

Meeting Date: November 17, 2016

Agenda Item No. 16

Agenda Item: Sawtooth Zone Elk Hunt Evaluation

Bureau Chief Approval:

Prepared by: Craig White, Deer & Elk Program Coordinator

Background:

Historically, the Sawtooth Elk Zone was a popular area to hunt with hunter numbers ranging between 5,880-7,267 from 1992-2006. Because of declining elk numbers in the zone, including a long-term decline in the bull segment of the population, the Commission implemented a cap in 2009 reflecting a >50% reduction in hunter numbers. To lessen impacts to hunters, including those using the services of an outfitter, the Commission chose to implement the cap over a 3-year period. Following rules for capping a zone, the Commission established a final allocation of 1,786 resident tags, 210 non-outfitted nonresident tags, and 96 outfitted tags. See Appendix A for additional details on Sawtooth Zone tag allocation.

In recent years interest in hunting the Sawtooth Elk Zone has increased substantially, resulting in the resident "A" and "B" tags selling out in one day in 2015, and in less than an hour in 2016. Elk tags are normally sold at license vendors, Department offices, through the internet, and over the phone. Because of a quick sell-out in 2016, some hunters were frustrated by what they perceived as a lack of fairness based on whether they were at a vendor, using the telephone option, or attempting to purchase online.

Commensurate with increasing resident demand for tags, demand for nonresident and outfitted-nonresident tags has also increased. Some outfitters in the Sawtooth Zone have indicated they could provide service to more hunters if a portion of the tags allocated to non-outfitted nonresidents was reallocated as outfitted tags. The proposal would have no effect on tags allocated to residents.

The Commission-adopted elk population objectives for the Sawtooth Elk Zone are 3,000-4,500 cows and 630-945 bulls. Both the bull and cow segments of the elk population have been below objective in recent surveys. Since 2009, bull and cow numbers have been increasing. The Department has modeled the projected elk population trajectory since the last full helicopter survey in 2013 using information from radio-collared cows and calves. Preliminary model results suggest the elk population is increasing, particularly for bulls, but is likely still below objective. The Department will conduct a helicopter survey in the Sawtooth Zone in January 2017 to reassess status with respect to objectives.

The Department will address 3 primary issues affecting the Sawtooth Elk Management Zone over the next few months: a) distribution of tags and what hunters perceive as equitable access, b) elk population status and whether more opportunity can be provided (including potential changes in hunt format), and c) allocation of outfitted tags.

To accommodate potential changes in how Sawtooth Elk Zone tags are sold or potential changes to season structure, nonresident Sawtooth elk tags will not go on sale on December 1, 2016 with the other over-the-counter nonresident deer and elk tags. Sawtooth non-resident tags are expected to go on sale some point after the 2017-2018 big game season-setting process is completed.

Statutory Authority and/or Policy Issues:

Idaho Code §36-104 authorizes the Commission to establish rules for the taking of wildlife consistent with state policy. Idaho Code §36-408 provides Commission authority to allocate elk and deer tags for hunters using the services of outfitters. Commission rule

(IDAPA 13.01.04.505) provides guidance how the Department implements allocation of capped elk zone tags. Commission-approved species management plans provide direction for population and harvest management.

Public Involvement Process:

Department staff will continue to work with stakeholders on potential options to address the 3 issues referenced above as part of the 2017-2018 Big Game Season setting process. The Department will present potential options related to method of tag allocation or hunt format for Commission consideration at the January meeting. Following public input on proposals, final recommendations will be presented at the March 2017 Commission meeting.

Justification:

This agenda item is to update the Commission about the process and timelines for addressing management issues related to the hunt in the Sawtooth Elk Management Zone.

Staff Recommendation:

None. This agenda item is for Commission information.

Action Requested:

This agenda item is for Commission information. No action is requested at this time.

Appendix A.

Sawtooth Elk Zone Cap History:

- Elk tags first capped in 2009; 5-year historic use table shown below:

Average Tags Sold, 2004-2008

	Resident		Non-outfitted Non-Res		Historic Outfitter	
	Total	Tags	%	Tags	%	Use
Sawtooth (A)	2133	1922	90.1%	168	7.9%	43
Sawtooth (B)	3263	2806	86.0%	363	11.1%	94

- Targeted reduction was 74% 'A' and 54% 'B' tags. Original recommendation would have resulted in the following outcome:

Original Proposed Allocation

	Total	Non-outfitted		Outfitted Tags
		Resident Tags	Non-Res Tags	
Sawtooth (A)	550	496	43	11
Sawtooth (B)	1500	1290	167	43

- Commission chose to phase in the tag reductions over a 3-year period given the magnitude.
- Commission continued implementing the phase-in during 2010 and 2011, but chose to "freeze" outfitter allocated tags at the 2009 level (retaining 50% of the proposed reductions). The discretion to not reduce outfitter allocation further was based on an IDAPA rule previous to the current rule language. The current allocation is:

Final Allocation

	Total	Non-outfitted		Outfitted Tags
		Resident Tags	Non-Res Tags	
Sawtooth (A)	566	496	43	27
Sawtooth (B)	1526	1290	167	69