

# Hunters call for big changes in antelope hunts

DEMING – Southern New Mexico sportsmen meeting Tuesday, June 29, said they would be willing to pay more to hunt antelope if the State Game Commission would do something to increase their odds of drawing a license when it overhauls antelope hunting regulations this fall.

Currently, New Mexico resident hunters who apply for antelope licenses in the state's Big Game Draw will get an average of one license every 20 years.

“That’s staggering to me,” said Ray Trejo, a Deming hunter who helped organize the meeting that drew 50 sportsmen. “It’s easy to sit on the sidelines and accept that you didn’t draw a tag again,” he said. “Personally, I’m tired of that.”

Hunters statewide want the State Game Commission to overhaul the Antelope Private Lands Use System (A-PLUS) program, which gives 70 percent of all available antelope licenses to private landowners to sell at whatever price they can get. The remaining 30 percent of licenses go into the Big Game Draw, of which New Mexico resident hunters get just 78 percent thanks to the state’s liberal quota for nonresidents.

Trejo and fellow hunter Jim Bates of Las Cruces organized Tuesday’s meeting. Both are members of a task force appointed by the Game Commission and the Department of Game and Fish that aims to come up with proposals to improve A-PLUS. The Game Commission will vote on revisions in September.

Hunters at the meeting strongly supported a major overhaul of the A-PLUS program, provided it increases the number of licenses allocated through the Big Game Draw. They said they would gladly pay landowners a so-called “trespass fee” to hunt on private land, but want all or most antelope licenses allocated through the draw rather than given to landowners to sell at prices that sometimes top \$2,500 apiece. In comparison, a license obtained through the Big Game Draw costs a resident hunter \$63.

By a show of hands, the sportsmen unanimously supported the idea of paying more for a license, as well as paying more for the state’s Open Gate program, which provides cash incentives to private landowners to allow public hunters on their land. Said Bates, “We just want something that’s equivalent to what they have in other western states.”

Most Rocky Mountains states give resident hunters 85 to 90 percent of the available big game licenses. Few other state give licenses directly to landowners, and none are as liberal with transferable licenses as New Mexico. The norm is to put all big game licenses in a public draw, and let hunters who draw licenses negotiate with landowners for access to private property. In New Mexico, fewer than 25 percent of antelope licenses have been allocated to state residents through the Big Game Draw, according to numbers provided by the Department of Game and Fish.

Trejo said the difficulty in drawing antelope, elk and other big game licenses is making it harder for New Mexico hunters to pass on long-held family traditions. "For youth, women and new sportsmen, I feel like they're being choked out of the hunting tradition," he said.

For more on the Deming meeting, please contact Ray Trejo (575-494-5507) or Jim Bates (575- 494-5507).