



# DEVELOPING AND IMPLEMENTING MULE DEER HABITAT PROJECTS ON FEDERAL PUBLIC LANDS

## Fact Sheet #38

Achieving successful conservation outcomes for mule deer often requires working closely with multiple stakeholders, including state and federal agencies, tribes, landowners, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Understanding how these different organizations operate and engage with each other to develop and implement cooperative habitat conservation projects is important for planning purposes. This Fact Sheet presents some practical administrative considerations for working with federal agencies and includes recommendations for aligning conservation priorities and funding with partners to further the success of mule deer and black-tailed deer habitat restoration projects on federal public lands.

### IDENTIFYING HABITAT CONSERVATION OPPORTUNITIES

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the United States Forest Service (USFS) typically plan habitat restoration projects 2-5 years out, depending on: complexity, cost, location, scale, and sequence of habitat treatment types. Project proponents should meet with agency representatives early to discuss desired conservation outcomes; refine project goals and objectives; and determine feasibility/timelines for implementation. Proponents should become familiar with agency land use plans (USFS Forest Plans or BLM Resource Management Plans) and any resource or area use restrictions that may affect project design or implementation, such as Wilderness Area or Special



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Recreation Management Area designations. Local officials can share key information and guidance regarding current management priorities, competing workloads, and project feasibility. Organizations and partners are encouraged to explore potential collaborative conservation opportunities by participating in: agency information exchange meetings; interdisciplinary field site tours; review of agency plans/assessments; NGO meetings and sponsored events; and coordination meetings with private landowners, agricultural producers, and the Natural Resources Conservation Service to discuss ideas and learn more about wildlife conservation issues.

### PROJECT PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS (NEPA AND OTHER LAWS/REGULATIONS)

Requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) can affect and slow the authorization of a project on federal lands. Projects that cause significant environmental impacts or that may be controversial will likely require an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), which can often take years to complete. Smaller projects with no significant impact may require a simpler Environmental Assessment (EA), while certain activities that have been legislatively excluded or previously found to

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have no impacts may only require a relatively simple Categorical Exclusion (CE or CatEx). A recently authorized (2020) CE covers certain vegetation restoration activities for mule deer and greater sage-grouse habitat, but has specific geographic and project size restrictions, so application may be limited. Many proposed actions on federal lands require completion of mandatory cultural/archeological surveys and threatened and endangered species surveys prior to implementation; and may also require U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and tribal consultations. Project implementation timelines can be delayed or complicated by seasonal or area closures or restrictions, such as fawning/lambing area closures; migratory bird nesting seasons; fire/equipment restrictions; and/or temporary suspension of activities during hunting seasons. Therefore, substantial lead time (1-5 years) is required prior to implementing most activities on federal lands.

## PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION AND FUNDING CONSIDERATIONS

Competing workload priorities and limited staffing may impact the ability of federal agencies to take on additional projects. Collaboration with multiple partners and leveraging agency budgets with external funding is an effective approach for expanding operational capacity and getting more work accomplished. Some states (Utah, New Mexico) have formal statewide restoration programs, where agencies, tribes, landowners, and NGO partners work together to pool resources and coordinate landscape priorities. Others have cooperative regional alliances and partnerships with various conservation organizations. Both BLM and USFS use cooperative agreements and shared stewardship agreements/contracts that allow agencies and NGOs to leverage resources and share administrative and project implementation authority. The expanded use of *Good Neighbor Authority Agreements* has also allowed federal/state agencies, tribes, and county governments to work together to increase accomplishments and share project costs and responsibilities for forest vegetation and other resource projects on federal lands. NGO volunteers can also help with agency capacity issues and in building strong public support for projects.

## MONITORING AND REPORTING OBLIGATIONS

Project monitoring should be included in project plans and budgets to determine how effective the habitat project was in meeting planned resource management objectives. Reporting progress and results to agency officials, stakeholders, and the public is critical for informing future funding and management decisions and for building trust and continued support. Use of social media and local news outlets can provide cost-effective and timely coverage of project activities. Some grants and funding sources require that published results also acknowledge support from funding organizations.

## RECOMMENDED TOOLS AND INFORMATION SOURCES

A variety of resources are available to state and federal agencies and their partners for land management projects that improve or restore habitat for black-tailed or mule deer on federal lands. The Mule Deer Working Group has developed numerous guidance documents on a variety of relevant topics for habitat projects, including an important set of seeding guidelines developed by experienced restoration practitioners.

## SUMMARY

Developing and implementing successful cooperative wildlife habitat projects on public lands can be complex and time-consuming. However, substantial conservation benefits to mule deer and black-tailed deer populations can be realized by building trusting working relationships, understanding key operations and decision spaces, and effectively engaging federal land management agencies with state agencies, tribes, private landowners and NGOS.



Photo by: Steve Belinda / MDF

More information on mule deer can be found at [muledeerworkinggroup.com](http://muledeerworkinggroup.com)

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