

# Summary of Research



Following the 2010 general hunting season, the Commission for Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) requested the agency begin exploring whether or not there is a need to update Montana's mule deer management plan (Adaptive Harvest Management Plan 2001). To kick-off this effort, FWP conducted a survey of resident mule deer hunters to help evaluate Montana's mule deer management relative to hunting and harvest opportunities.

In late may of 2011, a survey was mailed to a randomly selected sample of N=5,000 resident Deer A license holders from the 2010 general hunting season. Two weeks following the initial mailing of the survey, postcard reminders were sent to all the survey participants. Surveys were successfully delivered to a total of N=4,813 resident deer hunters. There were a total of N=1,980 survey respondents, resulting in an overall 41 percent response rate for the resident survey. This response rate is considered to be good for a mailback survey of this kind.

This summary presents selected overall statewide results from this important survey. In addition to this summary, separate reports have been developed that provide detailed survey results for Montana as a whole and detailed survey results for seven administrative regions of Montana.

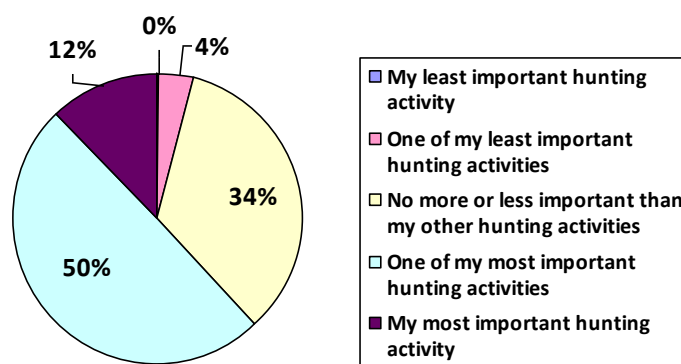
Overall, 80 percent of all the survey respondents reported they have hunted mule deer in Montana during the past five years. These resident mule deer hunters are the focus of this summary.



## IMPORTANCE OF MULE DEER HUNTING IN MONTANA

Nearly two-thirds of the survey respondents indicated that mule deer hunting is "one of my most important hunting activities" or "my most important hunting activity" (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1. Response to..."How important is mule deer hunting to you in Montana?"



## PERCEPTIONS REGARDING OPPORTUNITIES TO HUNT MULE DEER IN MONTANA

On a scale from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent), 85 percent of the survey respondents rate overall opportunities to hunt mule deer in Montana as being better than average (a score of three out of five or higher).

Using the same scale, nearly 50 percent of the respondents rate opportunities to hunt large mule deer bucks in Montana as being better than average (a score of three out of five or higher).

## SATISFACTION WITH CURRENT MULE DEER HUNTING REGULATIONS IN MONTANA

On a scale from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied), 77 percent of the survey respondents rate mule deer hunting regulations in Montana as being satisfactory (a score of three out of five or better). Only two percent of the respondents indicated they believe mule deer hunting regulations in Montana are "very difficult to understand". And, only two percent of the respondents reported they have "often" decided NOT to go mule deer hunting in Montana during the past five years because they thought the hunting regulations were too difficult to understand.

## OPINIONS REGARDING HOW RESTRICTIVE MULE DEER HUNTING REGULATIONS SHOULD BE IN MONTANA

Managing for higher numbers of mature mule deer bucks (e.g., bucks 4-5 years of age or older) may require implementing more restrictive mule deer hunting regulations. For instance, in current limited permit areas in Montana the average drawing odds are once every four years. With this in mind, survey respondents were asked the following forced-choice questions to help assess how restrictive mule deer hunting regulations should be in Montana. The numbers in red represent the percent of survey respondents who selected that choice for each of the three survey questions presented in the box below.

Response to..."Given only ONE CHOICE, which of the following would be most favorable to you in MONTANA as a whole? (check only one)"

63.0% The opportunity to hunt mule deer bucks every year somewhere in Montana (with a *lower probability* of harvesting a mature buck)

-OR-

37.0% The opportunity to hunt mule deer bucks once every several years somewhere in Montana (with a *higher probability* of harvesting a mature buck)

Response to..."Given only ONE CHOICE, which of the following would be most favorable to you in the REGION of Montana where you've spent the most time hunting mule deer during the past FIVE years? (check only one)"

63.8% The opportunity to hunt mule deer bucks every year in this REGION of the state (with a *lower probability* of harvesting a mature buck)

-OR-

36.2% The opportunity to hunt mule deer bucks once every several years in this REGION of the state (with a *higher probability* of harvesting a mature buck)

Response to..."Given only ONE CHOICE, which of the following would be most favorable to you in the HUNTING DISTRICT where you most prefer to hunt mule deer in Montana? (check only one)"

63.3% The opportunity to hunt mule deer bucks every year in this Hunting District (with a *lower probability* of harvesting a mature buck)

-OR-

36.7% The opportunity to hunt mule deer bucks once every several years in this Hunting District (with a *higher probability* of harvesting a mature buck)

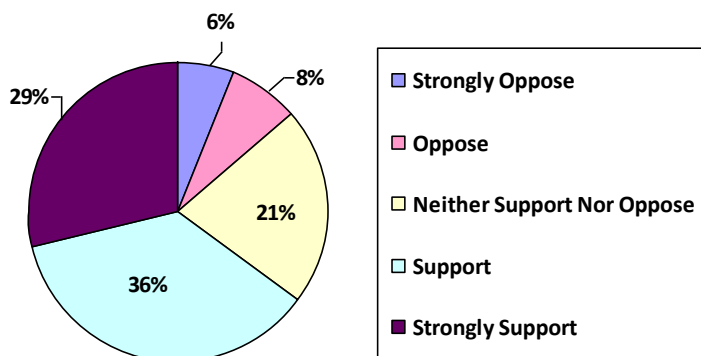
Overall, 55 percent of the respondents selected the non-restrictive option for all three of the survey questions listed above. Thirty-three percent of the respondents selected the restrictive option for all three questions. Of note, respondents who reported that mule deer hunting isn't very important to them were more likely to select the more restrictive option. For instance, 50-53 percent of the respondents who reported that mule deer hunting isn't very important to them selected the "opportunity to hunt mule deer bucks once every several years" for the each of the three survey questions. This compares to 33-35 percent of the respondents who reported that mule deer hunting is important to them. Also of note, respondents who reported that harvesting a trophy buck is an important motivation for going mule deer hunting in Montana were more likely to select the more restrictive option. For instance, 45-46 percent of the respondents who reported that harvesting a trophy buck is important to them selected the "opportunity to hunt mule deer bucks once every several years" for the each of the three survey questions. This compares to 28-29 percent of the respondents who reported that harvesting a trophy buck is NOT important to them.

Related to the three forced-choice questions listed above, respondents were also asked, "How important is it to you to be able to consistently hunt mule deer in the same place in Montana each and every year?" Fifty-seven percent of the respondents indicated this was important or very important to them, while 25 percent reported this was unimportant or very unimportant to them. Eighteen percent reported this was neither important nor unimportant to them.

## OPINIONS REGARDING THE TIMING OF THE MULE DEER HUNTING SEASON IN MONTANA

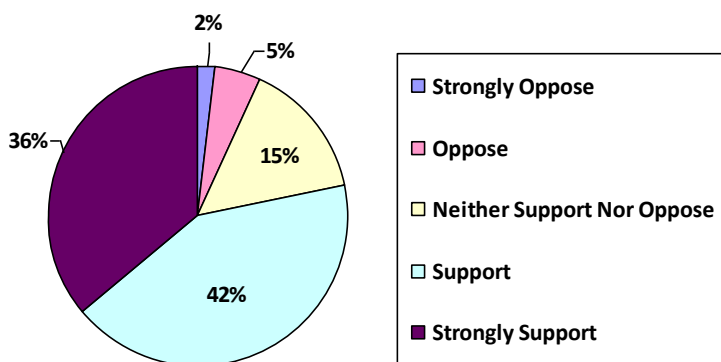
Nearly two-thirds of the survey respondents “support” or “strongly support” hunting mule deer bucks in Montana during the rut (see Figure 2 below). Fourteen percent “oppose” or “strongly oppose” hunting bucks during the rut.

**Figure 2.** Response to...“To what extent do you support or oppose the hunting of mule deer **BUCKS** in Montana during the rut (generally after mid-November)?”



A strong majority of respondents (78 percent) “support” or “strongly support” the current timing of the five-week general rifle season for mule deer hunting in Montana (see Figure 3 below). Only seven percent “oppose” or “strongly oppose” the current timing of the season.

**Figure 3.** Response to...“To what extent do you support or oppose the current timing of the five-week general rifle season for mule deer hunting in Montana which starts the third weekend in October and ends the Sunday after Thanksgiving?”



In addition to the above, 65 percent of the survey respondents believe it is “important” or “very important” that the general rifle season for mule deer hunting matches up with the timing of the general rifle season for elk hunting in Montana. Fifteen percent of the respondents think this is “unimportant” or “very unimportant”. Twenty-one percent reported this is “neither important nor unimportant” to them.

## INTEREST IN HARVESTING ANTLERLESS MULE DEER IN MONTANA

A little over half of the survey respondents (51 percent) reported they are “interested” or “very interested” in harvesting antlerless mule deer in Montana. Twenty-eight percent reported they are “disinterested” or “very disinterested” in harvesting antlerless mule deer in Montana. Twenty-one percent were “neither interested or disinterested”.

## REASONS FOR HUNTING MULE DEER IN MONTANA

Survey participants were asked to rate the importance of ten different potential reasons for going mule deer hunting in Montana. Each of these reasons are listed below along with the percent of respondents who rated each reason as being “important” or “very important”.

- To enjoy nature and outdoors (91%).
- To be with friends who have similar interests (77%).
- To do something with my family (75%).
- To get venison for eating (69%).
- To feel the exhilaration of the hunt (69%).
- To experience solitude (67%).
- To develop my skills and abilities (64%).
- To test my hunting skills (64%).
- To feel a sense of accomplishment (59%).
- To harvest a trophy buck (47%).



## BARRIERS TO OBTAINING DESIRED MULE DEER HUNTING EXPERIENCES IN MONTANA

Survey participants were asked, “What is the single greatest BARRIER to you gaining the type of mule deer hunting experience you’re looking for in Montana?” The most frequently listed barriers were as follows:

- Poor access. Concerns about access to hunt mule deer (e.g., poor access to privately owned lands that have good hunting, locked gates, closed roads, leased up lands, etc.).
- Time and money. The costs of hunting.
- Physical limitations (e.g., getting older, disabled, sick, injury, etc.).
- Not enough big bucks. Poor opportunities to harvest a mature buck.
- Too many other hunters. Competition from other hunters.
- Too many predators. Competition from predators.

## BACKGROUND CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SURVEY RESPONDENTS

- On average, respondents reported they hunt mule deer in Montana 12 days per year (median = 10 days per year).
- Sixty-five percent of respondents report having hunted mule deer each of the past five years in Montana.
  - Nine percent four of the past five years.
  - Twelve percent three of the past five years.
  - Ten percent two of the past five years.
  - Six percent one of the past five years.
- None of the respondents have hunted mule deer out-of-state each of the past five years.
  - One percent four of the past five years.
  - One-half percent three of the past five years.
  - One percent two of the past five years.
  - Two percent one of the past five years.
  - Ninety-six percent none of the past five years.
- Average age of respondents 47 years (median = 49 years).
- Eighty-eight percent of respondents were male; 12 percent female.

## DISCUSSION

Results from the 2011 Resident Mule Deer Hunter Preference Survey confirm that mule deer hunting is very important to Montanans. This tracks with the fact that deer hunting is by far the most popular hunting activity in Montana (in terms of overall numbers of deer hunters and hunter days).

Overall, survey respondents were generally satisfied with the current mule deer hunting regulations and the timing of the current mule deer seasons in Montana. However, many resident mule deer hunters are concerned about a variety of hunting access related issues. Despite these concerns, respondent reported being generally satisfied with overall mule deer hunting opportunities in Montana. Furthermore, nearly half of the respondents rated opportunities to hunt large mule deer bucks in the state as being better than average.

Each year, FWP hears from a segment of the mule deer hunting public that more emphasis needs to be placed on trophy mule deer hunting in the state. Surprisingly, trophy hunting was the least important reason expressed by survey respondents for hunting mule deer in Montana. Correspondingly, about two-thirds of the survey respondents prefer less restrictive mule deer hunting regulations across the state compared to more restrictive regulations that limit opportunity. Of note, these numbers provide support for current mule deer management in the state where about three-quarters of the hunting districts in Montana do NOT limit buck hunting opportunity.

Mule deer are truly one of Montana’s premier big game species. FWP intends to use results from this survey as an important piece of information in the consideration of future management for this significant game species that is so highly prized by Montana hunters. 🌲

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**TO OBTAIN COPIES OF THIS SUMMARY** (or more detailed survey results)

Contact the Human Dimensions Unit of FWP by phone (406) 444-4758 or visit FWP’s website at <http://fwp.mt.gov> (and click on the following links...“Doing Business”, “Reference Information”, “Surveys”, Social & Economic Surveys”).