

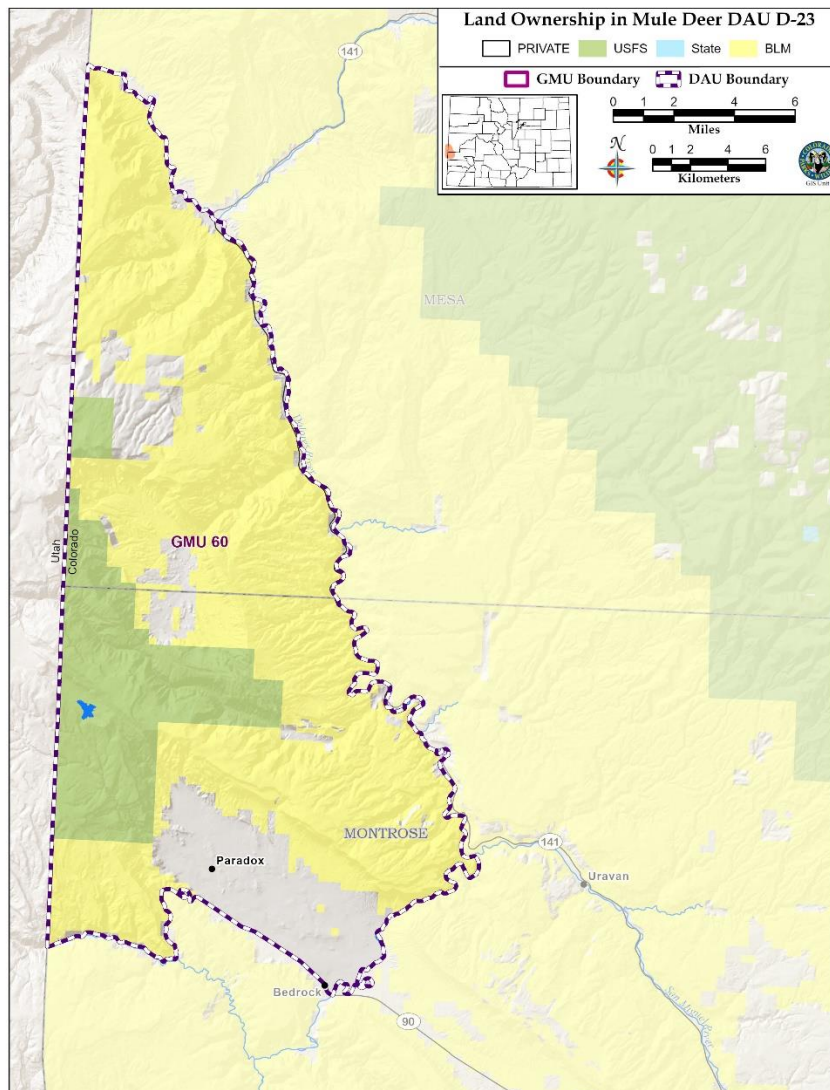
LA SAL DEER HERD MANAGEMENT PLAN DATA ANALYSIS UNIT D-23

Alyssa Kircher, Wildlife Biologist, Montrose

GMUs: 60
Last HMP Approval Year: 2008

Post-hunt Population: Previous Objective: 2,500-3,000; 2022 Estimate: 1,500.
Preferred Alternative: Decrease the current population objective to 1,500-1,800 deer

Post-hunt Observed Sex Ratio (bucks:100 does): Previous Objective: 25-30;
2022 observed: 31; modeled: 32.
Preferred Alternative: Decrease the current sex ratio objective to 20-25 bucks:100 does



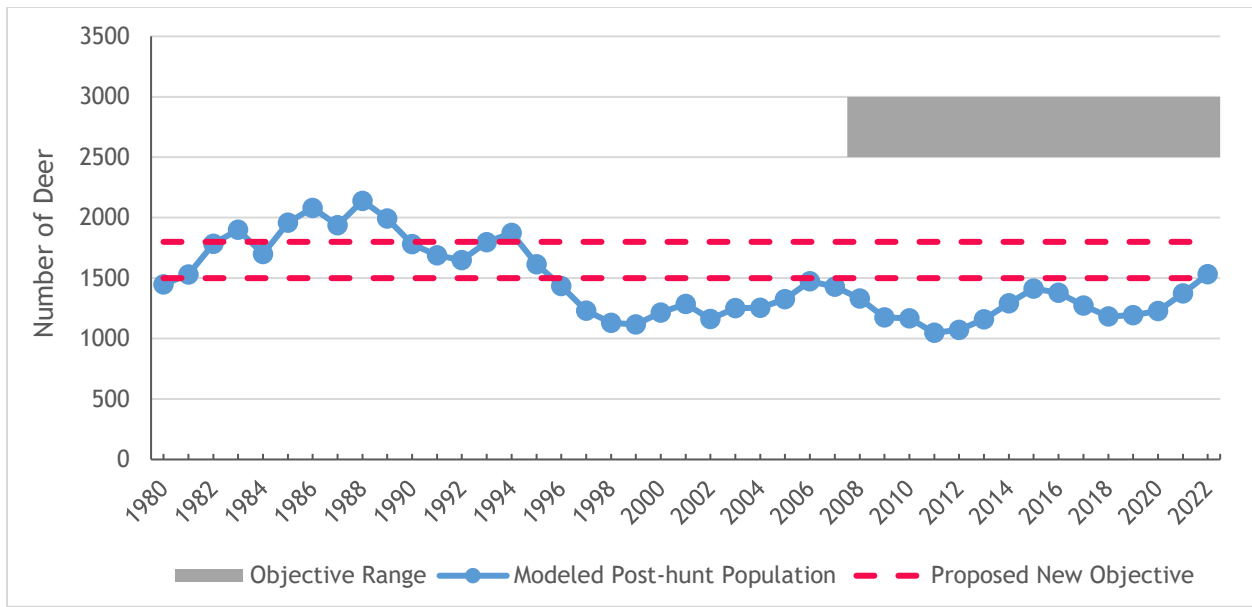


Figure D23-1. Deer DAU D-23 modeled post-hunt population and objective range, years 1980-2022.

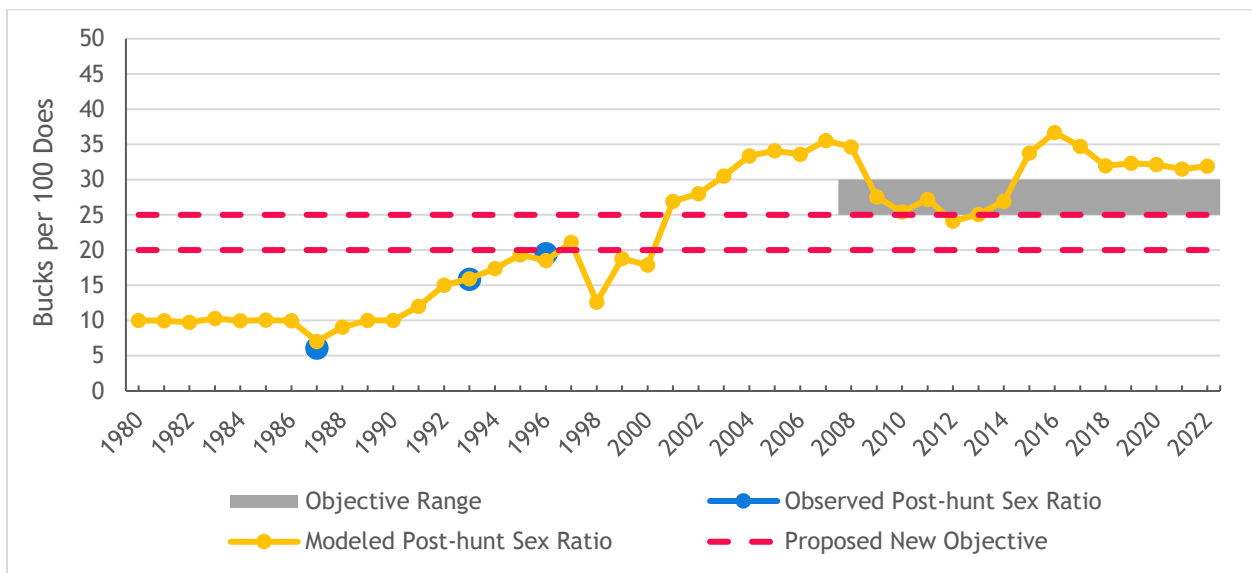


Figure D23-2. Deer DAU D-23 observed and modeled post-hunt sex ratio (bucks:100 does), years 1980-2022 (note: this herd is not classified every year).

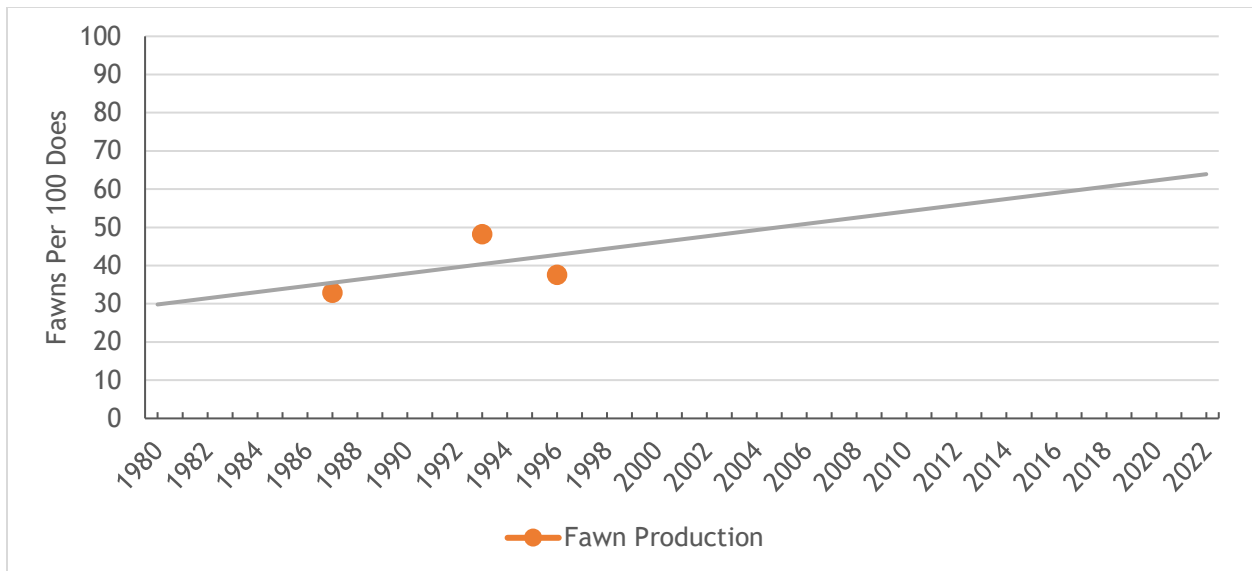


Figure D23-3. Deer DAU D-23 fawn production (observed post-hunt fawns:100 does ratio, years 1980-2022; note: this herd is not classified every year).

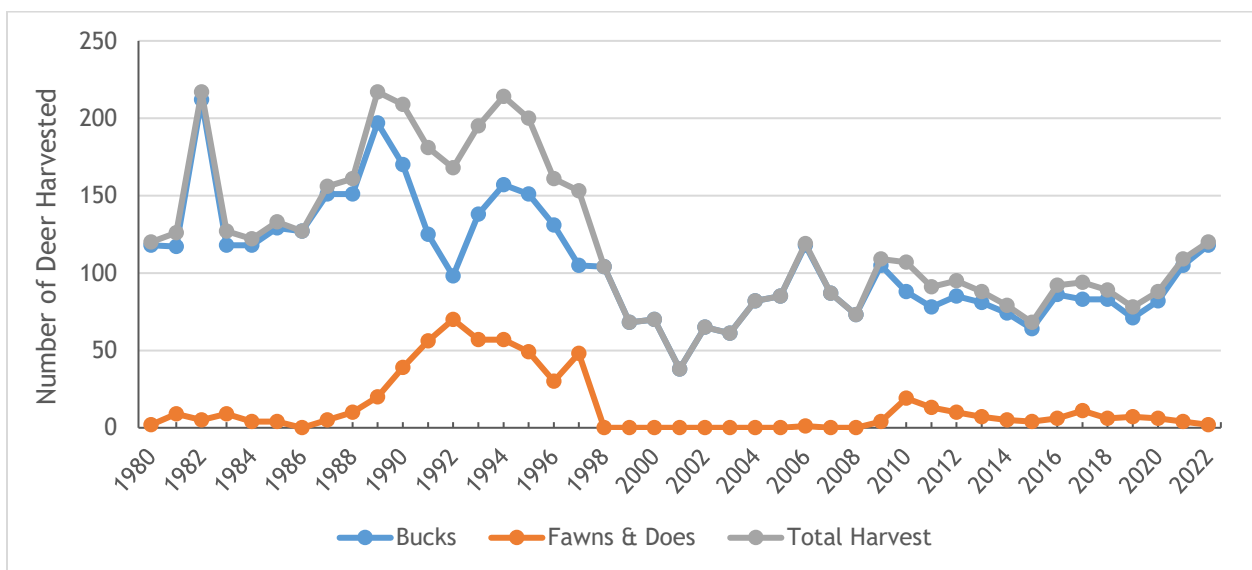


Figure D23-4. Deer harvest estimates in D-23, years 1980-2022.

Background Information

Data Analysis Unit (DAU) D-23, the La Sal deer herd, consists of Game Management Unit (GMU) 60 along the Utah state line and includes parts of Montrose and Mesa Counties. The landownership in this unit consists of 65% Bureau of Land Management, 18% U.S. Forest Service, and 18% privately owned.

Plant communities are diverse within the DAU, based on the changes in elevation from 4,500 feet in the desert shrub communities around Gateway and the Dolores River to the Ponderosa pine and mountain shrub areas in the upper elevations above 8,000 feet on the west end of the DAU. Agricultural areas and cultivated croplands within the DAU occur primarily in the Paradox Valley, Sinbad Valley, Gateway area, and along the Dolores River.

D-23 consists mostly of winter ranges, with summer ranges occurring primarily in the La Sal Mountains in Utah. In the spring and summer, most of the D-23 deer migrate to higher-elevation aspen and oakbrush habitats in the La Sal Mountains. By fall, large numbers of deer move to lower elevations into the pinyon/juniper, sagebrush, and agricultural lands for winter. Snow levels in the La Sals primarily determine how many deer migrate into Colorado for the winter; however, a growing residential population of deer is associated with the agricultural valleys near Paradox and Gateway.

Historic DAU D-23 population estimates have fluctuated based on winter conditions. The last few years (2020-2022) have been on an increasing trend. The 2008 herd population objective was 2,500-3,000, with an estimated 2,400 deer (2006 estimate).

The 2022 population was estimated at 1,500 deer. In response to outreach and surveys in 2021 and 2022, CPW staff and public stakeholders stated a desired slight increase in deer populations in this herd. CPW proposes a new objective range of 1,500-1,800 to capture the estimated population number and to better reflect the current herd dynamics and recent population trend. This objective range will also balance the public's desire for more deer with CPW's responsibility to manage Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) prevalence in the agricultural regions of this unit. Increasing deer densities could result in greater CWD prevalence.

Since D-23 has a population that is more greatly impacted by climatic conditions than by hunter harvest (like most herds), limited effort has been invested in monitoring this population, making fine-scale herd management difficult. The population has only been classified by helicopter for age and sex ratios four times since 1980. GMU 60 was last classified in 2021, but CPW did not observe enough deer to use the estimates in the population model. The population model uses estimated survival rates and post-hunt observed age and sex ratios from the adjacent DAU D-19 (Uncompahgre Plateau). Observations of herd status from the local district wildlife manager, local residents, and hunters are evaluated to monitor observed trends and anecdotal verification of modeled estimates and trends for the population.

The five-year average observed post-hunt buck ratio for D-19 is 32 bucks:100 does and the five-year average modeled post-hunt buck ratio for D-23 is 32 bucks:100 does. The buck ratio objective CPW prefers for the 2023 plan is to lower the objective range (20-25 bucks:100 does). Utah's Division of Wildlife Resources and CPW both agreed that decreasing the buck:doe ratio because of high CWD prevalence and seasonal interstate movements between Utah's Unit 13 and D-23 would be best for long-term herd health. The public would like a higher buck ratio,

but with CWD prevalence estimated at 21% (based on a small sample size), CPW must manage this growing threat to mule deer populations. This ratio would balance hunting opportunity and CWD management flexibility since this herd has a high CWD prevalence.

The five-year average observed post-hunt fawn ratios in D-19 averaged 54 fawns:100 does. Fawn-to-doe ratios in D-19 have been increasing slightly since 2016. In 2022, there was a slight decline from 60 fawns:100 does to 57 fawns:100 does.

Harvest in DAU D-23 has fluctuated historically from as few as 38 deer to as many as 217 deer. Harvest has averaged approximately 91 deer per year over the last ten years. In 2022, 118 bucks and two does were harvested by 186 hunters with a success rate of 65%. Preference point minimums for resident licenses in D-23 range from 0-2 points. Preference point minimums for nonresident licenses range from 0-9 points, with some licenses drawn as second choice or in the leftover draw. Antlerless licenses are only available as private-land-only and game damage licenses to control resident deer populations and minimize game damage. There have always been very few limited licenses and limited demand for licenses in this DAU, often making herd management difficult.

Significant Issues

The majority of deer habitat within D-23 is winter range, and extended drought has resulted in poor winter forage conditions for deer throughout much of southwestern Colorado. Annual snow levels determine the population size in Colorado and Utah, meaning poor forage conditions in Colorado impact local deer populations and interstate populations.

Although claims for deer damage in D-23 are not excessive, complaints from landowners about crop damage occur, primarily in the Paradox valley where deer are utilizing alfalfa fields. Damage to corn is expected in the future as residential deer populations increase in Gateway. Limited demand for private-land-only (PLO) licenses impedes CPW's ability to manage game damage through harvest.

One of the critical issues affecting D-23 is Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD). This disease occurs in deer, elk, and moose. CWD is an infectious prion (misfolded protein) disease that affects the nervous system over approximately three years. CWD can spread from the host by direct contact or through resources shared with an infected individual. To add to the complexity, prions can last for many years in the environment, further challenging management. This disease is 100% fatal and a treatment has not yet been developed. CWD was first detected in D-23 in 2018, and the current estimated prevalence rate is 21%; however, the accuracy of this prevalence rate is unknown because only 19 samples were collected during mandatory testing in 2020. The majority of the CWD prevalence is in the agricultural areas around Paradox. Utah's neighboring La Sal Unit 13 has the highest CWD prevalence in the state, which further compounds the issue with interstate deer movements. To mitigate the issue, CPW has increased buck licenses to decrease CWD spread since adult male deer are more likely to contract CWD. Proactive CWD management will be a crucial part of the D-23 Herd Management Plan.

Management Alternatives

Post-hunt population and buck ratio objective alternatives considered for the 2024 D-23 HMP:

Table D23-1. Proposed population and buck ratio objective ranges for the 2024 D-23 HMP.

Population Objective Alternatives:		Buck Ratio Objective Alternatives:	
1,200 to 1,500 (midpoint 1,350)	(1) 10% decrease in the current population estimate to the middle of the proposed objective range.	20 to 25 bucks per 100 does	(1)
1,500 to 1,800 (midpoint 1,650)	(2) Preferred- 10% increase in the current population estimate to the middle of the proposed objective range. The current population estimate is within this range.	25 to 30 bucks per 100 does	(2) status quo
2,500 to 3,000 (midpoint 2,750)	(3) Status Quo- Approximately 83% increase in the current population estimate to the middle of the proposed objective range.	30 to 35 bucks per 100 does	(3)

Management Objectives

CPW intends to increase this deer population slightly above the current population estimates to balance stakeholder and CPW staff desires for an increased population, but also stabilize CWD prevalence (Alternative 2). Since CWD is concentrated around the town of Paradox, increasing the population slightly should not change CWD prevalence dramatically. Utah also plans to increase the bordering herd numbers in Unit 13. Decreasing this herd (Alternative 1) would be difficult because there is already limited desire for the licenses currently available and this would not reflect CPW and stakeholders desires for an increased population. An 83% population increase over 2022 estimates (alternative 3, status quo) is not attainable with the current population without very large-scale habitat management adjustments, reduced predator populations, or an increased social tolerance. The variable deer movement between both states would also make it difficult to maintain such a significant increase. A large increase in deer numbers could also be problematic for CWD management, as increased deer densities could increase CWD prevalence.

CPW intends to decrease the buck ratio, despite stakeholder desires for more mature bucks in the population. Stakeholders have stated a preference for hunting mature bucks rather than the opportunity to hunt every year (Alternative 3). Unfortunately, mature bucks tend to have a greater probability of carrying CWD; therefore, managing for more mature bucks would be counter-productive to CPW’s CWD management strategies. The status quo objective range of 25-30 bucks:100 does allows for hunting opportunity for all age classes of bucks, but would not manage unit 60’s high CWD prevalence effectively (Alternative 2). Decreasing the buck ratio to 20-25 bucks:100 does (alternative 1) would help decrease CWD prevalence and potentially increase hunting opportunity in the short term. This objective does not align with stakeholder desires for increased buck ratios in the population, but the long-term health of this herd must be considered. This proposed objective would align more closely to Utah’s La Sal Mountains herd buck ratio objective of 15-17 bucks:100 does.

Strategies for addressing management issues and achieving objectives

D-23 has unique management issues because of the varied seasonal movement between Utah and Colorado. This variability leads to limited population monitoring. This population is also small, so limited numbers of licenses are offered and demand is low for many of the licenses, compounding herd management complexities.

CPW manages sex ratios and population objectives by increasing or decreasing licenses by total quota, by season, and by sex, depending on the objectives for each herd. This herd has historically been managed for a balance of opportunity and slight population growth. CPW would like to continue this management strategy. Additionally, the last several years have been managed proactively to limit CWD spread, and staff sees this as an important strategy to continue into the future. Antlerless game damage licenses would still be available for landowners to deter deer from causing more damage and to increase landowner tolerance. Buck licenses will continue to be offered to manage CWD concerns and allow for moderate hunting opportunity. Additionally, predator and competing ungulate management will continue.

In addition to license management, CPW recognizes the importance of habitat protection and habitat quality improvement. CPW regularly communicates with land management agencies such as the USFS and BLM, landowners, county governments, CDOT, Utah Division of Wildlife Resources, and NGOs and will continue collaborating with these government agencies and organizations to achieve management goals. These agencies can help with large-scale habitat management projects to improve carrying capacity and regulate recreation and grazing on public lands, which could bolster deer populations.

Stakeholder Outreach

Hunters were randomly selected to complete the 2022 Deer Hunter Attitude Survey after the completion of their hunting seasons. There were 75-87 respondents (depending on the question) who answered the opt-in questions for D-23. Overall, hunters desire a slight to moderate increase in the deer population and are generally satisfied with their hunting experience. Hunters also prefer pursuing more mature bucks (higher buck ratio) to hunting more often (lower buck ratio). The majority of respondents also did not feel crowded while deer hunting.

The draft HMP for D-23 will be sent to local county commissioners in Montrose and Mesa Counties. Draft plans will also be sent to the HPP, USFS, the BLM, and Backcountry Hunter and Anglers (BHA). Additionally, CPW met with Utah's Division of Wildlife Resources to discuss future management between both states. The HMP will be posted on the CPW website for 30 days, allowing stakeholders to comment on the alternatives in the plan.

CPW Commission Approved Objectives:

Post-hunt Population: Pending

Post-hunt buck ratio: Pending