

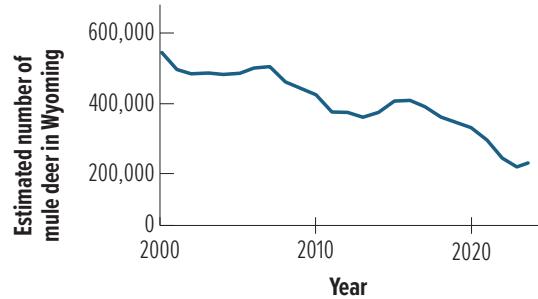


# Wyoming's Mule Deer Conservation Strategy

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## A coordinated strategy for mule deer conservation

Mule deer are a symbol of Wyoming's wildlife heritage and are important to the state's way of life, economy and ecosystems. The 64,000 residents and visitors that participate in mule deer hunting every year continue a legacy that has been in place for generations and provide an influx of resources to local economies. Beyond hunting, nearly everyone who has spent time in Wyoming has paused to watch a mule deer in an aspen stand while on a Sunday drive, or stumbled upon a fawn hidden in the sagebrush. Finally, mule deer are an integral component of the wild ecosystems and working landscapes of Wyoming.



Mule deer have declined significantly over the past 25 years. The factors that contribute to the significant declines in mule deer are complex, but conserving this species primarily rests on our ability to positively impact the quality and availability of its habitat. Mule deer eat high-quality plants and need to move throughout different portions of their home range for food, water, shelter and to find mates. Functional, healthy habitat is essential for mule deer, and the proactive actions outlined in this strategy are a roadmap to sustainable mule deer conservation in Wyoming.

The conservation of mule deer has been and remains a statewide concern that requires a statewide approach. Agencies, organizations and individuals have worked hard to address the decline of mule deer and factors affecting their habitat by dedicating funds, investing time and sharing expertise. Despite these notable efforts, the conservation of mule deer is a bigger challenge than any single organization, policy or funding source can address. Conservation of mule deer and their habitats will be more effective, and typically require fewer resources, if it is coordinated and strategic.

The Mule Deer Conservation Strategy, initiated by the Wyoming Game and Fish Department and executed in collaboration with many partners, is a bold proposal that builds on ongoing efforts to guide statewide conservation of mule deer in Wyoming. The strategy outlined in this document includes the actions the department has identified as being most effective and highest priority for mule deer conservation in the next five years. The strategy has three broad components — conserve intact habitats, improve degraded habitat and support mule deer conservation — that encompass multiple priority actions. These actions are specific recommendations that individuals, organizations and agencies can use as a roadmap for a strategic, coordinated and statewide approach for mule deer conservation.

The department invites elected officials, decision makers and agency leaders to draw from this plan when identifying how to contribute to mule deer conservation. Further, the department encourages individual hunters, landowners and interested citizens to reference and elevate the strategy in their respective efforts. Conserving mule deer has and will continue to require significant funds and effort. It is a significant lift, but it is achievable through our combined contributions.



## Overarching goal

The Mule Deer Conservation Strategy seeks to further mule deer conservation through a strategic, coordinated and statewide approach. These high-priority actions build on ongoing work.

Wyoming possesses some of the most intact landscapes in the nation and provides high-quality habitat that supports world-class mule deer populations. Nutritious food resources like shrubs, flowers and grasses help make this habitat so valuable. Wyoming's open spaces are vital, allowing mule deer to move freely to meet their needs. The actions below conserve what we already have to ensure that mule deer can thrive on Wyoming's landscapes for generations to come.

Increasing free movement across the landscape so mule deer can access food, water, shelter and mates is vital to meet mule deer habitat needs throughout the year. Efforts to improve habitats typically require significant funds for multi-year, boots-on-the-ground work and multi-agency collaborations. The actions on the next page will improve current habitat to make it more valuable to mule deer.

  
**Conserve intact habitat through coordinated, landscape-scale approaches**

  
**Improve degraded habitat by increasing food availability and connectivity**

  
**Support the foundation of mule deer conservation**

Funding, research, collaboration and planning are essential to ensure resources are available to get the work done efficiently and effectively. The actions on the next page will ensure the state has the necessary resources and information needed for mule deer conservation.

## Priority actions to conserve mule deer across Wyoming



### Conserve intact habitat through coordinated, landscape-scale approaches

**Develop and implement statewide, cross-jurisdictional development policies that prioritize, value and conserve intact, high-quality mule deer habitat.**

- Balance the needs of mule deer with development that is central to the state's continued economic success by implementing siting and land-use policies that appropriately value intact, high-quality mule deer habitat during and after development. These policies will be most effective if they are coordinated across the state and across jurisdictions.

**Develop land-use plans, travel-management plans and recreation plans that are aligned in how they prioritize, value and conserve intact, high-quality mule deer habitat.**

- Align efforts to maintain the integrity of high-quality habitat across local, state and federal levels to support landscape-scale conservation of mule deer and their habitat.

**Secure \$50 million annually to conserve high-quality habitats by keeping working lands working.**

- Many private landowners are eager to participate in programs such as short-term habitat leasing and conservation easements to ensure their property serves as important wildlife habitat. Securing additional funds would help meet the landowner demand, since landowner interest has outpaced the availability of funds.



# Priority actions to conserve mule deer across Wyoming



## Improve degraded habitat by increasing food availability and connectivity

### Secure \$75 million annually to treat 1 million acres of habitat affected by invasive species per year.

- Invasive species such as cheatgrass, medusahead and venterata are less nutritious than native plants. These invasives increase the threat of wildfire and degrade habitats, rendering them unable to sustain a healthy mule deer population. The quality of mule deer habitat could be significantly and immediately improved with funding to remove invasive species and prevent further invasion.

### Secure \$15 million annually to expand routine habitat management efforts and add an additional statewide habitat crew.

- The Wyoming Game and Fish Department routinely improves mule deer habitat through efforts such as conifer removal, along with sagebrush, mountain shrub, aspen and riparian enhancements. These techniques have been refined over years of boots-on-the-ground work and can be readily implemented. Additional funding would support personnel and expand the capacity to continue this important work.

### Secure \$15 million annually to remove or convert 500 miles of existing fencing to wildlife-friendly designs.

- Mule deer movement and connectivity between important habitats would be immediately improved if restrictive fences were removed or converted to wildlife-friendly versions.

### Secure \$50 million annually to implement high-priority wildlife crossing projects.

- Wildlife crossing projects are a proven method of improving habitat connectivity while ensuring roadways are safer for wildlife and motorists. Sustainable federal funding is needed to support the implementation of priority crossing projects.

### Improve the ability to implement habitat improvement projects by streamlining permitting processes.

- The important work of conserving mule deer and their habitat can happen quicker by increasing coordination between agencies and streamlining administrative processes.

### Support restoration work through laws, policies and capacity.

- Reclamation can make disturbed landscapes valuable to mule deer again. Through new policies and supporting the use of native vegetation, we can raise the bar from reclamation to restoration and ensure that landscapes once again provide high-quality habitat for mule deer.



## Support the foundation of mule deer conservation

### Increase partner use of the Wyoming Game and Fish Department's Statewide Habitat Plan.

- The Statewide Habitat Plan outlines priority actions to conserve and improve high-quality habitat and identifies priority areas to implement those actions. By aligning efforts across organizations, we can operate in a coordinated, strategic manner to conserve mule deer and their habitats.

### Develop creative, flexible and ready-to-implement funding mechanisms.

- Improving conditions for mule deer requires considerable funding for equipment, supplies and personnel time. The ability to make significant progress hinges on additional support from diverse funding sources. Options include, but are not limited to, developing creative programs funded by federal agencies, partnering with industries to develop dedicated funds and partnering with conservation-based organizations.

### Continue to build upon successes of Wyoming's conservation approach by convening a mule deer summit.

- Individuals, organizations and agencies across Wyoming have been working hard on mule deer conservation. Convening directors of local, state and federal agencies, on-the-ground experts, decision-makers and partners would provide the opportunity to learn from each other, align resources and develop a coordinated implementation strategy.

### Secure \$2 million annually for additional research and monitoring of mule deer.

- Investing in research allows deer to indicate what they need from their habitat. This information can be used to better understand the impacts of disease, infrastructure and predators, as well as prioritize conservation efforts, make better decisions and evaluate whether efforts are successful.



# Building on conservation successes

The Mule Deer Conservation Strategy stands on the shoulders of statewide investments in mule deer and their habitats. These examples highlight a few of the notable efforts that have promoted mule deer conservation, and serve as examples for the Mule Deer Conservation Strategy.



## Maintaining the functionality of vital mule deer habitats.

The Wyoming Game and Fish Department consults with developers regarding activities in important habitats. Especially when done early, this consultation process identifies opportunities to maintain habitat functionality.



## Leveraging funds for on-the-ground projects.

Between 2017-25, the Wyoming Game and Fish Commission allocated \$5.5 million through the Mule Deer Initiative, and partners provided \$45 million in matching funds. These funds enhanced habitat conditions for mule deer in priority habitats.



## Innovative partnerships to conserve habitat.

Since the inception of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service Migratory Big Game Initiative in 2022, more than 700,000 acres have been conserved by investing in efforts primarily on private lands.



## Cross-agency collaborations to improve connectivity.

Since 2008, the Wyoming Game and Fish Department, Wyoming Department of Transportation and partners have invested nearly \$91 million to install underpasses, overpasses and high fencing to ensure connectivity for wildlife and improve motorist safety on highways in Wyoming.



## Using plans and policies to support conservation.

Mule deer and their habitat needs have been incorporated into plans and policies at local, state and federal levels. Together, these plans and policies ensure that efforts are aligned across organizations and address the highest-priority concerns.

## How to help

The time to act is now. Conserving mule deer and their habitats hinges on support and creative ideas from local, state and federal-elected officials, decision-makers and agency leaders across Wyoming. Success also relies on support and engagement from landowners, hunters and concerned citizens. Whether you can offer funding, technical expertise, land protection or volunteer time, direct your resources toward the priority actions identified in this strategy to maximize conservation outcomes.



Scan the QR code or visit [wgfd.info/muledeerinwyoming](http://wgfd.info/muledeerinwyoming) to learn more about mule deer in Wyoming.

