

Commission and Department Authorities

The establishment of hunting seasons and management of game species is consistent with the authorities granted the Fish and Wildlife Commission and Department of Fish and Wildlife by the Washington State Legislature through Title 77 of the Revised Code of Washington. The Fish and Wildlife Commission develops and adopts hunting regulations (i.e., rules in the Washington Administrative Code) per the authority granted under Title 77 authority. In addition, various Commission and Department policies and procedures, including this Game Management Plan (GMP) guide game management.

The Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission and Department of Fish and Wildlife are responsible for the management and protection of fish and wildlife resources in Washington State. The Legislative mandate (RCW 77.04.012) for the Commission and the Department includes the following directives for wildlife management:

- The Commission, director, and the Department shall preserve, protect, perpetuate, and manage the wildlife...
- The Department shall conserve the wildlife resources in a manner that does not impair the resource. The Commission may authorize the taking of wildlife only at times or places, or in manners or quantities, as in the judgment of the Commission does not impair the supply of these resources.
- The Commission shall attempt to maximize the public recreational hunting opportunities of all citizens, including juvenile, disabled, and senior citizens (see Title 77 Revised Code of Washington).

In addition, various policies and procedures guided the Commission and Department in developing this GMP. In particular, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife Hunting Season Guidelines (August 1999), which were amended by the Commission in 2014, provide further guidance for the existing GMP:

Hunting seasons and regulation recommendations should be based on good science. When biological information is lacking or insufficient, management decisions should be sufficiently conservative to ensure protection of wildlife resources. At no time should decisions favor income to the agency or recreational opportunity to the detriment of conservation of wildlife populations.

1. *In general, hunting seasons and boundaries of game management units should be easy to understand while maintaining hunting opportunity and management options.*
2. *Continuity in hunting seasons over time is highly valued by the public; therefore, Department recommendations for significant changes to seasons should be adequately explained to the public and should address a resource management need.*
3. *Establishing hunting seasons shall be consistent with the Commission Policy C-3607 regarding cooperatively managing wildlife resources with the tribes.*
4. *In general, hunting seasons shall be consistent with species planning objectives and provide maximum recreation days while achieving population goals.*
5. *A three-year season setting process which provides consistent general seasons from year to year with annual changes in permit levels to address emergent resource issues; natural disasters; and to meet requirements of federal guideline changes; etc.*

6. *The public shall be offered substantial and timely opportunity to make comments on and recommendations for the three-year hunting rules decision-making process. These opportunities must comply with the state's Regulatory Reform Act.*
7. *Public involvement for annual permit season setting shall include at a minimum, a standard written comment period and one public meeting where comments will be considered.*
8. *Hunting rules shall provide separate deer and elk general season recreational opportunities for archers, muzzleloaders, and modern firearm hunters.*
9. *Special deer and elk permit hunt opportunities shall be allocated among three principal user groups (archery, muzzleloader, and modern firearm) using the approved formula of success/participation rate.*
10. *Weapon and hunting equipment restrictions should maintain public safety; protect the resource; allow wide latitude for individuals to make equipment choices; be easy to understand and allow effective enforcement.*
11. *Disabled hunter opportunities shall emphasize equal access consistent with the Americans with Disabilities Act.*
12. *For disabled hunters, graduates of Master Hunter programs, youth hunters, and hunters over 65, strategies for enhanced opportunity shall include special consideration during general seasons, opportunities for special access, and other incentives rather than special permit hunts. Master Hunter incentives should return to the program's original intent, which was to address wildlife problems, issues associated with hunter ethics, and the challenging hunting circumstances on private lands.*
13. *Private landowner hunting issues such as season length, damage control, and trespass should be given consideration when developing hunting season recommendations.*
14. *The rules shall standardize furbearer seasons to provide trapping opportunity and address damage control.*
15. *The migratory bird and small game regulations shall provide maximum hunting opportunity considering federal guidelines, flyway management plan elements, and Department management objectives.*
16. *The hunting season closures and firearm restrictions shall be sufficient to assure resource conservation and public safety.*
17. *The goat, sheep, and moose permit hunting rules shall maintain high quality opportunities consistent with resource availability.*
18. *The Department shall maintain programs that offer the public high quality hunter education and firearm safety training.*
19. *The Department shall promote high standards of hunter ethics and adoption of principles of fair chase.*

Implementing the legislative mandate and the Commission guidelines for game species requires knowledge of game population trends and impacts of hunting regulations, development and management of hunting seasons and actions that support and maximize public recreation, and conservation of wildlife resources. The Fish and Wildlife Commission adopts major hunting seasons every three years. Minor adjustments are made annually such as modifying permit levels or addressing crop damage or nuisance problems. Migratory waterfowl seasons are adjusted annually in coordination with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Pacific Flyway Council.

The process for developing hunting seasons typically includes the following steps:

1. Staff determine the status of game populations and impacts of previous harvest strategies;
2. Staff engage in preliminary discussion of ideas with the tribes, the public, state and federal agencies, and WDFW biologists and managers;
3. Staff develop a set of season and regulation alternatives;
4. Staff prepare formal submissions pursuant to the Administrative Procedures Act of the draft regulations and identify the period for public comment;
5. Staff receive, consider, and summarize public comments;
6. Staff develop final recommendations for hunting season rules;
7. The Fish and Wildlife Commission considers staff recommendations, public comments, and related information and adopts regulations governing hunting seasons.

The process of establishing hunting seasons, bag limits, and geographical areas where hunting is permitted is exempt from State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA) rules through WAC 197-11-840. In addition, feeding of game, issuing licenses, permits and tags, routine release of wildlife, or re-introductions of native wildlife are also listed as exemptions from SEPA rules. However, policy development, planning, and all other game management actions are not considered exempt from SEPA rules.