

July 22, 2011

Commission approves SB 196 refunds, despite complications

The State Game Commission approved a **risky plan to refund general hunting license fees** for unsuccessful draw hunters next year, despite the questions and problems the refund program creates for hunters and the Department of Game and Fish -- such as eliminating 120 off-range oryx hunts.

The commission, which met Thursday in Clayton, also approved an **agreement that allows greater access to State Trust Land for hunters, anglers and trappers**, made a few minor changes in trapping rules and rescinded the ban on certain types of traps in the Gila region.

Department Director Tod Stevenson had said earlier that the **license fee refund was requested by Gov. Susana Martinez** before she would sign Senate Bill 196, the bill approved last spring that gave New Mexico residents some 3,400 additional big game licenses and lowered many license fees. The legislation also required big game hunters -- both draw and private land hunts -- to buy a general hunting license (\$15 for residents, \$65 for nonresidents). Department staff said they don't know what effect the new Big Game Draw rules will have on department finances when the rules take effect next year.

The refund program will result in several complications. Staff said the department expects a certain amount of public confusion about the new rules and they are already planning a public relations campaign urging unsuccessful draw hunters to donate their license fee to the department. It was pointed out that some unsuccessful draw hunters may get a refund in June, even though they had already used their general hunting license in April to hunt turkey.

Another complication took most at the meeting by surprise, including the commission. Staff said the refund program would require moving the oryx draw from March to June, in turn **forcing the department to eliminate 120 licenses for off-range oryx hunts in May and June.** "This is the first we've heard of it," said Chairman Jim McClintic, prompting a scramble to figure out how not to lose 120 licenses. Commissioners agreed to reopen the oryx rule in the near future and transfer the licenses to other off-range hunts. Until then, however, those licenses are gone.

New Mexico Wildlife Federation had **urged the commission to hold off on the refund plan for a year**, to see how the new rules affect department finances and minimize unforeseen complications like lost oryx hunts. The commission voted unanimously, however, in favor of the refund plan.

Land Office, Department improve access for sportsmen

The commission approved a **one-year extension of the easement that allows recreational use** by licensed hunters, anglers and trappers on lands managed by the State Land Office. Highlights of the agreement include a new provision that allows recreational use on all trust lands, except those explicitly exempted. In the past, sportsmen were automatically barred from state land on which there was a so-called business lease. Some leaseholders sought that type of lease simply to prohibit public access. The new agreement still requires those who want to use state land to have a permit, but it allows the permit holder to have more guests than in the past. In addition, the Land Office and the department are developing maps of all state lands open to sportsmen, which will be posted on both agencies' Web sites.

Trapping rules left largely unchanged

Commissioners adopted some **minor changes in the statewide trapping rules**, but overruled the department on two portions of the staff proposal. Staff had suggested to doubling the setback distance of certain traps from the nearest road or trail, to 50 yards. Trappers at the meeting unanimously wanted the status quo -- 25 yards -- and the commission agreed with them, leaving the setback unchanged. The proposal had also sought to limit nonresident trappers to five bobcats per year. Staff said the change wasn't biology-driven, but rather to limit the nonresident share of the harvest. The commission found that arbitrary and nixed the limit.

With almost no discussion, the commission also lifted a ban on leghold traps in the Mexican gray wolf recovery area that had been requested by then-Gov. Bill Richardson. As part of the ban, the department had asked the New Mexico Cooperative Fish & Wildlife Research Unit to study the potential effects of trapping on the wolves, and while the results were shared with the department, the study has not been made public. Nor was the study mentioned Thursday. An editorial in the Albuquerque Journal had **encouraged the commission to delay its vote**, noting: "That a report done for the public by a public agency with public money would not be available before another public board uses it to set public policy would be bad policy -- not just for the wolves, but also for New Mexico and the public." The commission pressed on nevertheless, voting unanimously to lift the ban.

New Mexico **migratory bird hunters will see some changes** next year after the commission approved changes including a 20-bird reduction in sandhill crane permits. It also approved a **new fee structure for landowners enrolled in the Open Gate program.** Open Gate coordinator Aaron Roberts said landowners are getting more interest in the program, which uses \$1 from every \$4 Habitat and Management Access Fund stamp to pay landowners for access by hunters. The department applied for a federal grant that would have brought millions of dollars to the program and could have dramatically increased the number of enrolled acres. But because New Mexico did not apply the year before, the funds went to other states, staff said.

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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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