

COMMISSION MEETING AGENDA BRIEFING

Meeting Date: February 20, 2026

Agenda Number: 9

Presenter: Stewart Liley

Corroborator: N/A

Agenda Title: Initial 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 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 elk projects completed in the last 4 years.

Preliminary proposed changes include:

- I. Adjust season dates where necessary.
 - a. Shifting start dates to maintain hunts beginning on Saturday or adjusting to calendar day starts for consistency.
 - b. Evaluate season dates for hunt structure consistency across the state.
 - c. Evaluate season dates to ensure harvest is biologically sustainable.
- II. Consider aligning most primary management zone hunts to have a muzzleloader hunt first, followed by any-legal-weapon hunts. Early October hunts shift to muzzleloader to address increased male susceptibility to harvest.
- III. Consider aligning hunt season start dates in GMUs containing both PMZ and SMZ..
- IV. Adjust some hunts to minimize overlap of weapons used or species hunted.
- V. Adjust draw license numbers based on biological data and management goals.
 - a. Possible reductions in the following herd units: Greater Gila, Valle Vidal (A).
 - b. Possible slight increases in licenses in the Northcentral herd unit (A) and Sacramento and Ruidoso.
- VI. Designate statewide draw elk licenses (currently ELK-1-700) as a quality hunt.
- VII. 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.
- VIII. Possible adjustment of management zone boundaries.
- IX. Re-assess public/private land split due to land ownership changes of the last 4 years.

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 issued 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 is at the beginning of the public involvement process. Proposed changes to the elk rule will be posted on the Department's website. Input will be gathered from mail, email, 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.