

ELK PROPOSED RULE CHANGES SUMMARY

Date of update: 3/11/2026

**The Department remains actively engaged in reviewing biological data and considering public input as the rule development process progresses. Please check back regularly for updates and additional information as decisions are finalized.*

ELK BIOLOGY

Elk population growth is driven by both juvenile and adult female survival. Several factors influence the survival of adult females; the largest influential factor is hunter harvest. Calf survival can vary annually and is often influenced by environmental factors and predation. Because elk population performance is mostly driven by these factors, and not adult male mortality, the Department can maintain relatively high levels of mature bull (MB) harvest throughout the state. Although much of the elk harvest within New Mexico is male-bias, many opportunities to harvest antlerless (A) elk are available, and antlerless harvest is used as a tool to manage populations where productivity is high. The Department aims to maintain harvest of both male and female elk within estimated sustainable limits, depending on the goals of the herd unit.

The Department uses two primary management strategies to meet diverse stakeholder interests: Optimal Opportunity hunts and Quality hunts. Optimal Opportunity hunts are designed to maximize hunter participation while maintaining overall population health. These hunts typically have higher license numbers, higher hunter density, and a younger average age of harvested bulls.

In contrast, Quality hunts are designated to provide a more limited, higher-quality hunting experience. These hunts generally feature lower hunter density, higher success rates, an older average age of harvested bulls, and/or more favorable season timing and length. Quality hunt designations are established by the State Game Commission and involve more restrictive license numbers.

For more information on elk biology and management in New Mexico, see this report:

<https://wildlife.dgf.nm.gov/download/elk-hunting-prospects/?wpdmdl=45657&refresh=699f44af07afe1772045487>

PROPOSED CHANGES TO ELK HUNTING

- 1) 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.
- 2) 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.
- 3) Consider aligning hunt season start dates in GMUs containing both Primary Management Zone (PMZ) and Secondary Management Zone (SMZ).
- 4) Adjust some hunts to minimize overlap of weapons used for species hunted.
- 5) Adjust draw license numbers based on biological data and management goals.
 - a. Possible reductions in the following herd units: Greater Gila, Jemez (A), Valle Vidal (A).
 - b. Possible slight increases in the San Juan, Northcentral, Sacramento, and Ruidoso herd units.
 - c. Consider establishing elk hunts in GMU 32 to address an increasing elk population in the area.
- 6) Designate the premium statewide elk hunt (currently ELK-1-700) as a Quality hunt.
- 7) Require the purchase of a license at least one day prior to hunting. 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.
- 8) Possible adjustment of management zone boundaries.
- 9) Re-assess public/private land split due to land ownership changes over the last 4 years.

PUBLIC INVOLVMENT

The Department continues to receive public comment. If you would like to comment on the proposals, please send an email to: DFG-Elk-Rule@dgf.nm.gov