

# Coalition for Nevada's Wildlife

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## Mule Deer Enhancement

### Introduction

This discussion is in response to the formation of statewide and local Mule Deer Enhancement Committees and specifically to Washoe County.

Mule deer populations have plummeted in Washoe County over the last twenty years and particularly the past decade having lost 50 percent of an already depressed population in the last 10 years. The situation is so dire that many feel that recovery is impossible.

The formation of the Mule Deer Enhancement Committee and Subcommittees represent our last hope of reversing this alarming decline. The following discussion outlines limiting factors and identifies potential solutions

### Predation

We feel predation is presently one, if not the greatest, limiting factor to mule deer populations in Washoe County. Mountain lion populations are at historic highs for unknown reasons, although many factors could be cited. A few decades ago, mountain lions were either completely absent from large segments of western Nevada, or extremely scarce in numbers. A wildlife text published in 1946 shows lion populations were limited to eastern Nevada and the Sierras. Well known trappers and guides such as Tony Diebold of Gerlach never caught a lion in coyote or bobcat sets over decades. NDOW biologists such as Willie Molini never witnessed a lion in northern Washoe County outside of the Carson Range between Reno and Lake Tahoe. Hunters and trappers finding a lion track in the snow was a rare novelty that was a subject of "bar talk"

What has happened in the past 50 years almost defies logic. Widespread use of poisons was ended in the 1960's. Lions are now a protected species in neighboring California and the use of dogs prohibited for lion hunting in neighboring Oregon. Alternative prey species such as bighorn sheep and antelope have been reintroduced with increasing populations. Feral horses and burros are hundreds of percent over Appropriate Management Levels (AML). Has there been created a "Perfect Storm" that created the abundance of lions?

Let there be no doubt that an abundance of lions exist. A single trapper just outside Reno caught eleven (11) different lions (including 4 adult males) in a few months in a few miles between Spanish Peak and Pond Rock, a distance of less than 10 miles. Wildlife Services removed 17 lions around a single domestic sheep flock in a few weeks period. Deer and

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Chukar hunters are seeing lions during outdoor excursions. Such a population of lions cannot help but have an adverse impact on deer herds.

Control of lion populations by sport hunting alone is not viable. Few sportsmen can afford a \$6,500.00 lion hunt on a regular basis, since a guide with dogs is the only efficient method of take. Furthermore, hunters shelling out big bucks want an old trophy male, not effective for population control. The allowed quota of take is never reached. Predator projects through Wildlife Services are expensive and subject to the bureaucratic process of both state and federal agencies. We suggest a greatly simplified approach as follows:

- 1) Area biologists should already know key mule deer habitat, both summer and winter ranges.
- 2) When licensed trappers incidentally catch a lion, they notify NDOW to dispatch the lion. The legality of this has been verified.
- 3) Selectivity of euthanasia (i.e. Lactating females or outside mule deer areas) could be made.
- 4) Lions up to a selected quota could thus be removed in a cost effective and efficient manner.

Since the previous predator project, performed in Area 014, was an unquestionable success with a documented population increase of nearly 80 percent in ten years, a new project should be tailored for this unit. In addition to removing incidentally trapped lions as described above, Wildlife Services should be enlisted. With planned GPS collaring of mule deer, mortality signals should immediately be investigated and if lion caused, the lion could be removed by hounds, traps, snares etc.

We feel predator control is the most effective tool that could make an immediate difference in deer survival and recovery and should therefore be given the highest priority.

### Feral Horse and Burros

The over population of feral horses and burros is also one of the greatest threats to healthy wildlife populations particularly mule deer. Dozens of scientific studies verify this statement. Government has failed miserably in their mission to protect our native wildlife resources by not providing a thriving and balanced ecosystem and healthy rangeland.

Feral horses are large, strong animals that outcompete and intimidate native wildlife. Not only do overpopulations deplete forage and monopolize water sources, large animals simply intimidate smaller animals. Deer and antelope are displaced into lower value habitat resulting in lower body conditions and the result is lower recruitment rates and ultimately fewer animals. Recent collaring efforts in unit 014 not only found an alarming low number of deer, but also documented all captured does were in very poor body condition, this in a time of year when they should have fat reserves. Numerous studies show that when large animals move in, smaller animals move out.

Neither the 1971 Wild Horse and Burro protection Act, nor its 1973 Amendment are being adhered to in this mismanagement fiasco. These laws mandate horse and burro populations

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are to be managed in balance with other uses to maintain a healthy range land and that excess numbers be removed. Animals not adopted are to be disposed of. However each appropriation bill through Congress prohibits disposal of excess animals and fails to appropriate sufficient funding to remove animals down to Appropriate Management Levels (AML).

There is little hope that Congress will see the light since wild horse advocacy groups are an extremely well organized lobby that is funded worldwide. Well meaning efforts at educating the public will always fall short in the face of wild horse advocacy propaganda that claims wild horses are being mistreated and are on the brink of extinction. People simply want to believe the worst and politicians (even our own Nevada delegation) simply do not have the political will to do what is necessary.

The problem is at crisis levels. There are over 50,000 feral horses in Nevada with an AML under 13,000. Populations double every three to four (3-4) years. Some of the damage to rangeland is almost non-repairable.

We believe the only recourse is through the courts. The State of Wyoming has previously successfully filed litigation and was granted a court order to reduce and maintain their populations at AML. Litigation should come from the state; however this requires politicians with backbone. Past Wildlife Commissions have made this recommendation, the present Commission should do likewise. This question should be posed to all candidates for governor and attorney general. An election year is the perfect time to make politicians take a position. If the state fails to act, perhaps sportsmen groups should form an alliance with ranching and rural counties. We can only hope that if private interests are forced to take the initiative and file suit that the state will at least intervene on our behalf. It is long past the time to take action.

Management of wild horse populations is probably more important and effective to the recovery of mule deer populations than habitat improvement projects.

#### Augmentation

Mule deer populations are at such low levels throughout much of Washoe County that a discussion of augmentation should be initiated. There is resistance from NDOW on this topic although other western states have at least tried this methodology.

Nevada has successfully transplanted all three (3) subspecies of big horn sheep, antelope, elk, and mountain goats across state and international borders. It is understood that wildlife diseases are a constant concern; however we are not aware of any data within the state that would preclude consideration of this alternative.

Hunt quotas are, and should be, continually reduced with the threat of future closures. The discussion of augmentation should be initiated.

#### Habitat

Healthy rangelands are key to healthy wildlife populations – this is a given. Good forage and ample water resources result in healthy does that have healthy fawns that gain ample weight for survival through the first winter. Such factors as predation, drought, and competition

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with feral horses stress wildlife and result in lower recruitment rates. Habitat improvement projects are important, even a vital tool; however the results are often not realized for years.

NDOW and BLM have diligently completed a wide variety of projects in Washoe County ranging from Pinion-Juniper thinning, wildfire reseeding, spring riparian fencing, and water developments. NDOW is presently putting as many projects on the ground as they have staff to plan, permit, design, and manage implementation. We applaud both their efforts as well as the results on the landscape which are readily observable.

### Regulation and Bureaucracy

Regulation and bureaucracy continually impede what should be accomplished in a common sense manner. The following list is but a few examples:

- Hesitancy of all-out fire suppression just because the area has wilderness designation.
- Not using non-native species in restoration/re-seeding projects, although plants like kocia have much greater sprouting success in many areas and is great forage for deer, antelope, and livestock.
- Reluctance to permit badly needed water developments in wilderness areas.
- The inability to rehabilitate old, decadent sage brush stands with no understory because the current Range Management Plan (RMP) did not recognize the need.
- The reluctance to even consider private citizens in badly needed efforts like follow-up of mortality collar signals or predator-control with assistance by trappers.
- The refusal to even consider any augmentation of mule deer populations in spite of the fact that we have successfully relocated big horn sheep, antelope, elk, and mountain goats within the state and across state and international borders.
- Regulations that allow doe hunts in areas that have decreasing populations.

We need biologists and administrators who continually think of ways to make things happen, NOT reasons why it can't. We need programmatic EA's that help streamline the process. We need to reward those with initiative, those who actually get things done rather than let the process beat them down.

### Closing

The Washoe County Subcommittee should more aptly be named "Recovery subcommittee" since population levels have plunged so low. This is our chance and perhaps last chance to make a difference, and thus we are forced to make bold proposals that would be otherwise unnecessary if healthy populations exist. We must think outside the box and come up with ways to implement bold measures. We simply don't have a decade to study the problem; we must act. Not all of our suggestions have guaranteed success, but at least we did something. We are not willing to accept the failed measures of the past.

Thank you for your consideration.

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## **The Coalition for Nevada's Wildlife**

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