

COMMISSION MEETING AGENDA BRIEFING

Meeting Date: June 25, 2026

Agenda Number: 9

Presenter: Stewart Liley

Corroborator: N/A

Agenda Title: Subsequent Discussion of elk rule (19.31.14 NMAC) for the 2027-2030 hunting seasons.

1. Summary of Agenda Item

The Department will present proposed changes to the Elk Rule (19.31.14 NMAC) based on survey information, management goals, and public comment. The Department has analyzed and evaluated data to help inform the rule development process and is still in the process of collecting public comments on the proposed rules. The Department will present the current proposal for the 2027-2030 hunting seasons.

Preliminary Proposed changes include:

General Statewide proposed changes

- Adjust season dates to account for calendar shift. For example, if a hunt normally starts on a Saturday, this date shift would be maintained throughout the rule so the hunts continue to start on a Saturday.
- Adjust some hunts to minimize overlap of weapons used or species hunted.
- Align most primary management zone hunts to begin with muzzleloader hunts, followed by any-legal-weapon hunts. Early October hunts shift to muzzleloader to address increased male susceptibility to harvest.
- Align hunt season start dates in GMUs containing both PMZ and SMZ.
- Adjust draw license numbers based on biological data and management goals.
 - o Reductions in GMUs: 15, 16A, 16B, 16C, 16D, 16E, and 55A
 - o Slight increases in GMUs: 2, 34, 36, and 51
- Designate statewide draw elk licenses (currently ELK-1-700) as a quality hunt.
- Require the purchase of a license at least one day prior to 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.
- Re-assess public/private land split due to land ownership changes of the last 4 years.

Specific Proposed changes

- Increase antlerless elk licenses in GMU 2 by introducing two Youth Encouragement Hunts.
- Create muzzle loader hunts prior to any-legal-weapon hunts in the following GMUs: 4 (within Sargent, Humphries, and Rio Chama WMAs), 5A, 5B, 12, 16A, 16B/22, 16C, 16D, 21A, 49, 50, and 51.
- Redistribute a small portion of any-legal-weapon hunt licenses to muzzleloader hunt licenses in the following GMUs: 5A, 5B, 12, and 50.
- Creation of, and redistribution of licenses to new muzzleloader hunts will slightly increase licenses in GMUs 5B, 12, and 50. New muzzleloader hunts will be bag limit MB, with the exception of WMA hunts within GMU 4, where bag limits shall be MB/A and GMU 51, where bag limits shall be ES.
- Shift existing late-season muzzleloader hunt dates in GMU 51 to begin after archery

- and before rifle hunts to align with statewide muzzleloader seasons.
- Increase antlerless elk licenses in GMU 51 to address issues with winter concentrations of elk.
- Increase antlerless licenses within GMUs 34 and 36 to address continued population growth within these herds.
- Eliminate Youth Encouragement hunts throughout Greater Gila elk herd unit (GMUs 15, 16A-E) to reduce adult female mortality within the herd. Reductions in herd productivity and adult female survival necessitate the reduction of female harvest to aid in sustainability of the herd.
- Decrease antlerless licenses within Greater Gila elk herd unit (GMU 15, 16A, 16C, 16D, and 16E) to reduce adult female mortality within the herd.
- Shift antlerless hunts earlier in the year within the Greater elk herd unit (GMU 15, 16A, 16B, 16C, 16D, and 16E) to reduce adult female mortality.
- Decrease antlerless licenses on Valle Vidal (GMU 55A) to reduce adult female mortality and address decreased calf recruitment.
- Shift Mobility Impaired (MI) and Youth Only (YO) rifle hunts after muzzleloader hunts in units where MI and YO rifle hunts had initially followed archery hunts (GMUs 16A, 16C, 16D, and 23). MI and YO hunts in muzzleloader-only units (GMU 9, 15, and 17) will remain as previously scheduled.

2. Background Information

The elk rule (19.31.14 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.

Elk in New Mexico are managed within three zone designations: Primary Management Zones (PMZ), Secondary Management Zones (SMZ), and Special Management Zones (SpMZ). Differing management objectives and management actions exist within each of the three zone designations. Primary Management Zones are where the highest densities and largest elk populations reside. Within PMZs, the Department closely monitors herd productivity to determine license allocations. Secondary Management Zones are areas no specific elk herd management goals are set and licenses on participating private lands are issues over-the-counter. Special Management Zones where elk hunt authorizations are issued to private landowners by the Department on a ranch by ranch basis through negotiations, land ownership in this zone is typically greater than 90% private.

The Department allows for both male and female harvest in many elk populations. Elk population growth is primarily driven by both juvenile and adult female survival. Because elk population performance is largely driven by these factors, and not adult male mortality, the Department can maintain high levels of mature bull (MB) harvest throughout the state without negatively impacting population performance. Male harvest in PMZs is managed for a particular goal, to either provide more hunting opportunity (OOM) or a more quality hunt (QHM). Female harvest is a tool that the Department uses to maintain elk populations at selected levels or decrease populations in some cases. Elk harvest licenses are based upon estimated populations and sustainable harvest levels, calculated for each herd unit independently with available data collected annually from aerial classifications and hunter harvest surveys.

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 held 2 hybrid in-person/virtual public meetings on March 11 in Albuquerque and March 12 in Las Cruces. We have also received comments via email. Public comments will be summarized and presented during the meeting. Proposed changes to the elk rule have been posted on the Department's website.

Suggested Motion

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