



Game Commission Report

June 13, 2011

Public notice cuts reduce transparency, sportsmen's participation

Wolves made the headlines after last Thursday's State Game Commission meeting in Las Cruces, but the biggest impact on New Mexico sportsmen came when the commission **reduced the amount of advance notice hunters and anglers will get on upcoming decisions**. Commissioners OK'd a proposal from the Department of Game and Fish that has the potential to curtail public input on major rule changes.

Since 2009, the commission has given the public 60 days' notice on pending rule changes. Although the policy allowed for exceptions, it required 30 days of public review on draft proposals and another 30 days for final proposal. Under the policy approved unanimously on Thursday, the **draft review period was reduced to 21 days and is no longer required**. The public still has 30 days to comment on the final proposal. Commissioners Jerry Maracchini and Rob Hoffman suggested changes to maintain the current longer public comment period, but the rest of the commission voted them down. Maracchini and Hoffman then agreed to the new, shorter public notice policy, which takes effect immediately.

Commissioners give up NM's say in wolf management

With no public warning that a vote was planned on Thursday, the commission **relinquished New Mexico's seat at the table in the Mexican wolf reintroduction program, effective June 30**. The move will have no practical effect on the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service-run program, Game and Fish officials said, except that the department will lose its voice in the collaborative program as wolf issues arise in the recovery area. About 50 wolves live in Arizona and New Mexico. New Mexico's decision is expected to save the department some \$50,000 a year. There was no word Thursday on whether the department's wolf program coordinator would be laid off or reassigned to other duties. [Click here](#) to read the Albuquerque Journal story on the vote (you may have to watch a short ad first.)

Resident big game tag increase moves forward

Department staff updated the commission on **how they plan to implement Senate Bill 196**, the legislation passed earlier this year that gives New Mexico resident hunters some 3,400 additional Big Game Draw licenses that before had gone to nonresidents. A key element of the bill is a provision to ensure no net loss in revenue to the department. Rather than raise the cost of all hunting licenses, the bill requires everyone who either applies for a Big Game Draw license or who buys a private land authorization to first purchase a general game license, which entitles the buyer to hunt waterfowl and small game. Since the bill cuts the cost of a small game license by \$5 (to \$15), **thousands of residents who already buy a small game license will pay less every year**. Deer license fees also dropped by \$5. The creation of a general game license also brings more federal funds to the state, due to a funding formula that is based in part, on the total number of license buyers.

However, department Director Tod Stevenson told the commission that in order to get Gov. Susana Martinez to sign the bill, **he made an agreement with her that will require the department to refund the game license to anyone who does not draw a big game license**. "Without the department agreeing we would move this rule change (creating the refund), this law would have been vetoed," he said.

Commissioners Rob Hoffman and Dickie Salopek spoke up against the refund idea. Hoffman said the relatively small additional costs will not burden hunters who already pay, in some cases, thousands of dollars to apply for big game hunts. He also noted that other states don't return general game license fees to unsuccessful draw applicants. Salopek said the majority of hunters want the extra license fees to stay in department coffers, perhaps to provide additional law enforcement in the field.

The refund plan will come up for a vote next month. According to department staff the refund would be an option for unsuccessful draw hunters, not automatic. Assistant Director Patrick Block estimated the refunds will amount to \$125,000 to \$175,000. **Stevenson said the refund program could be revised if it cuts into department revenues**.

Temporary State Land easement improves sportsmen's access

Also next month, the commission is scheduled to vote on a one-year extension of the easement that expands opportunity for licensed hunters, trappers and anglers to access State Land Office properties during open seasons. State Land Office Assistant Commissioner Mike Anaya presented a draft proposal that **provides sportsmen with greater accessibility to State Trust Land**. Thanks to a last-minute change approved by Land Commissioner Ray Powell, the one-year agreement allows licensed hunters and trappers to take non-protected species such as coyotes, rabbits and feral hogs on trust land. But the proposal also notes that the Land Office wants to work with sportsmen and Game and Fish on the long-term easement to better manage both protected and non-protected species on trust lands in the future.

Habitat Stamp allocation plan kicked down the road

The Habitat Stamp Program, which typically has strong support from sportsmen, **came under some harsh scrutiny Thursday**. First the commission approved some \$739,000 worth of projects for the coming year. The sparks flew when program Coordinator Dale Hall started to discuss the future of the program, in particular the way funds are allocated. Currently, the funds are split between five regions on a near-equal basis. A number of southwest region sportsmen want the allocation based on the relative acreage of Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service land in each region. Since their region has the most federal land, under their proposal that region would get a larger share of the Habitat Stamp dollars.

Several commissioners grilled Hall over how and why certain landscape-scale projects were proposed for funding as well as his handling of concerns raised by the Southwest Citizens Advisory Committee. During public comments, several sportsmen criticized the allocation method used to fund a major project in southeastern New Mexico. **But rather than discuss the key issue – how Habitat Stamp funds are split statewide – the commission punted**. The commission suggested Hall and the two federal partners continue to work with the the citizen committees to come up with a better allocation method without providing them any direction.

Some items postponed until next meeting

The commission ran out of time in the Las Cruces meeting and had to postpone discussion of several items, including an update on the Open Gate program. The department has applied for \$2.3 million in federal grant money to expand the Open Gate program, which pays for access to private land. All the postponed items will be on the agenda when the commission meets Thursday, July 21, in Clayton.

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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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