

COMMISSION MEETING AGENDA BRIEFING

Meeting Date: February 20, 2026

Agenda Number: 8

Presenter: Stewart Liley

Corroborator: N/A

Agenda Title: Initial discussion on deer rule (19.31.13 NMAC) for the 2027 – 2030 hunting seasons.

1. Summary of Agenda Item

The Department will present proposed changes to the Deer Rule (19.31.13 NMAC) based on survey information, management goals, and public comment. The Department is currently analyzing data and reaching out to public and interest groups to evaluate alternatives and to help inform the rule development process. The Department will also present key findings from deer projects completed in the last 4 years.

Preliminary Proposed changes include:

- Adjust season dates where necessary.
 - o Shifting start dates to maintain hunts beginning on Saturday or adjusting to calendar day starts for consistency.
 - o Evaluate season dates for hunt structure consistency across the state.
 - o Evaluate season dates to ensure harvest is biologically sustainable.
- Adjust license numbers to meet management strategies and reflect changes in deer herd dynamics.
- Reduce deer licenses in GMU 2B based on input received during current rule cycle.
- Create a public muzzleloader deer hunt on Wildlife Management Areas in GMU 4 to coincide with the private land hunt.
- Create a December rifle hunt for Coues white-tailed deer in GMUs 16 and 22 to be consistent with Coues white-tailed deer hunts in other southwest GMUs.
- Designate the premium statewide deer hunt as a Quality hunt.
- Structure the January hunt on White Sands Missile Range as a youth hunt.
- Consider eliminating the restricted muzzleloader deer hunts.
- Evaluate current antlerless hunts across the state.
- Require the purchase of a license at least a day prior to the start of the hunt. For hunts where published season dates are less than 6 days, hunters will no longer be able to buy a license once the hunt starts.
- Evaluate a potential “ranch registration” process for OTC private-land deer licenses, similar to the current registration process used for private land elk hunting in Secondary Management Zones.

2. Background Information

The deer rule (19.31.13 NMAC) is re-evaluated every 4 years and changed based on population data, harvest data, management goals, and public feedback. The Department will begin reaching out to the public for input.

The Department balances providing hunting opportunity with maintaining the potential for larger antlered bucks through two management approaches: Opportunity Hunt Units and Quality Hunt Units.

Opportunity Hunt Units are designed to maximize hunter access by offering more licenses and higher drawing odds, while maintaining overall population health. This typically results in more hunters afield at the same time.

Quality Hunt Units are designed to enhance the hunting experience by limiting hunter numbers and offering benefits such as lower hunter density, higher success rates, broader legal animal selection, and/or more favorable season timing and length. These units are designated by the State Game Commission and have more restrictive license allocations.

Except for in a few very specific instances to address nuisance issues, the Department allows male harvest only. Population trajectories are driven by adult female and fawn survival; both adult female and fawn survival rates need to be adequate for stable populations. Weather, disease, predation and human induced mortality can all impact adult female and fawn survival; however, availability of quality forbs, shrubs, and concealment cover can lessen or intensify the effect of these individual factors. Deer have a polygamous breeding strategy where a single male will breed many females within a season. Because of this breeding strategy, almost all (>95%) breeding age females become pregnant each year even though there are generally fewer males than females in a population. Studies have shown that when the number of bucks stays above 10 bucks per 100 does, pregnancy rates are consistent and high. As such, buck mortality, including mortality from harvest, does not negatively impact population growth because females carry pregnancies and almost all of them are pregnant each year.

3. Strategic Plan References and Possible Impacts of Agenda Item

The process as presented to the Commission meets the Conservation Services Program Objectives 1, 2 and 5 of the Department's Strategic Plan: FY 2019 – FY 2023

4. Considerations Regarding Duplications and/or Conflicts with Existing Rules or Statutes

None

5. Description and Summary of Public Involvement Process and Results

The Department is at the beginning of the public involvement process. Proposed changes to the exotics rule will be posted on the Department's website. Input will be gathered from mail, email, an online survey, and public meetings with interested members of the public.

Suggested Motion

This is a discussion item and no motion is necessary, unless Commission discretion dictates otherwise.