

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The Wyoming Range Mule Deer Initiative (WRMDI) was initiated in June 2010. The goal of this effort is to engage and collaborate with the public to develop a herd unit specific management plan. This plan is tiered from the statewide Mule Deer Initiative approved by the Wyoming Game and Fish Commission in July 2007.

After a survey, conducted in 2008, of people who hunt mule deer in the Wyoming Range, the Wyoming Game and Fish Department (WGFD) engaged in a public process called “collaborative learning” to share information and ideas about mule deer management in the Wyoming Range. From June 2010 through February 2011, the WGFD conducted a series of three workshops in Marbleton, Afton, Kemmerer, and Green River. The goals of the collaborative learning workshops were to engage participants in the process, learn from each other about the status and management of the deer herd, and to work together to develop solutions and this plan.

Accordingly, this plan is based on the issues and actions identified through this collaborative public process. The issues include: Public Involvement and Outreach, Habitat Management, Population Management, Research, Predator Management, and Law Enforcement. Those actions identified and deemed feasible given WGFD resources and authority are presented in this plan. Actions already completed or still in progress are listed in each section within the main body of the text. New actions proposed in the plan are summarized by issue below.

### **Public Involvement and Outreach**

**Objective: Increase public understanding through dissemination of information regarding various issues as they relate to the Wyoming Range mule deer herd.**

- The WGFD will provide both verbal and written materials, including fliers and brochures, to update hunters on important issues involving the Wyoming Range deer herd at annual check stations and field contacts starting in 2011.
- The WGFD will identify new ways to publicize the importance of protecting mule deer on winter ranges.
- The WGFD, in partnership with the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies’ Mule Deer Working Group, will produce a documentary chronicling the importance of mule deer in the West and challenges faced to sustain this species.
- The WGFD will increase public awareness of the antler hunting regulation on public lands west of the Continental Divide through timely media releases and increased signage along access routes into winter ranges.
- The WGFD will initiate additional public meetings to focus on mule deer issues in each region. These meetings will provide a forum for continued collaborative information exchange, as well as an opportunity to discuss progress on this plan.

## **Habitat Management**

**Objective: Improve quantity and quality of all seasonal mule deer habitats throughout the Wyoming Range mule deer herd unit**

### **Habitat Treatments**

- The WGFD will work with the BLM to develop the Muddy Creek Spike treatment to enhance mule deer winter range conditions on sagebrush and mixed mountain shrub communities.
- The WGFD will develop the Star Valley Front project with the Bridger Teton National Forest (BTNF) to enhance mixed mountain shrub communities.
- The WGFD will pursue development of a Piney Creek aspen enhancement project on BTNF lands to enhance fawning on summer and fall transitional habitats used by mule deer.
- The WGFD will emphasize habitat work underway in tall forb communities throughout the Wyoming Range on BTNF to enhance forage quality on summer range.
- The WGFD will employ a habitat technician to work fulltime to address habitat-related issues related to the Wyoming Range Mule Deer Plan.
- The WGFD will develop a long-term operational plan for habitat treatments in the Wyoming Range.

### **Grazing Partnerships**

- The WGFD will review and provide recommendations on Allotment Management Plans (AMPs) currently being evaluated. Several AMPs that include important mule deer seasonal habitats are currently being evaluated and updated on the BTNF and on BLM lands. This is a federal agency-led process and the WGFD encourages public comment on these plans.

### **Forage Reserves and Grass Banks**

- The WGFD will discuss with the BLM state office the importance of creating forage reserves and grass banks to gain BLM support for the idea.
- The WGFD will work with private landowners to explore the possibility of setting aside forage reserves and grass banks where these options fit into their management operations.

### **Invasive Plants**

- The WGFD will increase involvement with mapping and treatment of invasive species with landowners and land management agencies.

**Objective: Improve and protect mule deer movement corridors between different seasonal habitats throughout the Wyoming Range Mule Deer herd**

**Highway Crossings**

- The WGFD will continue to pursue funding opportunities with the Wyoming Department of Transportation (WYDOT) and others to install additional underpasses where appropriate. The current priorities for this herd are the corridors between Big Piney and LaBarge. Preliminary location visits and initial design have occurred.
- The WGFD will pursue additional fencing and underpasses to enhance mule deer movement across Highway 189 and private land from Big Piney to LaBarge.
- The WGFD will work with national and local citizen-based groups to elevate the importance of these projects to wildlife conservation and the state of Wyoming. This includes working with and education of the national media. Invitations to key media personnel will occur to promote awareness of this issue.
- The WGFD will cooperate with WYDOT to purchase and use additional variable message sign trailers during critical migration periods.
- The WGFD will work with WYDOT to enact reduced speed limits where wildlife mortality is excessive.

**Objective: Mitigate impacts of oil and gas developments to offset habitat losses and maintain or improve mule deer populations throughout the Wyoming Range mule deer herd.**

**Mitigating Impacts**

- Local WGFD biologists are currently working with BLM personnel on the LaBarge Platform Development and Exploration project to address present and future well pad density levels on crucial mule deer winter ranges.

**Replacement of Lost Habitat**

- Mitigation will be planned to offset the loss of habitat effectiveness throughout the areas directly and indirectly affected by energy project development.
- When it is not possible to avoid, minimize, or effectively mitigate impacts, the WGFD will pursue the creation of a Mitigation Trust Account. The operator would contribute funding to this account based on the estimated cost of off-site habitat treatments needed to offset the impact(s).

**Objective: Address ORV impacts to mule deer seasonal and security habitats.**

**Travel Plans**

- The WGFD will encourage and assist federal partners in developing a coordinated Travel Management Plan (including all classes of motorized vehicles) for the Wyoming Range designed specifically to benefit mule deer and other wildlife species.

- The WGFD will cooperate with the BTNF and BLM to implement season closures primarily during hunting seasons in portions of the herd unit that have high road densities. This has proved beneficial in the Bear River Divide to temporarily increase deer security and can ultimately maintain or improve deer quality.
- The WGFD will increase its efforts to educate the public regarding impact of motorized vehicles on deer survival and hunt quality, including increased communication with local ORV and snow machine organizations. Information will be provided to hunters about impacts of road density and vehicle disturbance on hunt quality and mule deer production/survival.

## **Population Management**

**Objective: Evaluate management strategies that focus on implementing herd-unit wide common opening and closing dates to address hunter crowding and densities, minimize hunting September and October opening days, and disperse hunting pressure.**

### **Standardized Season Dates**

- The WGFD will ascertain whether consensus exists for a standard opening date throughout the herd unit. If consensus is reached, this recommendation will be made available for public review and comment during the 2011 season setting process.

### **Overlapping Deer and Elk Seasons**

- The WGFD will evaluate the November-January elk hunting season structure to ensure these seasons are effective in terms of elk reduction and do not result in displacement of mule deer from winter ranges.

**Objective: Maintain a flexible system of deer harvest strategies that encourage hunter participation and support the North American Model of Wildlife Management. Develop management strategies that accommodate a variety of public interests including youth, recreational, and trophy hunting opportunities.**

### **Youth Hunting**

- A WGFD working group has developed recommendations that will guide the recruitment of young hunters and promote the development of youth hunting opportunities in Wyoming. This will be reviewed for applicable implementation in the Wyoming Range.
- The WGFD will recommend to the public in the 2011 seasons setting to allow youth hunters to take antlerless animals on any license type.

## **Antler Point Restrictions**

- A WGFD working group has been appointed and is evaluating antler point restrictions. This group will provide a detailed analysis in the fall of 2011 of the pros and cons of antler point restrictions and how effective these management actions are in achieving desired objectives.

## **Objective: Provide accurate and reliable harvest data for mule deer management in the Wyoming Range**

### **Harvest Reporting**

- The WGFD will evaluate our harvest reporting protocol and other techniques. If new techniques are shown to produce better and affordable results, they will be implemented.

## **Objective: Evaluate the Wyoming Range mule deer Herd Population Objective with a goal to manage on a sustainable basis with the habitat**

### **Evaluate Herd Unit Objective**

- The WGFD will evaluate the population objective based on habitat conditions and estimated population size and, in concert with the public, adjustment to the objective will be considered.
- The WGFD will explore the relationships between browse production and utilization, climate, and deer population changes. Browse production will be measured each fall after the summer growing season and then re-evaluated the following spring to assess how much utilization has occurred over the winter months. This analysis may be useful to maintain herd objectives within the existing capacity of the habitat.
- The WGFD will continue to emphasize managing deer populations within herd objectives and within numbers the habitat can support on a sustainable basis.
- The WGFD will evaluate the objective every five years to assess if modifications to the objective are warranted.

## **Research**

## **Objective: Use Scientific Research to improve our understanding of mule deer ecology and management to maintain or improve mule deer populations in the Wyoming Range Mule Deer herd.**

### **Research Priorities**

- The WGFD will evaluate the reliability of different computer simulation models for estimating sizes of mule deer populations and for tracking population trends within the next five years.

- The WGFD will assess the reliability of applying weather data to modify mortality and survival estimates used in estimating annual mule deer population size and trend. The WGFD will evaluate using Idaho's most recent model correlating winter weather conditions to projected fawn mortality rates.
- The WGFD will evaluate the effectiveness and cost of collecting survival rate information for this herd, allowing for a more accurate estimate of mortality and population trends.

**Objective: Use Social Science Research to improve our understanding of the desires of Wyoming Range Mule Deer Hunters.**

**Hunter Surveys**

- The WGFD will address public information needed to improve management of the Wyoming Range mule deer herd in concert with the interests of deer hunters.
- The WGFD will consider less expensive and intrusive ways to survey hunters. This would allow for regular feedback from hunters on their hunting experiences and expectations. Possibilities include email surveys and sharing information via our mule deer web site.

**Predator Management**

**Objective: Seek information to determine if predator management would benefit the Wyoming Range mule deer population. If predator control is utilized, coordinate with predator management agencies to maximize the benefits of predator control to mule deer.**

**Predator Research**

- Wildlife managers will seek information on predator control efforts from predator control agencies and boards to assist in estimating the effects of predator control on mule deer in the Wyoming Range.
- If other carnivores are limiting mule deer productivity and/or survival, the WGFD will evaluate management objectives for these species and, with public input, determine if reductions are warranted.

**Coyote Control**

- Where the WGFD estimates coyote predation is restraining population growth and habitats can support more deer, the WGFD will seek partnerships to reduce coyote numbers.

## **Law Enforcement**

**Objective: Increase law enforcement presence on winter ranges to protect mule deer from human disturbance during the most critical time of the year thereby reducing winter mortality and illegal take.**

### **Winter Range Law Enforcement Task Forces**

- The WGFD will not only continue the current task force effort, but will expand it as time and resources allow to include those crucial winter ranges from Kemmerer to Cokeville and any other winter ranges where a threat exists.
- The WGFD will be more flexible scheduling task force operations to cover all critical periods for mule deer. While current task force efforts concentrate on the breeding season, the period of time from January through April is very critical for the survival of deer. This is also when the antler hunting closure is in place on the Wyoming Range mule deer winter ranges.
- Any restitution from federal court cases involving the illegal take of mule deer bucks from these winter ranges will be directed toward funding additional costs associated with the increased enforcement effort.
- The WGFD will approach the oil and gas industry to procure funding for rewards for the WGFD's Stop Poaching Program and additional law enforcement costs related to oil and gas energy development.

### **Road Closures**

- WGFD personnel will document activities on public lands that stress mule deer and potentially decrease their survival. The WGFD will coordinate with the appropriate land managers to consider additional protections for mule deer.
- The WGFD will evaluate the concept of an "Adopt a Winter Range Program." This program would provide an opportunity for concerned members of the public or volunteers to assist law enforcement by detecting violations on winter ranges such as road closure, antler hunting, and poaching violations.