

Proposed Elk Season Guidelines

Flexible season structure with performance-based shoulder seasons

These guidelines were developed for improved elk harvest management resulting in more elk populations being at objective. The guidelines emphasize flexibility using all currently available harvest tools (existing season structures, license/permit types, game damage hunts, management seasons, and season extensions) and adds A7 licenses, antlerless permits, and performance-based shoulder seasons as options.

A “shoulder season” is defined as any firearm season printed in the hunting regulations that occur outside the 5-week general firearm season between August 15 and February 15 in one or more Hunting Districts or portion(s) thereof. Shoulder seasons could be early and/or late seasons and may include antlered and/or antlerless options. Shoulder seasons are designed to supplement existing harvest, not replace or reduce harvest during the existing general archery and firearm seasons. Performance criteria described later in these guidelines, have been developed to help ensure transparent agency and public assessment of how shoulder seasons are performing. Shoulder seasons are a tool to support the general seasons and are not presented here or intended to be an end objective. Shoulder seasons do not include early backcountry hunts, primitive weapon hunts, or season extensions.

These guidelines also include “fundamental objectives” meant to describe how management success looks and to help ensure transparent agency and public assessment of how overall elk harvest management is progressing. These fundamental objectives are listed below and have no individual priority ranking. Fundamental objectives address more than just population status and offer the multiple metrics for the Fish and Wildlife (FW) Commission to consider in their season setting decisions.

FUNDAMENTAL OBJECTIVES

Elk considerations:

- **Manage elk populations to objective as rapidly as possible.**
- **Increase harvest of elk, where appropriate.**

Hunter and landowner considerations:

- **Address problematic distributions of elk and elk harvest.**
- **Enhance free public access to bulls and cows on private land during the general seasons.**
- **Reduce exclusive access to elk.**
- **Enhance landowner flexibility to manage elk hunting on their property.**

- **Reduce game damage.**
- **Reduce hunter impacts on landowners** (e.g., cost of hiring additional staff, loss of productivity, property damage from hunters, etc.).
- **Simplify rules and regulations.**

Logistical considerations:

- **Balance statewide consistency with local flexibility of regulations, rules, and policies.**
- **Keep staff time and cost down.**

Regions would have discretion to propose all or some of these tools in any hunting district based upon local circumstances and achieving fundamental objectives. FWP may propose performance-based shoulder seasons where populations are over objective or where shoulder seasons can address local circumstances and be consistent with fundamental objectives. Examples might include areas where elk are typically absent during the general hunting season or the landscape is dominated by multiple small ownerships making it difficult to safely harvest elk or respond to game damage. In hunting districts that are over objective the primary intent of shoulder seasons is to reduce the population to objective. As such, shoulder seasons would be proposed for removal when a district reaches objective unless local circumstances (see above) are present, there is overall positive performance relative to fundamental objectives, or there is broad, expressed support from landowners, sportsmen, FWP and the FW Commission.

Performance-based shoulder seasons and specific shoulder season performance criteria

The primary intent of a shoulder season is to help reduce the population in a Hunting District or group of Hunting Districts. Performance-based shoulder seasons are designed to supplement existing harvest, not replace or reduce harvest during the existing general archery and firearms seasons. To reduce a population in a given year, the total harvest for all seasons combined – archery-only, 5-week general and shoulder season – must exceed the number of calves “recruited” or added into the population the previous spring. That is, annual harvest must exceed annual recruitment. To assess the performance of a shoulder season and to assure the performance-based shoulder season does not replace or reduce harvest during the existing general archery and firearm seasons, the following harvest criteria will be used. This performance assessment will be used to determine whether or not FWP proposes to maintain or remove shoulder seasons.

Shoulder Season Harvest Criteria

1. During the past 3 years^a the number of bulls harvested during the archery-only and 5-week general seasons combined (not including the shoulder season) is more than half (>50%) the number of bulls recruited^{b,c} during that 3-year period **AND**

2. During the past 3 years^a the number of cow elk harvested during the archery-only and 5-week general seasons combined (not including the shoulder season) is more than half (>50%) the number of cows recruited^{b,c} during the 3-year period **AND**
3. Total harvest during all seasons combined (archery-only, 5-week general and shoulder season) is greater than the number of elk recruited **OR**
4. If harvest criteria have not been met due to clear and widely accepted extenuating circumstances (e.g., weather, forest fire, etc.), the shoulder season may be continued, as long as access to elk during the general season is not considered to be the main reason harvest criteria are not being met.

OR:

Other shoulder seasons not subject to the above harvest criteria are allowed if they are consistent with the fundamental objectives and have broad, expressed support from landowners, sportsmen, FWP and the Fish & Wildlife Commission.

Total annual harvest relative to annual recruitment will be assessed annually through FW Commission and public review. Assessment will be done at the level of a Hunting District or group of Hunting Districts, depending on how the shoulder season was designed and implemented. An established shoulder season will be proposed to remain in place if all harvest criteria are being met. If all harvest criteria above are not consistently met or if the Hunting District(s) reaches objective, FWP may propose to remove the late shoulder season.

~~~~~

<sup>a</sup> To account for annual variability in hunting conditions that might affect harvest and to account for variability in recruitment rates, a moving 3-year window is used.

<sup>b</sup> This applies if elk are present during the archery-only and 5-week general season. The intent is that most of the total annual harvest from all seasons combined occurs during the archery-only and 5-week general season and that shoulder season harvest adds to this rather than replaces it. Therefore, a number of bull elk and antlerless elk that is more than half the annual bull and cow recruitment, respectively, must be taken each year during the combined archery-only and 5-week general seasons. Harvest criteria for both bulls and cows must be met in order to propose maintaining any shoulder season. If the number of bulls harvested during the archery-only and 5-week general season is equal to or greater than the number of bulls annually recruited and any specific bull objectives for that area are being met, the shoulder season does not need to include bull hunting. Proposed bull harvest should be consistent with the need to reduce bulls as well as cows in areas that are over objective.

<sup>c</sup> “Recruitment” is the estimated number of 11-12 month old calves in the population in late winter or spring. Annual recruitment for both bulls and cows will be determined by the area

biologist using best available data. To estimate the total number of cow and bull calves recruited s/he will need:

- Survey data or another estimator of herd size and composition
- An estimate of sightability
- An estimate of bull:cow ratio among 11-12 month old calves

Example: Using herd count and composition data and adjusting for sightability, a biologist estimates that during the past three years a total of 300 (an average of 100 per year) 11-12 month old calves were recruited. Using check station or other data it is estimated that 60%, or 180, of these were cow calves and 40%, or 120, were bull calves. Using harvest survey point estimates more than half of this number of animals, or more than 90 cows (an average of 30 per year) and 60 bulls (an average of 20 per year), had to be taken during the combined archery-only and 5-week general seasons over that same three year period and at least 300 elk (an average of 100 per year) had to be taken during all seasons combined (archery-only, 5-week general and shoulder season) to justify continuing the shoulder season.