



April 24, 2025

Colorado Parks and Wildlife Commission
6060 Broadway
Denver, CO 80216

Dear Colorado Parks and Wildlife Commissioners:

The Colorado Wildlife Conservation Project (CWCP) is a diverse coalition of organizations and individual professional members representing the wildlife conservation community on behalf of tens-of-thousands of Colorado hunters, anglers, wildlife conservationists, and outdoor enthusiasts. We are writing in advance of the May 7-8 Commission meeting, when you set license numbers for this year's big game seasons.

Hunters are a passionate and diverse community, and naturally, opinions vary. The perspectives provided here reflect high-level consensus among our coalition members. Many of our organizations and community members will also offer comments specific to local herds, hunting methods, and regional considerations. We deeply appreciate the opportunity for public engagement and your time hearing these voices.

Big game hunting plays a foundational role in Colorado's cultural, ecological, and economic landscape—important to hunters and non-hunters alike. Your responsibility to manage and set license numbers, as authorized by C.R.S. 33-1-104(1), is critical. We thank you for your dedication to this complex and consequential task.

Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) staff dedicate considerable time and expertise to developing license recommendations—from rigorous harvest data collection and helicopter classification surveys to sophisticated population modeling and professional field validation. These science-based, data-rich recommendations are essential for balancing opportunity, wildlife health, and long-term sustainability.

Big game population trends provide critical insights into broader environmental conditions. As large, migratory ungulates, species like mule deer and elk require expansive, seasonally variable habitats with intact connectivity. Their health often serves as an indicator of ecosystem integrity and the pressures facing less visible but ecologically interdependent species.

Furthermore, the economic and operational health of CPW—as well as many of the programs that support law enforcement, habitat management, conservation education, and public access—

relies heavily on revenue generated by license sales, particularly from non-resident hunters. In the current fiscal landscape, no alternative funding mechanisms exist at a scale capable of replacing this foundational revenue stream. The continuation of responsible, science-driven big game management is essential to sustaining both wildlife populations and the programs that support them.

Hunting also drives local economies, particularly in rural western Colorado. From fuel and lodging to gear and groceries, hunters provide a direct and multiplied economic benefit to small businesses and rural communities. The SCORP report from last year noted a \$10 billion dollar contribution to the state economy. Licenses and fees exceeding \$400 million funds the management of many species. License decisions, therefore, carry weight not only in ecological terms, but in economic and social resilience as well.

CWCP continues to prioritize wildlife-first decision-making. Following the severe winter of 2022–23, we supported staff recommendations to reduce license numbers in response to substantial mortality, particularly in the northwest region where snowpack and snow water equivalent (SWE) were well above average. It was, and remains, our position that recovery of these populations is essential to ensuring future hunter opportunity and ecosystem stability.

After two mild winters, we are encouraged by early signs of population rebound and look forward to upcoming staff reports on herd status and trends. Past data indicates that elk populations are increasing, while cow license numbers have continued to decline. Big game license numbers are not the only tool that the State has to grow and maintain healthy big game populations. As such, we believe it is appropriate and warranted to revisit common themes in CPW's Herd Management Plans to further develop strategies to meet herd management objectives, including avoiding, minimizing, and mitigating adverse impacts when reviewing development and activity in big game habitats.

In addition, we encourage the Commission to consider the following for review and potential action:

- **Habitat Restoration, and Conservation:** Where do opportunities exist to expand efforts to protect and restore crucial big game habitat? And finally, we ask the Commission to consider inviting CPW staff to provide an annual summary presentation highlighting restoration and conservation work completed by the State, as well as restoration and conservation projects planned or completed by Regional Partnerships or other similar regional partners.
- **Habitat Connectivity and Migration Corridors:** Wildlife corridors are critical as fragmentation increases due to a variety of factors. With CPW's increased capacity and the introduction of new connectivity plans, what projects are underway? How is CPW

addressing impacts from energy, outdoor recreation including illegal trail construction, and other development? We ask that CPW assess the cumulative impacts on habitat and wildlife populations and develop ways to address them.

- **Highway Crossings:** We request an update on CPW's work with the Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) regarding wildlife crossings. What is the status and progress of CDOT's west slope and east slope priorities list? What does the most recent data show regarding collision reductions? What additional structures are planned, and what funding mechanisms are in place to support them? Are other state agencies, local governments, and other state Commissions aware of projects planned and on-board with the need to conserve the areas proximal to crossing structures?
- **West Slope Mule Deer Strategy:** Mule deer, an iconic western big game species, has been in decline since the early 2000s. In 2014, CPW launched the West Slope Mule Deer Strategy, allocating up to \$5 million through 2024. What measurable outcomes have resulted from this investment, and what is needed to update the strategy moving forward?
- **Colorado's Outdoors Strategy:** This vision and framework aims to integrate recreational development with wildlife conservation. We ask that the Commission support only those projects that advance both goals together.
- **CPW Budget and Cash Reserve:** As statutory requirements mandate reserve thresholds, and as new demands stretch the agency's resources, what steps is the agency taking to ensure CPW remains financially resilient? We are especially concerned about long-term funding to support the agency's full mission. We believe a public workshop on CPW's budget would be greatly beneficial to members of the public and the Commissioners.

Thank you for considering these high-level comments and for your continued leadership in guiding Colorado's wildlife policy. We appreciate the opportunity for meaningful public engagement and look forward to participating in the Commission's upcoming meeting.

Sincerely,

