



Game Commission Report

May 6, 2011

Commission resumes work with McClintic at helm

The State Game Commission got back to business this week in Albuquerque, but while **there were no major surprises or bombshells at the meeting Thursday, there were hints that change may be in the air.**

The commission elected Dickie Salopek of Las Cruces, the agricultural representative, as vice-chairman. For the second year in a row, however, there was no public election for chairman. Jim McClintic was elected chairman in December 2009 and has kept the title. (He was appointed by former Gov. Bill Richardson after he and his companies donated more than \$12,000 to the governor's various campaigns. His company, JMS Construction, contributed \$3,000 to Gov. Susana Martinez's campaign.)

Much of Thursday's meeting was taken up with informational presentations, including a financial audit report stating that **Department of Game and Fish books are in good shape.** Staff also noted that while the department is authorized for 305 full-time employees, it has 67 vacant positions. It is currently advertising to fill 25 of them. Two more vacancies are expected soon: Northeast Area Chief Lief Ahlm retires this month, and Mark Birkhauser, who until recently has been Hunter Education Program coordinator, is retiring this summer.

Antelope rule keeps making work for department

The A-PLUS (Antelope Private Land Use System) program continues to raise hackles after the Commission formalized the program in December, and **on Thursday there was talk about bringing the new rule back for revision.**

Department staff conducted seven meetings with A-PLUS landowners this spring after receiving substantial pushback to the new rule, Wildlife Management Division Chief Jim Lane told the commission. **A few landowners are "squalling like mashed cats because they're not getting the good old buddy allocation"** they received in the past, he said. The meetings seem to have calmed down most enrolling ranchers, Lane said, and the department now expects that roughly the same number of ranches will enroll in A-PLUS this year. He did not have allocation numbers, **but in the past about 70 percent of all antelope licenses in the state have been allocated as resalable license authorizations** to ranches enrolled in A-PLUS, leaving just 30 percent for the Big Game Draw.

Some ranchers this spring told the department they want archery and mobility-impaired antelope hunters to be limited to ranch-only, Lane said. The landowners believe those two groups have an unfair advantage over transferable authorization hunters because they currently hunt unit-wide through a straight draw system and they hunt earlier in the season. Lane said he didn't think ranch-only for archery and mobility-impaired hunters was optimal, noting that the **unit-wide hunting "seems to have worked up to this year."**

Commissioner Rob Hoffman of Las Cruces leveled his own criticism of A-PLUS, particularly about the roughly 1,000 antelope transferable authorizations every year that landowners do not sell. That's lost revenue to the department and lost opportunity to hunters, Hoffman noted. But it's also taking away game management decisions from department biologists, he said. "If those tags are not used, they should be pulled back and put into the public draw because clearly the management decision is being taken away from the department and given to land owners," he said. **"Basically I think the system abrogates the responsibility of the department to manage the antelope."**

New Mexico Wildlife Federation, other sportsmen's groups and some 6,000 individual hunters last year asked the commission to put all antelope licenses into the Big Game Draw. Under that "straight draw" system, landowners would decide how many hunters they wanted on their land and the state would no longer have to allocate antelope licenses on a ranch-by-ranch basis. Under the current A-PLUS program, only about half the private land in New Mexico with antelope is hunted; Montana, in contrast, has more antelope and a higher percentage of private land, yet 99 percent of private lands of 160 acres or more with antelope bucks on them are hunted through a straight draw system, according to a 2008 study. It's up to the Game Commission to decide whether to take up the A-PLUS rule again.

Public notice policy put on notice

Sportsmen should be concerned about one issue that will soon be on the Game Commission's agenda: the public notice policy. At the request of NMWF and other groups, in 2009 the commission adopted a policy to give the public more advance notice about pending commission business. It was prompted by events such as the Commission's decision to put trespass rules on its agenda the day before it voted to approve the changes, and another to change the quality/high demand hunt requirements without public input. **Both rules were eventually overturned following public outcry.** The new policy allows for emergency decisions on short notice, but generally calls for the department to give the public 30 days to look over and comment on any draft proposal and alternatives, and another 30 days to look over the department's final proposal before the commission votes on it. Department Director Tod Stevenson said the long notice period has posed hardships for the staff at times and said he wants the commission to revisit the policy in June. "We want to be transparent," but also want more flexibility to amend proposals based on public and staff input during the 30-day timeframes, he said.

NMWF Director Jeremy Vesbach told the commission that **the 30-day policy was designed in part to make sure the department and commission have the time and information they need to make good decisions.**

Higher quota bill poses challenges for department

After Gov. Susana Martinez signed Senate Bill 196, which gives New Mexico residents some 3,400 additional Big Game Draw licenses, the department started planning how to implement the new law next year – **and there are lots of changes,** staff told the commission. In order to increase the resident quota to 84 percent without affecting Game and Fish finances, the bill requires all big game hunters to purchase a general hunting license (\$15 for residents, \$65 for nonresidents) to offset the revenue loss of shifting additional licenses to residents. The bill also dropped the price of a deer license by \$5 to offset the purchase requirement. Department Director Stevenson reported that the department, at the request of the Governor's Office, is working on a proposal to refund the license fee to unsuccessful draw hunters. But Commissioner Dickie Salopek voiced concern about any action that might significantly reduce department funding. The refund proposal as described could cause a significant funding loss for the department and result in a loss of conservation officers and biologists in the field. **Each \$15 resident hunting license brings the department about \$125 extra in matching federal funds, Salopek noted.** Expect further discussion on this issue in the future.

In other action...

The Department of Game and Fish and the State Land Office are **working together to revise the statewide easement that allows hunters and anglers to use State Trust Land.** It's a two-step approach, Assistant Director R.J. Kirkpatrick told the commission. Up first will be a one-year agreement that should come up for approval this summer. The department and Commissioner of Public Lands Ray Powell are also looking ahead at a long-term agreement that will consider such issues as whether to allow camping on Trust Land and which state lands should be off-limits to hunting and fishing. The two agencies also want to develop online maps that show legal access to all Trust Lands. **The easement and the access maps are major issues for sportsmen and we'll keep you updated.**

The process to **remove desert bighorn sheep from the state's endangered species list** has started anew. The commission had expected to approve the delisting last year – a huge accomplishment for Game and Fish – but the department missed some deadlines that caused it to start over. The desert bighorn population is now estimated to be nearing 600, well above the threshold necessary to delist. Public hearings are set for Truth or Consequences and Deming on Sept. 6. Once the commission takes final action, additional hunting opportunity is expected to follow.

The commission **agreed to sell the city of Las Vegas, N.M., the department's water allotment from Storrie Lake.** Las Vegas Mayor Alfonso Ortiz told the commission his city's water supply is down to about 70 days, and that the department's annual allotment of 125 acre-feet will give the city almost three extra weeks. It was a one-year agreement that nets the department \$25,000. **The sale means no water this summer for McAllister Lake, but that's a good thing,** said Mike Sloane, chief of the fisheries division. Winds will scour the sediment and salts that have built up on the lake bottom and could help eliminate the golden algae bloom that has forced the lake's closure. Sloane said the department plans to rehabilitate McAllister over time. (For more on McAllister Lake, see the newest Outdoor Reporter.)

The commission **opened the Migratory Bird Rule.** Among proposed changes up for approval later this summer will be a reduction in Middle Rio Grande Valley sandhill crane permits, plus elimination of several free permits including the Middle Rio Grande Valley dark goose and Bernardo/La Joya permits in order to simplify licensing for hunters.

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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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