**Recommended Conservation Considerations and Reference Resources for Selected Big Game Species on Idaho BLM Lands**

**I. Introduction**

The primary purpose of this document is to recommend conservation guidance and reference resources for selected big game species in Idaho. Secretarial Order 3362 (SO 3362) directs BLM to apply site-specific management activities that conserve or restore habitat necessary to sustain local and regional big-game populations, with a focus on elk, mule deer and pronghorn. Bighorn sheep, while not a focal species in SO 3362, are included in this IB as well, due to their Special Status Species designation in Idaho. The implementation of appropriate seasonal timing restrictions and/or relevant habitat management activities and guidelines will promote big game habitat conservation and minimize disturbance to migrating or wintering animals.

The BLM is the agency with primary authority, jurisdiction, and responsibility for managing fish and wildlife habitat on public lands within Idaho administered under federal laws and U.S. Department of the Interior regulations. The Idaho Department of Fish and Game (IDFG) has the primary authority, jurisdiction and responsibility to manage and control fish and wildlife populations in Idaho. Under the Idaho BLM and IDFG Master Memorandum of Understanding (BLM MOU ID-SO-2019-01, Section V.C.8), both the BLM and IDFG agree to “Coordinate to foster and promote the conservation and/or improvement of big game winter range and migration corridors in Idaho, especially where associated with sagebrush communities.”

**II. Big Game Seasonal Habitats**

Offices should use the most recently updated IDFG big game seasonal habitat maps or models that are available or coordinate any site-specific changes in mapped habitat with regional IDFG offices. Modeling, mapping, and updating of big game seasonal ranges and movement corridors by IDFG is ongoing. The latest data will be provided to Idaho BLM during periodic Idaho Fish and Wildlife Information System data exports.

**III. Timing Restrictions**

Construction or other permitted human activities in big game seasonal habitats may disturb animals resulting in flight, physiological or psychological stress, increased vigilance and disruption of normal foraging, breeding, sheltering, or movement out of the area or avoidance. To reduce disturbance, seasonal restrictions within big game winter ranges in Idaho typically will apply as follows, or as identified in land use plans (LUP). This guidance does not supersede existing land use plan decisions. These dates, as specified, are general in nature for purposes of this document, and may be adjusted as needed in coordination with Idaho Department of Fish and Game regional offices.

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| **Species/ Season** | **Lambing/Calving/Fawning** | **Winter** |
| Bighorn Sheep | April 15 to June 15 | November 15-April 30 |
| Elk | May 1-June 30 | November 15-April 30 |
| Mule Deer | May 1-June 30 | November 15-April 30 |
| Pronghorn | May 15 through June 30 | November 15-April 30 |

**IV. Waivers and Exceptions to Timing Restrictions:**

Offices should strive to build seasonal timing considerations and/or restrictions directly into land use plan wildlife habitat objectives and, where appropriate, into project level NEPA analyses and Decisions. For transparency, informing the public in NEPA that exceptions and waivers to seasonal restrictions may be granted in certain circumstances may be appropriate. Where seasonal restrictions prescribed in a land use plan are not appropriate for a particular project, a waiver should be incorporated into the NEPA document.

For projects or other actions subject to pre-existing rights (e.g., mineral leases), guidance and big game habitat delineations established during the original authorization would be applied unless changes in mapping can be coordinated with project proponents and IDFG. For locatable minerals projects, work with operators for proposed exploration and mine developments to minimize adverse effects (roads, acres of disturbance, avoidance of critical seasons etc.) on select big game wildlife species and their habitats.

**Waivers.** A waiver to a seasonal timing restriction may be appropriate when it is determined by BLM, in coordination with IDFG, that the long term benefit of the proposed project or activity to big game (e.g., a proposed fence modification, habitat restoration treatment or planting), likely outweighs the impacts of short term disturbance, or in rare circumstances where the need to mediate impacts to other higher priority resources (e.g., a T/E species, eagles) outweighs big game concerns. In such cases, the waiver and associated documentation should be incorporated into the NEPA analysis and Decision or a new Decision may be warranted.

**Exceptions**. An exception is a one-time exemption to the timing restrictions for a particular project and is determined on a case-by–case basis subsequent to project authorization.

The intent of allowing an exception, subsequent to a Decision, is to eliminate a restriction when it has no applicability or is not needed to avoid impacts to wildlife, such as in situations when animals are not present in the project area, due to a mild winter. Exceptions to seasonal restrictions may be considered and granted by the authorized officer with input from staff biologists, and in coordination with IDFG. The general workflow for processing requests for exceptions will be as follows:

1. A request for an exception to a seasonal wildlife restriction must be initiated in writing (via letter or email) by the operator or project proponent (or appropriate representative) to the BLM field office manager/ authorized officer. Requests generated internally (e.g., for BLM projects) may also be appropriate. The unpredictability of factors such as weather, animal movement and animal condition preclude analysis and processing of specific requests for exception very far in advance of the time periods in question. In all cases, the request should include: 1) a description of the activity needing exception, 2) a description of the need and rationale for the exception, and 3) the date or dates for the requested exception.
2. The BLM field office biologist, in coordination with the appropriate IDFG staff, will review the exception request and supporting information, along with the *Factors to Consider in Exceptions* shown below. Analyses of requests for exceptions will include validation of the seasonal restriction (e.g., appropriateness, animal presence). The BLM field office biologist will then provide a recommendation in writing to the field office manager as expeditiously as is practical.
3. A final determination for granting an exception to a seasonal wildlife restriction will be made by the Authorized Officer, in consideration of the biologist’s recommendation and consistent with applicable law, regulation, policy, and applicable land use plan(s). The rationale for granting or not granting the exception must be documented in the relevant case file or project file/official record, including the biologists’ findings and recommendation.
4. Notification to the applicant will occur in writing, via letter or email from the field office manager or their representative.
5. Exceptions may be cancelled by the field office manager/ authorized officer in the event that local conditions change suddenly in a manner that places wildlife at unacceptable risk. For example, a temporary exception for construction activities in big game winter range granted on a Monday could be cancelled if heavy snowfall on the following Wednesday results in an unanticipated concentration of mule deer in the project area. In such cases, the field office manager or their representative will contact the project proponent as soon as possible to discuss the situation and negotiate an appropriate resolution.



**Factors to Consider in Exceptions:** Following are examples of factors to evaluate when considering waivers, modifications and/or exceptions to seasonal restrictions. One or more may be applicable.

1. Animal presence or absence (i.e., high or low abundance)
2. Animal condition
3. Weather severity
4. Snow conditions (depth, crusting, longevity)
5. Seasonal weather pattern
6. Wind chill factor (indication of animal’s energy use)
7. Air temperatures and variation
8. Duration of winter conditions
9. Forecasts (long range for duration of winter)
10. Habitat condition and availability
11. Forage condition (good or poor)
12. Competition (livestock and other wildlife)
13. Forage availability/accessibility (amount of forage, snow depth/crusting)
14. Whether or not there is suitable and ample forage immediately available and accessible nearby that is not being used
15. Site location
16. Presence of thermal and security (hiding) cover and other related factors
17. Proportion of winter range affected
18. Topographic Features (sight distances)
19. Location of site within winter range or migration corridor (edge? center? etc.)
20. Whether there is other activity in the area and whether it is likely to increase the cumulative adverse impact
21. Timing
22. Early in winter season vs. mid- or late winter? (e.g., animals may have depleted energy reserves)
23. Will migration movements or behavior likely be impeded?
24. Kind and duration of disruptive activity expected (short term vs. longer term)

**V. Travel Management Considerations**

During travel management planning, wildlife biologists and recreation staff should coordinate closely with the IDFG Regional Office(s) to identify and establish appropriate seasonal timing dates and restrictions, and travel management closures, where appropriate, to protect big game.

In the absence of LUP or TMP guidance, consider educational outreach and/or requests for voluntary compliance to reduce disturbance to big game during sensitive seasons or emergent situations, such as an unusually harsh winter. Where more formal restrictions are warranted, wildlife biologists and recreation staff should coordinate closely to ensure proposed restrictions or closures comply with applicable LUP decisions, Travel and Transportation Management Plan Decisions, CFR regulations, and BLM policies to ensure appropriate application of proposed travel restrictions. Consider the timing of public notifications, comment periods, and document preparation if travel management restrictions are necessary.

**VI. Emergency Winter Feeding**

BLM field offices should consider requests by IDFG for emergency winter feeding of big game that may occur under extreme winter weather conditions. BLM field office staff will conduct site visits, as needed, and incorporate, in coordination with IDFG, any appropriate measures and design features to minimize impacts to resources. Considerations include:

1. Avoid concentrating animals on good quality habitat. Co-locate emergency feeds sites with existing disturbance where possible.
2. Avoid areas of increased human activity to avoid disturbing big game at feed sites.
3. Consider adjacent private land concerns.
4. Require the use of certified weed free feed.
5. Use BLM Categorical Exclusion A. Fish and Wildlife 4, *Temporary emergency feeding of wildlife during periods of extreme adverse weather conditions*.

**VII. Habitat Management Considerations**

Offices should work toward improving the quality or effectiveness of big game seasonal habitats where opportunities exist, especially in Idaho’s Priority Areas, as delineated in the most recent Idaho Action Plan, *Implementation of Department of the Interior Secretarial Order 3362: Improving Habitat Quality in Western Big-Game Winter Range and Migration Corridors*. Washington Office Information Bulletin IB 2019-005 provides a list of potential management activities and other resources to consider. In most Idaho field offices, there are existing fence segments, water developments or vegetation communities in big game habitats that can benefit from proactive management actions. Additional considerations and helpful resources are summarized below.

1. **Fencing:** Promote wildlife-friendly fencing that meets containment objectives but allows for safe wildlife passage to prevent barriers and minimize entanglement. Recommendations include:
2. Reference BLM Fence Handbook H-1741-1 for appropriate fence standards (e.g., number of wires, smooth wire, stays, spacing, and maximum height).
3. Review recent literature or other guidelines for fence design and location where consistent with bureau standards and land use plan guidance.
4. In addition to fence standards, consider the geographic layout of fences in the broader context to analyze how they may impact big game seasonal habitats and migration corridors.
5. Promote fence options that minimize interactions with big game at both the broad and site-scale. Consider the application of temporary let-down fences where infrastructure occurs in established migration corridors and alternative locations are not feasible.
6. All new fences should be designed to minimize impacts on big game to the extent practicable while still meeting the containment or exclusion objectives of the fence.
7. Existing fences should be evaluated for potential modification where documented problems exist or are likely, in consideration of other workloads and priorities.
8. When planning fence modifications or removals, offices should consider using CX authority where appropriate. See BLM CX A. Fish and Wildlife 1, *Modification of existing fences to provide improved wildlife ingress and egress.*
9. **Water Developments (Spring developments and guzzlers)**

Design water developments to minimize disturbance to big game and sensitive habitats to the extent practicable. Recommendations include:

1. Wildlife access and use of water developments should be considered in project design. Consider design features to minimize water quality issues, disease transmission, and potential drowning hazards.
2. If new wildlife water guzzlers are being considered, coordinate with the appropriate IDFG regional office on the justification and options for placement.
3. Consider installing drain valves on guzzlers or consider how water will be pumped if water quality concerns are identified.
4. If metal tanks are used, consider options to minimize impacts to water quality from rust.
5. Consider ingress/egress access to guzzlers and design wildlife water developments to prevent big game from walking on buried tanks or collection aprons to the extent possible.
6. Promote the best possible access by target animals and minimize predation risk.
7. If placement of guzzlers or other water features in new locations is being considered, carefully evaluate the need based on factors such as proximity to existing manmade or natural water sources and whether water is indeed limiting for big game. Incorporate appropriate design features and monitoring and maintenance schedules as well.
8. Follow applicable land use plans, policy, and BLM Water Developments Handbook H-1741-3 to improve successful implementation. Consider removing dilapidated or unmaintained/unneeded guzzlers.
9. When planning modifications to water developments, offices should consider using CX authority where appropriate. See BLM CX A. Fish and Wildlife 2. *Minor modification of water developments to improve or facilitate wildlife use* (e.g., modify enclosure fence, install flood valve, or reduce ramp access angle).
10. Consider applicable recommendations in USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service Idaho Technical Note 23, *Wildlife Watering Facilities*. Available at <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/nrcs144p2_042076.pdf>
11. **Vegetation Management:** All vegetation management efforts, including ES & BAR, should consider the seasonal habitat requirements of big game, especially bighorn sheep, elk, mule deer and pronghorn. Field office staff should work closely with IDFG as well as review applicable land use plan decisions, peer reviewed literature, and appropriate habitat management guidelines to address limiting factors in seasonal habitats and/or migration corridors to the extent practicable.

1. **Habitat Management Guidelines and Related References:** Big game habitat management guidelines, considerations and scientific literature continue to evolve. Some helpful references that are currently available for consideration include, but are not limited to, the following:

1. BLM References
2. Information Bulletin BLM WO 2019-005
3. Bighorn sheep Manual 1730
4. Fence Handbook H-1741-1
5. Water developments Handbook H-1741-3
6. Mule Deer and Sage-Grouse Categorical Exclusion (IM 2020-027 and attachment)
7. Integrated Vegetation Management Handbook H-1740-2

Burned Area Emergency Stabilization and Rehabilitation Handbook H-1742-1

1. USGS References
2. Pyke, D.A., Chambers, J.C., Pellant, M., Knick, S.T., Miller, R,F., Beck, J.L., Doescher, P.S., Schupp, E.W., Roundy, B.A., Brunson, M., and McIver, J.D., 2015. Restoration Handbook for Sagebrush Steppe Ecosystems with Emphasis on Greater Sage-Grouse Habitat: Part 1. Concepts for understanding and applying restoration. U.S. Geological Survey Circular 1416, 44 p., https://pubs.er.usgs.gov/publication/cir1416
3. Pyke, D.A., Knick, S.T., Chambers, J.C., Pellant, M., Miller, R,F., Beck, J.L., Doescher, P.S., Schupp, E.W., Roundy, B.A., Brunson, M., and McIver, J.D., 2015. Restoration Handbook for Sagebrush Steppe Ecosystems with Emphasis on Greater Sage-Grouse Habitat: Part 2. Landscape level restoration decisions. U.S. Geological Survey Circular 1418, 21 p., http://dx.doi.org/10.3133/cir1418
4. Pyke, D.A., Chambers, J.C., Pellant, M., Miller, R,F., Beck, J.L., Doescher--, P.S., Roundy, B.A., Schupp, E.W., Knick, S.T., Brunson, M., and McIver, J.D., 2017. Restoration Handbook for Sagebrush Steppe Ecosystems with Emphasis on Greater Sage-Grouse Habitat: Part 3. Site level restoration decisions. U.S. Geological Survey Circular 1426, 62 p., <http://dx.doi.org/10.3133/cir1426>
5. Kauffman, M.J., Copeland, H.E., Berg, J., Bergen, S., Cole, E., Cuzzocreo, M., Dewey, S., Fattebert, J., Gagnon, Gelzer, E., Geremia, C., Graves, T., Hersey, K., Hurley, M., Kaiser, J., Meacham, J., Merkle, J., Middleton, A., Nuñez, T., Oates, B., Olson, D., Olson, L., Sawyer, H., Schroeder, C., Sprague, S., Steingisser, A., Thonhoff, M., 2020, Ungulate migrations of the western United States, Volume 1: U.S. Geological Survey Scientific Investigations Report 2020–5101, 119 p. <https://doi.org/10.3133/sir20205101>
6. Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies References
7. Mule Deer

<https://wafwa.org/publications/mdwg-publications/>

* Mule Deer Working Group Habitat Guidelines for Mule Deer
  + - 1. Intermountain West Ecoregion
      2. Northern Forest Ecoregion
* Mule Deer and Movement Barriers
* Mule Deer Conservation Issues and Challenges
* North American Mule Deer Conservation Plan
* Mule Deer: Changing Landscapes, Changing Perspectives
* Fact Sheets (winter feeding, fences, many more)
* Methods for Monitoring Mule Deer Populations
* Energy Development Guidelines for Mule Deer
* Predator relationships
* Predator Relationships with Black-Tailed and Mule Deer in North America
* Interactive maps
* Consideration of Disease Risks in Translocation of Deer by Wildlife Management Agencies
* Recommendations for Adaptive Management of Chronic Wasting Disease in the West

1. Pronghorn

* Pronghorn Management Guides <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/263199944_Pronghorn_Management_Guides_Fifth_edition>

1. Wild Sheep

<https://wafwa.org/publications/wswg-publications/>

* Bighorn Sheep Conservation Challenges and Management Strategies for the 21’st Century
* Recommendations for Domestic Sheep and Goat Management in Wild Sheep Habitat
* Pathogen and disease monitoring (several publications)
* Jurisdictional management plans (state and provincial)- query in search box
* Talking Points: Respiratory Disease in Wild Sheep

1. Idaho Department of Fish and Game References
2. Species Management Plans <https://idfg.idaho.gov/wildlife/management-plans>

* Mule Deer
* Elk
* Bighorn Sheep
* Pronghorn (pending ~2020)

1. Species Habitat Models (seasonal ranges and migration corridors)- subject to update (elk, mule deer) <https://data-idfggis.opendata.arcgis.com/search?q=ranges>

* Draft online maps may be view-only and subject to update.
* GIS data will be incorporated into biannual IDFG IFWIS database exports to BLM.

1. Idaho Action Plan: *Implementation of Department of the Interior Secretarial Order 3362: “Improving Habitat Quality in Western Big-Game Winter Range and Migration Corridors*. Idaho BLM offices should reference the latest Idaho Action Plan at:

<https://www.nfwf.org/programs/rocky-mountain-rangelands/improving-habitat-quality-western-big-game-winter-range-and-migration-corridors/state-action-plans>

* Secretarial Order No. 3362 directs the Department of Interior (DOI) to assist western tribes, private landowners, state fish and wildlife agencies, and state highway departments with conserving and managing priority big game winter ranges and migration corridors. Per SO 3362, the DOI coordinated with state wildlife agencies in 2018 to develop action plans identifying priority big game winter ranges, migration corridors, and corresponding management activities across jurisdictional boundaries. Plans are periodically updated.
* IDFG identified five Priority Areas in Idaho, based on the presence of key big game populations, locations of their corresponding winter ranges and migration habitats, and potential risks and threats to these populations. These Priority Areas are updated or refined periodically by IDFG and data are provided to Idaho BLM. Spatial data for the Priority Areas can be found on local SDE instances at: BDY\_OTH\_DOI3362PriorityAreas\_PUB\_UNK\_POLY or on the Idaho State Office server at: \loc\GIS\final\_data\wildlife\SO3362\_IDFG\_PriorityAreas
* The Action Plan describes winter ranges and migration routes, risks, threats, and additional information for each Priority Area.
* BLM offices should work closely with IDFG during land use plan revisions and project planning (including ES&BAR) to promote appropriate conservation actions in the Priority Areas, to the extent practical.
* BLM offices should also work to maintain or enhance winter ranges and/or migration routes that may occur outside the Priority Areas, where such opportunities exist.

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