

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

<b>Rifle Creek Deer Herd (DAU D-42)</b>	<b>GMU: 33</b>
<b>Posthunt Population:</b> Previous Objective: 7,700 - 9,400 deer; Estimate for 2020: 6,200	
<b>Preferred Alternative Objective:</b> 6,200 - 8,200	
<b>Posthunt Sex Ratio (Bucks:100 Does):</b> Previous Objective: 30 - 35; Posthunt 2020 observed: 21.5 modeled: 26.6.	
<b>Preferred Alternative Objective:</b> 25 - 32 Bucks:100 Does	

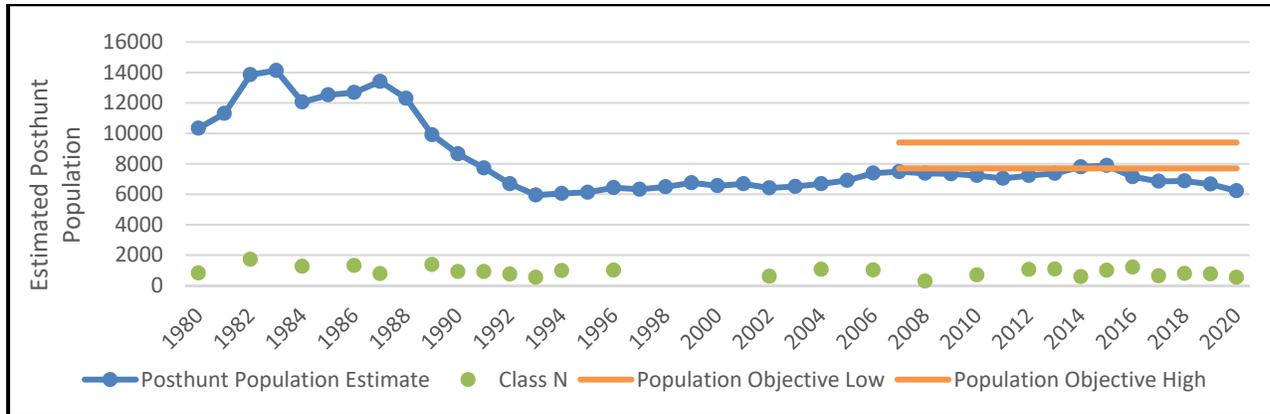


Figure 1. D-42 modeled post hunt population and objective range, 1980 - 2020.

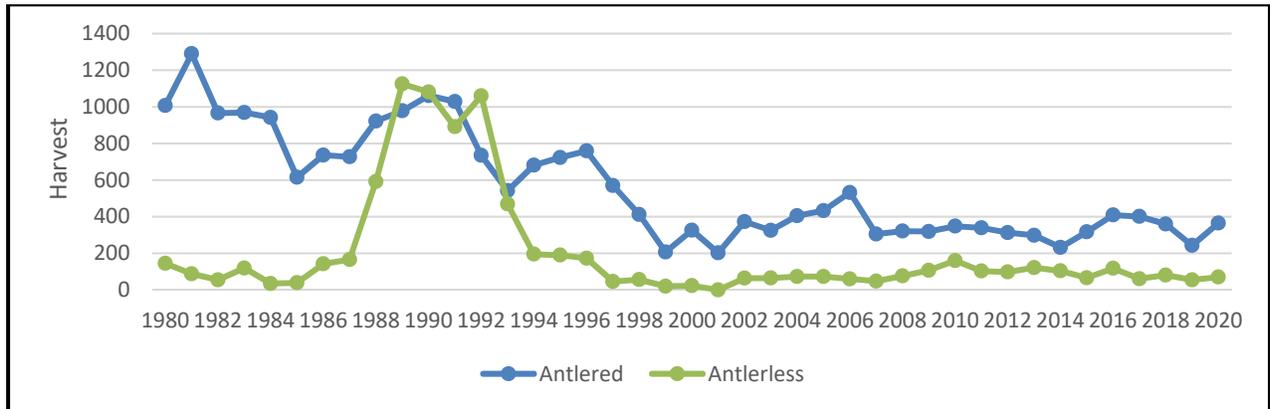


Figure 2. D-42 harvest estimates, 1980 - 2020.

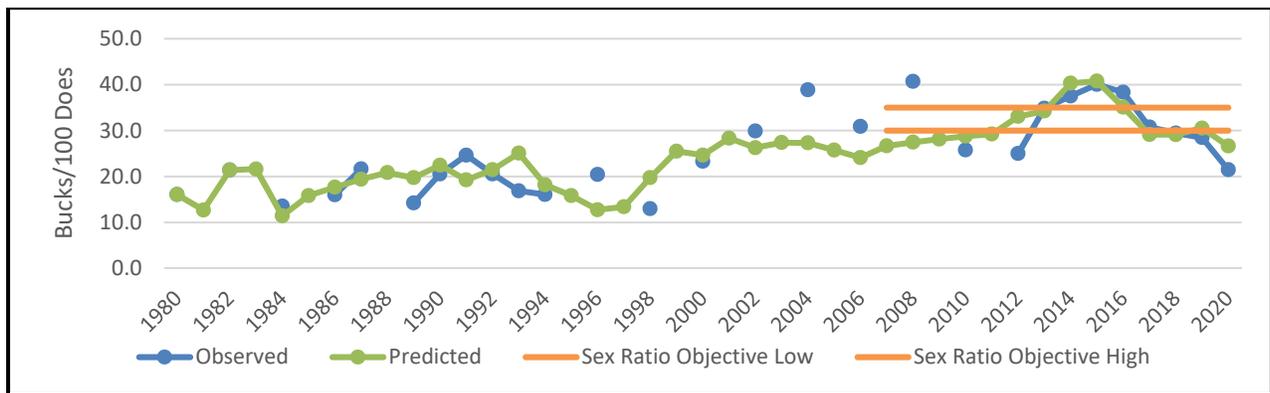


Figure 3. D-42 Observed and Modeled Bucks: 100 Does, 1980 - 2020.

## Background Information

The Rifle Creek deer DAU is located in west central Colorado and falls almost entirely within Garfield County except for a very small area within Rio Blanco County. D-42 consists entirely of Game Management Unit (GMU) 33. Approximately 74% of D-42 is public; 29% is managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and 45% is managed by the US Forest Service. State and federal agencies each own around 1% of D-42. Approximately 25% of the DAU is privately owned. Livestock grazing is an important land use on public and private lands, while hay and alfalfa are grown on private lands at lower elevations.

Mule deer occupy the entire DAU, migrating from low-elevation winter ranges to high-elevation summer ranges in response to available forage and snow conditions. Small resident herds live year-round at low elevations south of the hogback, relying on agricultural and low-density residential developments for forage.

Low fawn:doe ratios, high game damage claims, and poor forage conditions in the late 1980's led to intensive efforts to decrease the population size. The population size reduction was successful, but fawn: doe ratios are still low and forage conditions are not substantively better. The deer population in D-42 has been stagnant for nearly two decades.

## Significant Issues

Significant issues facing this deer herd include, disease, degraded habitats due to drought and over-utilization, recreational disturbance, residential development, long-term low fawn:doe ratios, and population stagnation. The habitat is fragmented and degraded throughout much of the herd's important ranges. Increases in residential development and recreational activities in the area leaves few areas free from human disturbance.

Mandatory testing in 2017 estimated the chronic wasting disease (CWD) prevalence at 10% in adult male deer, which is above the threshold to trigger management actions to reduce the prevalence. Stakeholders are concerned about the long-term effects of the disease on this herd.

## Management Objective Alternatives

Public involvement is a critical component of herd management planning, ensuring that hunters, landowners, and other interested stakeholders can participate in the development of management objectives for each herd. An initial survey of hunters, landowners and the general public was conducted to help identify issues and population and sex ratios objectives to be considered. In consideration of public interests and staff knowledge of the mule deer herd and management issues, a preferred alternative was identified and a draft plan was posted for public comment for 30 days. In addition, the plan was submitted to local BLM and USFS offices, as well as being presented to Garfield County Commissioners and local Habitat Partnership Program (HPP) committee.

In D-42, three alternatives were considered for the population objective range and two alternatives were considered for the sex ratio objective range. Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) preferred alternatives are in **bold**.

## Population Objective Alternatives

*Alternative 1: 7,700 - 9,400 (Status quo)*

*Alternative 2: 6,200 - 8,200 deer (Manage to population average)*

*Alternative 3: 6,000 - 7,200 deer (Decrease, broader range)*

### Sex Ratio Alternatives

*Alternative 1: 30 - 35 bucks: 100 does (Status quo)*

*Alternative 2: 25 - 32 bucks: 100 does (Slight decrease, broader range)*

### Preferred Alternatives

Based on herd productivity, issues affecting the deer population, and public input, CPW staff recommend the alternatives below.

*Population Objective Alternative 2: 6,200 - 8,200 deer (Manage to population average)*

The population for the D-42 herd has been largely stable since 2006 at an average population estimate of 7,194 deer. With the current amount of usable deer habitat throughout the DAU, the high prevalence of chronic wasting disease, and the pressures of recreation and other land uses, this alternative population objective range is more indicative of the amount of deer the land can currently sustain. This objective range is not a reduction of the deer population, but rather a management of the population at the level it has been stable at for the last 20 or so years. The current population estimate is at the lower end of this range.

*Sex Ratio Alternative 2: 25 - 32 bucks: 100 does (Slight decrease, broader range)*

As of 2020, the post-hunt observed 3-year average sex ratio was 26.5 bucks per 100 does. Most stakeholders would like to see CPW strike a balance between reducing CWD prevalence and maintaining mature buck harvest in this DAU. The sex ratio objective range of 25 - 32 bucks: 100 does attempts widens the sex ratio for CPW to make adjustments as prevalence of the disease fluctuates over time. This objective range gives CPW the flexibility to manage at the lower end of the range when CWD prevalence is high and manage at the higher end of the range when CWD prevalence is low.

### Strategies for Addressing Management Issues and Achieving Objectives

Although some of the issues facing the D-42 herd are beyond the scope of this HMP, CPW staff and interested stakeholders are committed to managing this herd with strategies that promote a robust, healthy, and resilient population. CPW will continue collaborating with land management agencies and private landowners to identify and implement opportunities for habitat improvements. CPW staff will participate fully in land management processes that affect D-42, including USFS Forest Plans and BLM Resource Management Plans. Ongoing disease surveillance and targeted management response will focus on reducing prevalence and mitigating the effects of chronic wasting disease.