



ROLE OF PRIVATE LANDS IN MULE DEER MANAGEMENT

Fact Sheet #36

OVERVIEW

Mule deer occur in northern Mexico and 24 western states, Canadian provinces, and territories. Private lands comprise more than 60% of mule deer range throughout North America, which underscores the importance of private lands and landowners to mule deer. Managing mule deer on private lands presents unique challenges, but these are outweighed by the potential benefits for large-scale and strategic management opportunities possible when conservation organizations and state/provincial wildlife agencies partner with private landowners.

BACKGROUND

The mix of public and private ownership in each state and province can vary. For example, the majority of the Great Plains is privately owned, while public lands are a much larger proportion of most western states and provinces. In the West, historical patterns of land settlement resulted in some key mule deer habitat on private lands where most human settlement and agricultural development occurred in lower elevation valleys. The same things that make productive agricultural and valued residential areas (water, deep productive soils and mild winter temperatures) make them attractive to mule deer. Private lands often overlap critical winter range and migration/stopover habitats. How these lands are managed can be key to herd productivity. Private landowners serve an important role as stewards of mule deer and their habitat.



Photo by: Levi Hefjefinger

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

While there are many challenges involved in managing mule deer on private lands, one of the most common is agricultural damage. Native habitat and agricultural development on private land often provide an abundance of food and cover for mule deer and other wildlife. If damage to crops by mule deer and other wildlife is substantial enough, crop yields are reduced impacting an operation's income. Wildlife managers use a variety of methods to minimize damage and maintain socially acceptable mule deer populations. Managers implementing depredation management tools must consider hunter, landowner, and other social inputs. Connecting landowners experiencing crop depredation with hunters who desire more mule deer in the same landscape can help directly reduce depredation problems, improve communication and understanding between stakeholders, and may change perceptions.

Habitat loss and degradation on both public and private lands can influence mule deer populations. Habitat degradation from excessive grazing can occur on all lands, but in general, private landowners have greater flexibility in livestock grazing management. When combined with habitat potential on private lands, it is clear that private lands are essential to maintaining healthy habitats for mule deer. Invasive plant encroachment such as mesquite, juniper, and cheatgrass often degrades mule deer habitat and landowners struggle with this issue on their private properties as well. Habitat loss on private lands from

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energy or agricultural development can have negative impacts to mule deer; however, some impacts can be mitigated through proper planning and strategies prior to development.

Economics is a major driver in the management of habitat on private lands. For example, ranchers must weigh the cost:benefit of a habitat project in terms of how it affects beef production. Some landowners have the financial means to conduct habitat projects regardless of the return on investment. Many landowners, however, can only invest in those projects that will provide an increase in their revenue stream regardless of their desire to benefit mule deer. Agencies use different approaches to assist landowners in improving habitat and management for mule deer, such as financial and technical assistance through the federal farm bill or state cost-share and incentive-based programs. Cost-share programs usually provide landowners with only a portion of the required funds for conducting habitat work or grazing deferment. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as the Mule Deer Foundation, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, and local conservation groups provide cost-share funds to landowners for habitat improvements on private lands. Other incentives used by agencies include landowner-specific hunting opportunities such as special landowner tags and/or longer hunting seasons. Incentive-based voluntary programs developed in some areas have had substantial positive impacts on mule deer habitat management through agency-approved wildlife management plans.

Landowners hold the key to accessing wildlife on their private lands, as well as landlocked public lands. In some jurisdictions, landowners can diversify their operations by charging hunters to access their property thus supplementing their annual income. However, overall public access may be reduced or financially out of reach for some hunters under such a scenario. Agencies and some NGOs have developed programs to incentivize willing landowners to allow the public on or through their private properties. Incentives may include direct payment or additional hunting tags for the landowner. Many ranches are now being marketed as recreational properties rather than traditional working lands. Whether directly charging hunters for access or entering into agreements for public access, landowners may add value to a property's financial base by managing for healthy wildlife populations.

Conservation easements have proven to be instrumental in preventing fragmentation and disturbance of key mule deer habitat. Conservation easements are entirely voluntary and work by providing willing private landowners with funds and sometimes tax credits to not subdivide or develop their properties. This is a win-win situation for mule deer and landowners. In many cases, conservation easements have kept large properties intact and in the same ownership for generations.

SUMMARY

Private lands and private landowners serve an important role in conserving mule deer and their habitat throughout North America. Keeping traditional agriculture operations economically viable maintains open space which is vital to sustaining healthy mule deer populations. Understanding a private landowner's goals, motivations, and concerns as well as agency objectives benefits mule deer. While there are both challenges and opportunities involved in managing a public wildlife resource on private lands, collaboration between state and provincial wildlife managers, private landowners, and other conservation partners can provide far more substantial benefits for mule deer populations and habitats than working alone.

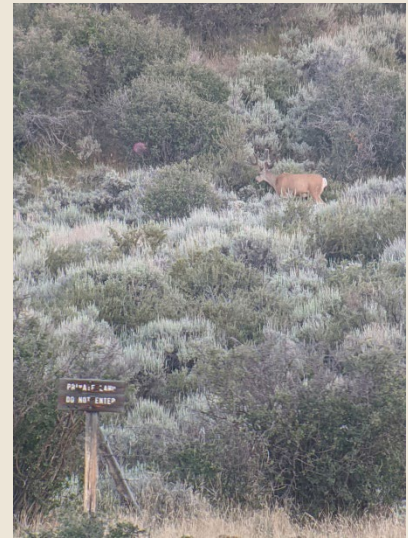


Photo by: Ken Clegg

More information on mule deer can be found at muledeerworkinggroup.com

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