

Dec. 19, 2011

Bighorn access program takes unexpected turn

Plans to create a new public access program for bighorn sheep hunting on private land took a surprising turn last week at the State Game Commission meeting in Albuquerque. The Department of Game and Fish brought the commission its plans to issue a limited number of bighorn licenses to large landowners in the Fra Cristobal and Culebras ranges in exchange for allowing public hunters onto their land. Originally the department described both programs as 50/50 deals, with half the tags going to the landowners and half going to public draw hunters. New Mexico Wildlife Federation had addressed the deal in a letter to the commission ([click here to read it](#)).

But while the 50/50 split still is the plan for desert bighorn tags in the Fra Cristobals, the department's draft agreement for Rocky Mountain bighorn hunts in the Culebras now calls for putting **just one license into the Big Game Draw for every two given to the landowners** (Vermejo Park Ranch and the Rio Costilla Cooperative Livestock Association).

Commissioners had a number of questions about the proposals, but offered no concrete suggestions for revisions. Department staff offered no explanation for the Culebras formula change.

For the 2012 hunt season, **six licenses will be offered for the Fra Cristobals** (three for the public draw, including one youth hunt, and three for the Armendaris Ranch). **One license would be available for the Culebras**, to go into the public draw, with the two landowners getting one tag each in 2013 and 2014. No scouting prior to the 15-day season is permitted as part of the agreements for the Fra Cristobal hunts, but successful applicants could call the ranch to ask for scouting opportunity. Scouting would be permitted for three days prior to the six-week Culebras hunt. Hunting parties will be limited to four. Camping will be allowed in a site designated by the ranch.

During public comments, NMWF Vice president Garrett VeneKlasen **encouraged commissioners to oversee the new program carefully** to ensure it does not become a headache for sportsmen, landowners or Game and Fish. He asked commission members whether they had seen the draft agreements; they said they had not. He then suggested the agreements include elements that ensure equity in motorized use, scouting and camping on private lands during bighorn hunts.

NMWF President Ray Trejo said later that the bighorn access program "needs to start out on the right foot," and said the decision to reduce public access to bighorn licenses in the Culebras Mountains was a misstep. "By allowing this custom agreement with landowners, the department is going down the same polarizing road that we now find ourselves on with antelope," Trejo said.

The department has not asked for commission approval to begin the bighorn program and staff did not reveal at the meeting what the next step would be.

Habitat Stamp Program remains at crossroads

The department has been trying for most of 2011 to develop a **better way to distribute some \$800,000 a year in Habitat Stamp Program funds**, and has been taking public comment on five options in recent weeks. The issue was listed on the meeting agenda as a discussion item only, but at the meeting the department asked the commission to make a decision and to choose Option 5. That option would replace the current regional citizen advisory committees with a single statewide group and would allocate the available funding based on individual project merits. It also would make more money available to large-scale projects, which could mean that some regions might not get funding every year.

Option 2 had much stronger public support, including that of NMWF ([click here to read our letter](#)). It would allocate funding based on each region's percentage of license-buying hunters and anglers and would maintain the current advisory committee system. The department cited numerous concerns about Option 2, however, which prompted Commissioners Rob Hoffman and Dickie Salopek to suggest that the department rework the option to eliminate the concerns. Their idea was not supported by the rest of the commission.

In the end, **commissioners voted to defer action on the Habitat Stamp Program** until the next meeting, yet offered no suggestions on how to craft an option that had the support of public, the department and the two federal agencies on whose land the habitat work is usually conducted.

Governor OKs some legislative measures, nixes others

Gov. Susana Martinez gave her blessing to two bills the Department of Game and Fish will support during the upcoming legislative session. One would allow the department to donate **two additional bighorn sheep tags** – one auction, one raffle – with proceeds used for bighorn habitat work. The proposed allows the department the flexibility to choose whether to offer Rocky Mountain or desert bighorn tags. The other measure would allow the department to **issue refunds to hunters whose big game hunts were disrupted by natural events**, such as wildfire.

But the governor did not support two other measures proposed by the department. One would **raise the fee for license vendors** to \$2 (up from \$1). Some vendors have said even \$2 does not cover their cost of issuing licenses, but that the extra \$1 would help. Similarly, Martinez opposed a proposal to **simplify the state's complex system of habitat permits and stamps** by combining several into a single fee and tacking it onto the cost of a general hunting or fishing license. Apparently the Governor's Office considers both measures a tax.

Conservation easement decision postponed

The commission also **deferred action on a proposal to establish a conservation easement on the H Bar V Ranch** in Catron County. The landowner has agreed to prohibit development on almost 5,000 acres of deeded land within an 80,000-acre ranch. While the Department of Game and Fish had worked with the landowner on a contract that spelled out that hunting was an allowed use on the property and the landowner would permit public cow elk youth hunts, several commissioners asked that the language be firmed up to guarantee hunting opportunity on the land in the future. Because the agreement needs to be signed soon, Commissioner Robert Espinoza asked whether commissioners could vote by email. That would be a violation of the state's Open Meeting Act, however. Chairman Jim McClintic was given authority by the commission previously to sign the agreement, and left with plans to do so following greater confidence in the legal language presented.

Pike, upland game, youth elk hunts amended

Commissioners approved a **new management plan for northern pike** in Eagle Nest Lake that requires all pike caught to be kept. As an invasive species, the number of pike must be reduced to protect trout numbers, the department has said. They also OK'd minor changes in upland game rules and **eliminated the need for bird hunters to have a separate blue grouse permit**. In addition, the commission **expanded the Youth Encouragement Hunt program for elk** to ensure that all tags are used. The online permits will remain available to unsuccessful youth draw hunters for 14 days. After 14 days, the hunts will be open to all youth, resident and nonresident.

Meeting goes out over the Internet

The Dec. 15 meeting was **available to watch online** as part of Gov. Martinez's effort to **improve public access and transparency** of all state boards and commissions. The public only had one day's notice about the webcast, but presumably future meetings will be online as well. A recording of the meeting should be available soon on the governor's website; [click here](#) to see it.

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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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New Mexico Wildlife Federation | 121 Cardenas Drive N.E. | Albuquerque NM | 87108