

MULE DEER WORKING GROUP DIRECTOR'S REPORT
Virtual Meeting • July 9 & 10, 2020
1-4pm MDT both days



Chair – Jim Heffelfinger, Arizona Game and Fish Department

114 people were registered for this meeting. Actual attendance was not obtainable by the Business Meeting.

2020 Mule Deer and Black-tailed Deer Status report

Available in Pathable files section for the Business Meeting and soon on the WAFWA website.

Mule Deer Foundation Welcome (Miles Moretti)

The MDF board asked Miles to delay his retirement until March 2021. MDF employees at this WAFWA meeting are: Jake Jaeger (Cooperative Biologist - AZ), Lucas Olson (Cooperative Biologist – AZ), Steve Belinda (Director of Conservation), and Jessie Shallow (New Idaho SO3362 action plan coordinator). MDF would like to continue to expand on conservation programs, and are open to partnerships with new states. Lack of banquets has forced MDF to change their funding model to more online auctions and think differently about how things are done. They continue to do a lot of habitat projects because they are considered essential work and are often not near Covid-19 hotspots. MDF doesn't foresee a huge change in commitments on projects but other conservation groups have had to cut back (and staff) dramatically. Miles sees partnerships and communication as key for all of their continued success.

Reseeding Guidance Document Revisions

We have been working on this document for a number of years in the face of a high turnover of coauthors. It is intended to be a useful document in the hands of practitioners, restoration biologists, and wildlife managers to synthesize all the information together into a much more concise document containing the basics on reseeding and guidance for where to get local information. The document has gone out for internal review and first draft was circulated back in February. We had some good reviews, but need a more thorough internal review so Danny Summers will incorporate edits thus far and we will resend it out for another review. We discussed whether we need to have a list of important plants for mule deer in an appendix to guide those putting seed mixes together (possibly by ecoregion). This is not intended to tell practitioners what to plant, but rather to give them a list of plants that are beneficial to mule deer to serve as a starting point to be refined by local knowledge. We recognized the need to bring in Department of Agriculture when we start talking about natives vs nonnatives in our recommendations.

Status of Wildlife Movement and Migration Working Group (WMMWG)

Orrin D: We still have 7 spots to fill for representatives. The WMMWG will meet tomorrow to discuss focal species, voting on mission statement/logo, an update on Casey Stemler's final report on SO3362 implementation, migration corridor protection order, highway bill update, update on Corridor Mapping Team, and the Utah migration initiative. They will also discuss products the group will produce. Representation on this working group had to be broader than just state/provincial/territorial agencies and includes USGS, FS, BLM, FWS, Tribal, and WAFWA state/provincial reps.

Fact Sheets

- Role of Private Lands in Mule Deer Management was sent to directors last month for approval at this meeting, but during the director review, suggestions were made that caused us to pull it from consideration at this meeting. We will bring back a revised final at the mid-winter.
- GPS Collars for Mule Deer is in internal MDWG review now.
- Chronic Wasting Disease first draft is being sent to the Wildlife Health Committee and then will return to MDWG for review by September
- Cooperative Mule Deer Habitat Projects on Federal Public Land first draft written by collaborators in the USFS, BLM and NGO and will now be reviewed by MDWG
- Economic Contributions of Mule Deer is being drafted
- Buck Hunting and Deer Abundance is being drafted
- Use of Cameras in Mule Deer Management is being drafted

Mule Deer Book Update

All chapters have authors assigned that are working to complete the writing. Chapters are due Oct 30th when they will be sent out to reviewers for 3 months (including mule deer working group members). Authors then incorporate comments for 3 months and the whole package will be reviewed by a professional copy editor. MDWG is serving as an editorial board to make decisions.

Implementation of Secretarial Order 3362

Year 3 State Action Plans are optional, but states are encouraged to refine corridors with new information as it becomes available (Due September 14, 2020). NFWF funds for habitat improvement are available again this year (\$3.1 Million, which is a million more than last year). USDA-USFS contributed this year so projects are eligible on USFS land. The first 2 years of SO3362 associated NFWF grants funded 67 projects in 11 states through 27 grants and 40 Partners for Fish and Wildlife projects:

- 39 fence related projects
- 21 invasive species projects
- 8 conservation easements
- 5 land management or fire rehabilitation
- 2 positions for increased capacity

Implementation of SO3362 the last 2 years also included \$6.4 million provided to the states for their identified research priorities (\$5.6 million from FWS science applications with BLM providing \$875K). An annual report from Casey Stemler forthcoming with documentation of the accomplishments thus far.

Corridor Mapping Team Update

Following signing of SO3362 the USGS created a Corridor Mapping Team to provide technical assistance to western states working to map elk, mule deer, and pronghorn corridors using GPS data. Based out of the Wyoming Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit, the team consists of USGS scientists working alongside spatial analysts employed by, or embedded within, participating state agencies. The 2019 USGS Migration Report will be released late summer/early fall and will include 26 corridors, 16 migration routes, 25 stopovers, and 9 winter ranges mapped.

Revisit MDWG Statement of Purpose

The original Statement of Purpose for the MDWG was written in 1998 and needs updating to better reflect what the group is doing. The MDWG will be working together on this update and will bring a proposed revision back to the directors for approval.

Revisions to Existing Fact Sheets

Some of the fact sheets have been out long enough that there might be updated information we could include to better inform or update the topic. The MDWG will be reviewing all past fact sheets for needed updates. This will not include wordsmithing and grammar, but rather only cases where substantial updates are needed to keep up with the state of our knowledge on the topic.

Deer/Elk Workshop Update

The venue has been set for the 2021 WAFWA Deer and Elk Workshop in Asilomar, California, May 17-20, 2021. A draft schedule is being finalized with the help of the MDWG. The MDWG helped provide ideas for special sessions and key note speakers. Suggestions included: Urban deer issues in the West, diseases other than CWD, corridors/connectivity, growing impact of recreation, capture myopathy, habitat carrying capacity/managing population size, technology in the hunting field, and threats to mule deer (social media, trophy fixation, shrinking opportunity for average hunter).

Website update

WAFWA is in the process of converting the existing website to a new one and so the MDWG is waiting for that before updating the many things that need to be updated on our pages.

WAFWA NextCloud

This is a server the MDWG can use to store and share documents and collaborate on document editing. NextCloud is more secure than Google drive, but we need to clarify that NextCloud is secure from public records requests and FOIA requests that will allow entities to request information without the originating agency having some input into what might be sensitive information. Different agencies have different laws that govern the sharing of information so we just need to make sure there are no additional vulnerabilities for states, provinces, and territories storing their information in a central location. Chanda Pettie is checking with the WAFWA attorney for confirmation.

Highway Bill Update (Ed Arnett, TRCP)

All 11 states listed in SO3362 identified roads/highways as a key threat on their state action plans. There is some resistance by Dept of Transportation to establishing dedicated funding in the bill. Competition among various priorities: some DOT's may not be prioritizing wildlife above other issues. State DOTs seem to prefer flexible, well-funded programs most don't care for additional process or dedicated programs specific to wildlife. Several federal and state sources of funds are available to DOT's (mainly funded by gas-taxes), competitive grants, special programs (innovation, safety, tribal, others). The Current highway bill expires Sept 30th and the new 2020 transportation bill is now being drafted. Senate bill passed unanimously out of EPW committee: 21-0. Senate version includes a competitive pilot grant program for \$250 million over 5-years dedicated to wildlife crossings. House T&I committee released their draft bill that does include a pilot grant program, but it did not have dedicated program for wildlife. Just recently, there was an amendment that does include 'dedicated' funding to wildlife but it apportions funds to all 50 states via a formula that would leave states like WY or SD with minimal funds, and it has a loophole allowing state DOTs to use these funds for other priorities. Highway bill now goes to conference committee later this summer and many groups will continue advocating for the senate language with a dedicated pilot grant program for wildlife crossings. Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership and 43 other groups sent a letter of support advocating for dedicated funding in the next highway bill. They also recommended: New "innovation fund" for fish and wildlife connectivity (at least \$50 million annually), remove \$10 million dollar cap for wildlife

projects from FLTP, increase forest road funding to \$250 million and reauthorize USFS legacy roads & Trails, and continue investment in Federal Lands Access Program to enhance public recreational access.

Collar censor time after capture

The MDWG spent a considerable amount of time discussing the time after capture that researchers should censor their survival data. For a period of time after capture (generally 2-4 weeks) study animals may suffer higher (and unrepresentative) mortality because of complications or outright injury from the capture. The MDWG will be assembling more information about this and it may be a topic of discussion at the 2021 Deer and Elk Workshop.

Energy Development Guidelines

The original MDWG Energy Development Guidelines were produced in 2011. Our guidelines may still apply for wind, solar, and geothermal, but the state of our knowledge for oil/gas development has improved and more research is still being done. In our oil and gas development section, well pad densities were the metric to define high, medium, and low impacts to mule deer. The information from more recent research, particularly Hall Sawyer's work on disturbance levels shows that other metrics of surface disturbance would be better to define impacts. MDWG discussed if we were ready to revise these guidelines. We decided to make a slow rolling start to the revision to start updating wind, solar, geothermal information and assembling updated oil/gas information, but to not get out ahead of Wyoming's upcoming new energy development guidelines that will be based on research that is still ongoing by Hall Sawyer and Jerod Merkle. We will take Wyoming's lead to finish our revision, just as we did with the first set of guidelines in 2011.

Video Clips of MDWG Fact Sheets

The MDWG is working with the video experts of several WAFWA member agencies to produce 40-second videos addressing the issues we write about in our fact sheets. These could be shared on social media (including by NGOs like MDF) and agency's websites. Arizona, Utah, Oregon, and possibly Washington will work on videos before the February meeting.

Mule Deer Foundation Update (Steve Belinda)

MDF continues to produce a Podcast and will be using MDWG members and content to help inform the public. Related to this is a project where MDF would like to do 1-2 minute interviews with experts to address topics the MDWG has published on. MDF will be rescheduling the Western Deer Summit but not sure when yet (it was scheduled for mid-May but postponed). MDF is going through internal planning on how we can be more effective in the work we do. MDF is focusing on priority landscapes/herds and working in coordination with states and federal partners. One of the things they are looking at is to identify cross boundary migratory herds with grants pending to do project work in those areas. Jesse Shallow is the new MDF Idaho cooperative biologist, implementation of projects identified in their action plan. This spring MDF secured \$125,000 for projects in 6 states and those projects came right out of SO3362 state action plans.

Categorical Exclusion in Farm Bill

MDWG discussed the intent of the CatEx that was included in the 2018 Farm Bill (*Sage Grouse and Mule Deer Restoration Act* (Section 8611)). There is some confusion about where (geographically) this applies to improving mule deer habitat. Karl Malcolm (USFS) said the language on CatEx might suggest that it is limited to sage brush type

ecosystems. Linda Cardenas (BLM) said that her agency took a literal reading of the CatEx, only interpreting that it applies to sagebrush communities at this time. BLM is currently working on its own CatEx which will be broader. They would like to expand their interpretation of the Farm Bill CatEx. Steve Belinda said the intent of the CatEx was for all habitats. If that is not clear enough then maybe we need a letter from congressional staff saying where CatEx can be applied for mule deer. John Shivik (USFS) encouraged that because it is being interpreted as a sage brush ecosystem focus.

General Discussion

- MDWG will hold a virtual meeting this fall to continue our work.
- National Deer Alliance has merged with Quality Deer Management Association (QDMA). Unclear about how mule deer might be associated with that merger. Miles Moretti is on the NDA board.