item — proposed increases in bear and cougar harvests. By the time the A-PLUS rules came up for discussion in the late afternoon, many hunters had run out of time and left. Those who stayed were outnumbered by outfitters and landowners enrolled in the program who are fearful of a major change. The meeting ran for nearly 12 hours.

The department's preferred option, Option 1, would leave the transferable tag allocation without significant change from current levels — in recent years about 70 percent of all licenses have been taken out of public ownership and given to landowners to sell, give away or discard. The option calls for putting additional public land into what would be called "public ranches," but that only increases the allocation by about 2 percent, said Jim Lane, head of the department's Wildlife Management Division.

The department did not explain how Option 1 changes either the number or percentage of licenses in the Big Game Draw. On Monday, NMWF requested those numbers from the department but as of today had not received a reply.

Option 3A is clearly better for New Mexico hunters and would benefit many landowners, as well. It would put virtually all licenses in the Big Game Draw (state law allows the department to develop a system of licenses for landowners or family to use themselves). Option 3A would let landowners — not the state — determine how many hunters they want to allow on their land. The straight draw system also offers more choice for landowners, who under Options 1 and 2 would not be allowed to permit rifle or muzzleloader hunts on their own land without enrolling in the Department's program. The Option 3A straight draw system is used in most other western states, yet the department has so far refused to explain how it could work in New Mexico.

Earlier in the Saturday meeting when members of the public challenged the department's plan for increasing bear and cougar harvests, Commissioner Tom Arvas asked Lane whether he had compared New Mexico's plans with those of neighboring states. Lane told the commission, "I'd be remiss if we didn't go to other states and ask their experts" about bear and cougar management. **But if the department checked with other western states about its plans for antelope management, it was not mentioned, nor did any commissioners ask.**

If the Department leadership had directed their capable staff to check with the Colorado Division of Wildlife, for example, they would have heard that Colorado sets aside just 15 percent of its antelope licenses as transferable permits for landowners — a higher percentage than any other western state except New Mexico. Under Colorado's Priority Landowner Program, a rancher doesn't get licenses automatically but instead can apply for up to six licenses (the number of applications is based on their acreage). Those who draw one or more tags can sell them, but the licenses are transferable just once — meaning they can't be sold to a broker or an outfitter.

The commission was largely silent on the A-PLUS program, although Commissioner Gary Fonay made a point of telling the audience that Option 3A would require hunters to have written permission before entering private land to hunt.

There has been some disinformation circulated about Option 3A by those who oppose it, including erroneous information posted on blogs or spread by word of mouth. At Saturday's meeting, instead of correcting the misinformation the department's A-PLUS presentation said erroneously that Option 3A "Eliminates landowner ability to generate revenues." In fact, under Option 3A landowners would be able to charge trespass fees to as many hunters as they wanted to allow on their land; they could lease private deeded lands to outfitters; and the department could easily expand its Open Gate program and start leasing land for antelope hunts, as it has already for upland game, youth deer and other hunting opportunities.

In fact, an honest discussion could show that many landowners currently enrolled in A-PLUS could make similar amounts of money under Option 3A, and would also have more choices and control over hunting on their own land. Option 3A also would allow the Game Department to expand its Open Gate access program, making real progress for resident hunters.

Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife joined the New Mexico Council of Outfitters and Guides and the New Mexico Cattle Growers Association to support Option 1, even though it provides little improvement or resident opportunity. Robert Espinoza, executive director of SFW, said the primary reason for his support for Option 1 was because "it sets everything in black and white. The landowner knows what he's going to get and sportsmen know what they're going to get."

But most sportsmen at the meeting strongly supported Option 3A. "I don't have a choice but to support Option 3A," said Daryl Tow of Silver City. Landowners who improve the habitat for antelope should be rewarded, he said, but giving them 70 percent of licenses — "I can't agree to that."

Greg McReynolds countered concerns raised by "some members of the commission and the directorate that Option 3A is an attempt to tell landowners who they can allow on their property.... **Landowners always have the right to control access to their property, and Option 3 does nothing to inhibit that right,**" McReynolds said. "You can own property and you can dictate who goes on that property, but the public owns the wildlife, and transferable tags are a clear violation of that."

He also chastised the department for **failing to apply for up to \$2 million in U.S. Farm Bill funding that could have been used in the Open Gate program.** "That's \$2 million that could have been used to lease access for sportsmen, \$2 million that could have been injected in the New Mexico economy, \$2 million that could have helped ranchers and landowners across the state and \$2 million that could have gone a long way toward solving some of the antelope problems by leasing access to private lands for public sportsmen."

Hunters weren't the only ones supporting more opportunity for New Mexico residents. Ed Wagner said he has turned his 20,000-acre ranch in western New Mexico into a wildlife preserve where hunting is part of the management strategy. The current allocation that gives the vast majority of antelope licenses to A-PLUS landowners "is ridiculous," he said. **"Give the public more — give 'em 50 percent and piss off both the landowners and the public."**

The Commission gave no guidance and made few comments on the direction it would like to take. **But it is not too late for the Department or Commission to begin showing some leadership to improve resident opportunity.**

A straight draw (Option 3) is the only option that would make significant improvement in resident opportunity, bringing New Mexico nearly on par with other western states. **But it is critical that the Department leadership take an honest and factual look** at how the perceived impacts to the revenues of landowners dependent on the program could be addressed and mitigated. The department had promised to post its final recommendations on A-PLUS, as well as bear, cougar and deer rules, on its website by Tuesday, Aug. 31, giving the public 30 days to comment before the final vote in Ruidoso on Sept. 30. But today the website posted a notice saying the Ruidoso meeting had been postponed "to allow for additional time to review and analyze public comments, and formulate rule changes as may be warranted."

Please contact your representative on the State Game Commission and **ask them to demand leadership from the Department of Game and Fish.** Making improvements to antelope allocation will set a precedent that the Department can and should improve resident opportunity for other species as well. Speak up today and ask for leadership to do better.

[Click here](#) for the commissioners' contact information, including phone numbers, or [click here](#) for a link to e-mail all the commissioners and the Department of Game and Fish directly. **Either way, it's up to sportsmen like you to make sure your voice is heard and to encourage the commission to do the right thing.**

If you appreciate receiving these reports from the State Game Commission meetings, please share this newsletter with a friend and ask them to get involved by joining our Sportsman's Alert network. New Mexico sportsmen need to stay involved to ensure our hunting and fishing traditions continue. **And please make a contribution to NMWF.** With sportsmen like you, we can continue to make a difference. [Click here to donate now.](#)

About the New Mexico Wildlife Federation

Founded in 1914 by sportsman and conservation pioneer Aldo Leopold, the New Mexico Wildlife Federation is New Mexico's first and most effective conservation advocate. We are dedicated to protecting New Mexico's wildlife, habitat and outdoor way of life. We spearheaded permanent protection of our hunting and fishing rights in the Valle Vidal, and stopped cold the previous sell-off of your public lands. We believe that the best way to get things done is to build consensus with common goals.

Our key priorities are: Opportunity Habitat Youth

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