



COLORADO

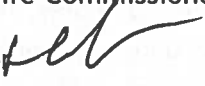
Parks and Wildlife

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MEMORANDUM

TO: Colorado Parks and Wildlife Commissioners

FROM: Laura Clellan, Director 

DATE: April 24, 2026

SUBJECT: Limited license recommendations for deer, elk, pronghorn, moose, and black bear

This letter is a summary and explanation of the enclosed Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) annual limited big game license recommendations for the 2026 big game hunting season.

CPW is recommending a total of 269,600 limited licenses; this is an increase of 8,100 (+3%) limited licenses from last year for deer, elk, pronghorn, moose, and black bear. These licenses will populate 2,800 individual hunt code quotas and represent the majority of the hunting opportunity for over 800,000 big game animals.

Statewide, CPW is recommending increases in deer, elk, and moose licenses and reductions in pronghorn and bear licenses.

Three mild winters in a row have resulted in excellent big game survival. Therefore, many license recommendations are increasing for 2026. Mild winters increase survival, but along with dry springs and summers, they intensify concerns about drought. Drought degrades range conditions, increasing the importance of managing big game populations within the capability of the habitat and within Herd Management Plan (HMP) population objective ranges.

In the Severe Winter Zone, from the winter of 2022-2023 in the northwest, license increases are replacing licenses that were part of the unprecedented 32,000 license reduction made in 2023 and the 1,200 license reduction made in 2024. These cuts were made to allow herds to recover as quickly as possible. Over the last three years, CPW has observed extremely high fawn and calf



Laura Clellan, Director, Colorado Parks and Wildlife

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ratios, high adult survival, and outstanding winter fawn and calf survival. Excellent population performance is achieved with young, productive populations at lower animal stocking densities.

Additional details are included in both the regulation form and in a series of table summaries titled “2026 Big Game License Recommendations Summary”. The summary tables were sent to the Parks and Wildlife Commissioners and posted to the CPW Commission webpage. They can be found at the following link:

<https://cpw.state.co.us/sites/default/files/dam/aqvee0xw7w/2026-big-game-license-recommendation-summary-pwc-mailing-040926.pdf>

Information in these tables, hereafter referred to as Summary Tables, transitions from a high-level summary to increasingly species-specific. Page 1 includes bulleted highlights, and Page 2 has Regional and Statewide totals that are particularly informative. After that, each species has a table with license totals and changes for every population, as well as figures and data demonstrating factors important to license setting.

The license recommendations are based on evaluation of previous harvest, age and sex-classification data, survival estimates from GPS-collared animals, population estimates, herd performance and trends, hunter distribution, Big Game Season Structure (BGSS) dates and timing, past licensing trends, hunter access to private land, and social considerations for each big game herd in Colorado.

The Colorado Parks and Wildlife Commission (PWC) publicly approves each HMP, Bear Management Plan, BGSS dates, hunt codes, and all limited license recommendations. The HMP for each herd incorporates the capability of the habitat to support big game populations, other social and biological limiting factors, and input from the public, organizations, and other agencies about their issues and concerns regarding hunting management and herd objectives. Annual harvest objectives and the resulting license recommendations for all hunts are designed to achieve the management objectives approved in the HMP. Female license increases are recommended in herds that are performing well and are within or above population objective ranges. Female license reductions are recommended in herds that are within or below population objective ranges. CPW staff use 3-year averages of hunter success rates to predict current-year harvest rates and set license recommendations to achieve harvest objectives.

A Data Analysis Unit (DAU) is the geographic area and identifying number of a relatively discrete big game population or herd. DAUs can contain multiple Game Management Units (GMUs), which are geographic areas delineated to distribute hunters.

Deer

Approximately 257,000 hunters applied for Colorado deer licenses in 2026. The majority of deer hunting in Colorado is managed through limited licenses; the only exception is over-the-counter (OTC) white-tailed deer licenses available in the Southeast Region.

Statewide, CPW is recommending 98,500 deer licenses, 5,600 (+6%) more deer licenses than last year. For all rifle seasons, we are recommending statewide total increases of 3,500 (+7%) buck, 700 (+12%) either-sex, and 1,100 (+9%) antlerless licenses. As with elk, deer have experienced excellent herd performance in the Severe Winter Zone. Along with this, high Chronic Wasting Disease prevalence and high buck-to-doe ratios are factors behind buck license increases in some herds.

Deer license recommendations are increasing in the Northwest and Southwest Regions and decreasing in the Northeast and Southeast Regions. Overall, buck licenses were reduced east of Interstate 25 (-900, -5%).

- In the Northwest Region, we are recommending an increase of 3,500 (+12%) deer licenses.
- In the Southwest Region, we are recommending an increase of 3,400 (+14%) deer licenses.
- In the Northeast Region, we are recommending a decrease of 900 (-4%) deer licenses.
- In the Southeast Region, we are recommending a decrease of 500 (-3%) licenses.

Buck license recommendations are increasing substantially in D-2 (Bears Ears), D-7 (White River), D-19 (Uncompahgre Plateau), and D-43 (Sweetwater Creek).

Doe license recommendations are increasing substantially in D-7 (White River), D-9 (Middle Park), D-19 (Uncompahgre Plateau), and D-24 (Disappointment).

Doe license recommendations are decreasing substantially in D-42 (Rifle Creek) and D-4 (Poudre).

With rare exceptions, these recommendations keep regular-season doe licenses at a minimum of 10 licenses per hunt code for all deer DAUs west of I-25 that are below the population objective. D-4 (Poudre) is below the HMP population objective range and has more than 10 licenses per hunt code; however, doe license recommendations were reduced by 345 (-47%). Elsewhere, in below-objective herds, the majority of doe licenses are private-land-only (PLO) licenses to address game damage. Private-land-only licenses and licenses with special restrictions to address deer conflicts near towns make up the vast majority of the doe licenses in below-objective herds.

The statewide post-hunt 2025 deer population estimate is 408,000, up from 384,000 last year. The sum of statewide population objective ranges is 387,000-496,000 for all 51 deer herds combined. Post-hunt 2025, 26 of 51 (51%) deer herds are within HMP population objective ranges and 18 of 51 (35%) deer herds are below their HMP population objective ranges. For a variety of reasons, many mule deer populations are struggling west-wide. Population objectives that are appreciably higher than population estimates reflect CPW's desire to stabilize, sustain, and increase mule deer populations.

The statewide deer population has averaged 411,000 over the last 10 years. The decade prior to that saw significant declines in some of the state's large westernmost herds. Diverse habitat types and environmental conditions around the state create considerable geographic variability in population performance.

CPW annually monitors well over 1,000 GPS-collared bucks, does, and fawns in five Intensive Mule Deer Monitoring Areas to estimate survival. CPW also conducts post-hunt herd inventories, primarily with helicopters, to estimate the sex ratios of males/100 females and the age ratios of young/100

females. In addition to survival rates, these ratios are needed to estimate population size using population models. The Summary Tables include the number of animals classified and sex ratios by DAU, Region, and statewide.

The average of sex ratio objectives for deer herds statewide is approximately 30 bucks/100 does. During the post-hunt herd inventories in 2025, CPW staff classified 71,350 deer and observed an average sex ratio of 31 bucks/100 does. The statewide average observed age ratio from helicopter inventory was 58 fawns/100 does, compared to 59 in 2024.

Some deer herds are performing well and others are stable but at much lower population sizes than desired. CPW has concerns about declines in many mule deer populations; however, statewide post-hunt averages of 31 bucks/100 does and 58 fawns/100 does are excellent and indicate that overall, deer herds are responding to management actions. Colorado remains a premier destination for deer hunters.

Elk

In 2026, approximately 270,000 hunters applied for Colorado's limited elk licenses. All rifle antlerless, muzzleloader, first, fourth, and late season elk licenses are limited. Archery licenses and second and third rifle bull seasons in many GMUs are also limited.

Statewide, CPW is recommending 133,500 limited elk licenses (+3,200, +2%). Excluding licenses converted to and from OTC described in the following paragraphs, CPW is recommending an increase in all previously existing limited elk licenses of 6,600 (+5%).

The statewide total of antlerless elk licenses for all hunting methods is 59,700 (+6,400, +12%). This is approaching the total prior to the severe winter 2022-2023 of 64,600.

Elk herds in the Severe Winter Zone in the northwest are coming back rapidly. E-2 (Bears Ears) is back within its HMP population objective range, and E-6 (White River) is above its HMP population objective range. Therefore, significant increases in female license quotas are recommended for E-2 Bears Ears (+2,000, +76%) and E-6 White River (+4,400, +60%). Bull licenses in E2 (Bears Ears) and E6 (White River) for the 2nd and 3rd rifle seasons are going back to OTC after 2 years of limitation in response to the Severe Winter of 2022-2023.

Elsewhere, CPW is also recommending substantial increases in antlerless elk licenses in E-20 (Uncompahgre) and E-24 (Disappointment).

For the second year in a row, CPW is recommending significant reductions in cow elk licenses in Middle Park in E-8 Troublesome (-1,760, -45%) and E-13 Williams Fork (-1,000, -91%).

New in 2026, formerly OTC 2nd and 3rd rifle season bull licenses are limited in E-5 (West Elk Mountains) and E-43 (Fossil Ridge). New limited quotas were set at a 10% reduction of the three-year average estimated OTC license sales (+3,500).

Limited nonresident archery quotas (V1A hunt codes), which were OTC prior to 2025, were set nearly identical to last year at 12,200 (-200, -2%). The differences are licenses that were moved to new PLO hunt codes in E-20 (Uncompahgre) and E-35 (Cimarron).

The 2025 post-hunt elk population estimate is 339,000, up from 309,000 elk last year. The statewide population had been increasing over a 9-year period, an expected response to reductions in antlerless licenses during that time.

The sum of Colorado's post-hunt HMP population objective ranges for elk statewide is 261,000-325,000 for all 42 elk herds combined. Thirteen of 42 (31%) elk populations are within their HMP population objective ranges. Nineteen of 42 (45%) of elk herds are above their HMP population objective ranges. Because season and license setting is designed to use antlerless harvest to bring elk populations to herd objectives, reductions in antlerless licenses are anticipated in the future as more elk populations reach objectives or population objectives increase. Many HMP population objectives for elk populations are set to account for social carrying capacity and tolerance for elk among landowners, and are set below the biological carrying capacity. Long-term experience with balancing stakeholder interests has informed CPW on the upper and lower social thresholds for elk population size in many herds, which benefits us greatly in herd management planning efforts.

CPW monitors over 1,000 GPS-collared cows, calves, and bulls. These elk are in three research study areas (E-2 (Bears Ears), E-15 (Avalanche), and E-20 (Uncompahgre Plateau)), in four Elk Monitoring Areas (Middle Park, Gunnison, South Park, and White River), and in numerous other projects around the state. CPW added E-6 (White River) to the Elk Monitoring Areas program this winter. E-6 is our largest elk herd; this will better inform management decisions for this important herd and surrounding herds.

In 2025, during post-hunt herd inventories using primarily helicopters but also ground surveys, CPW staff classified an incredible 120,000 elk for the second year in a row. This classification of 120,018 is close to the 120,600 elk classified last year, which is a record for Colorado. The observed statewide average sex ratio was 24 bulls/100 cows, up from 21 bulls/100 cows last year.

During these post-hunt surveys in 2025, E2 (Bears Ears) and E6 (White River) bulls/100 cows ratios are back to the levels observed prior to the 2022-2023 severe winter.

In addition to population responses to the license reductions mentioned earlier, these two herds are among our most productive elk herds. Excellent forage conditions and lower animal stocking densities resulted in high body condition, high birth rates, and record-high survival in the last three years.

Northern Colorado historically has had higher and more stable calf ratios by about 10 calves/100 cows than the southern half of the state. During primarily aerial surveys over the past 25 years, CPW has documented declining calf/cow ratios in the southern half of the state. In 2025, we observed a statewide average of 40 calves/100 cows during post-hunt herd inventories, which is the same as the last four years. Elk research and ongoing management changes are necessary, as calf production remains low in many herds. Low calf ratios reduce the number of elk licenses CPW can issue.

Having a combination of units that are limited in all seasons and units with both limited and over-the-counter hunting seasons allows us to offer a wide range of hunting opportunities on the nation's largest elk population.

Pronghorn

In 2026, approximately 120,000 hunters applied for limited pronghorn licenses. The majority of pronghorn licenses are limited, with the notable exception of over-the-counter archery licenses available in 70% of GMUs.

CPW is recommending 17,700 limited pronghorn licenses, down 200 (-2%) licenses from last year.

License recommendations are decreasing in the Northeast Region (-600, -16%) and increasing slightly in the other three Regions. Drought conditions on the eastern plains are causing some herds to have low fawn production and fall below HMP population objective ranges.

License reductions are recommended in herds that are within or below HMP population objective ranges. Examples include PH-1 (Escarpment), PH-7 (Thatcher), and PH-35 (Kiowa Creek).

License increases are recommended in herds that are within or above the HMP population objective ranges. Examples include PH-3 (North Park) and PH- 20 (Wet Mountains).

The estimated statewide post-hunt pronghorn population is 70,000, which is similar to last year. The sum of statewide population objective ranges for hunted pronghorn herds is 72,000-88,000. Ten of 29 (35%) pronghorn DAUs are within HMP population objective ranges.

Pronghorn are productive and are responding to improved habitat conditions and lower animal stocking densities in some places, including the Severe Winter Zone. Colorado offers some excellent hunting for one of North America's most iconic animals.

Moose

In 2026, 66,000 hunters applied for Colorado moose licenses. CPW is recommending 761 limited moose licenses, an increase of 42 (+6%) from last year. All four Regions went up in moose licenses. These recommendations include 323 (+16, +5%) bull and either-sex licenses and 438 (+26, +6%) antlerless licenses.

Six of 13 (46%) moose populations are within HMP population objectives, and six are above HMP population objective ranges. We are recommending increases in cow moose licenses in seven DAUs, some of which are within the objective range, to prevent them from going over the population objective.

Antlerless moose license recommendations are designed to manage moose populations toward HMP population objectives and keep moose populations within the capability of their habitat. CPW uses female harvest to manage moose populations and minimize over-browsing of important willow and aspen communities.

The estimated statewide 2025 post-hunt moose population is 3,400, down slightly from 3,600 last year.

We now have moose hunting in 74 GMUs, up from 39 GMUs in 2013. CPW implemented new late antlerless moose seasons in 2025. Late seasons allow us to harvest more female moose without creating crowding in the regular moose seasons.

We are fortunate that our moose populations continue to do well because many other states are experiencing declines in moose. The growing number and distribution of moose in Colorado have resulted in greater hunting and viewing opportunities.

Black Bear

In 2026, CPW is recommending 19,200 limited licenses for all seasons and methods of take for black bear. This is 500 fewer than last year and represents a 3% decrease in limited licenses. In 2026, statewide harvest is projected to be about 1,390 bears with a statewide total mortality of approximately 1,830 bears.

The 2025-2029 BGSS policy for black bear removes unnecessary barriers to bear hunting whenever possible to achieve DAU harvest objectives, while still managing bear hunter crowding during the early seasons or in quality deer and elk units. This BGSS policy is consistent with the 2020-2024 BGSS policy.

Current management objectives are to reduce bear populations in 8 DAUs and stabilize populations at present levels in the remaining 9 DAUs. These DAU objectives guided managers' selection between the two bear licensing strategies available to structure hunting opportunity under the current BGSS. Over-the-counter licenses will be available during archery, muzzleloader, and concurrent rifle seasons in 9 DAUs (plus B-99 Eastern Plains), as well as in most PLO hunts.

From 2019-2021, bear license fee reductions and the availability of OTC bear licenses in portions of the state drove a large increase in license sales. Maximum demand saturation appears to have occurred at 2021 and 2022 license fee levels. In the 3 subsequent years (2023-2025), we recorded annual license sales declines of 4%, 15%, and 5%, respectively. Our non-resident license sales have dropped nearly 50% since 2021, likely attributable to license fee increases over the last 3 years. Annual bear license revenue reached a tipping point in 2025, when decreased non-resident sales drove a reduction in overall revenue, even with increased fees per license. Given that bear license fees in the upcoming 2026 season are only increasing by the CPI rate, hopefully, bear hunter numbers have stabilized at participation levels seen in 2025. In general, hunter numbers have remained adequate in DAUs identified for the unlimited add-on license strategy to provide additional harvest towards management goals.

Conclusion

These big game license recommendations are based on substantial biological data in relation to Herd Management Plans and Bear Management Plans, and provide for an economically significant and diverse amount of big game hunting throughout Colorado. These recommendations provide the majority of the opportunity for hunters to enjoy the tremendous big game resources of Colorado. They also represent many thousands of hours of employees' collective effort in conducting herd

inventories, obtaining harvest estimates, incorporating this information into predictive models, communicating with the public, and, finally, making license recommendations. I am pleased to present these recommendations as a testament to the incredible wildlife resources CPW manages for the enjoyment of the people of Colorado and its visitors.

If you have any questions about this information or anything else related to limited license numbers, feel free to give me a call before the Commission meeting. Thank You.

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