MULE DEER STATUS REPORT - NEVADA

SUBSPECIES PRESENT:

CONTACT PERSON:
Mike Hess

OVERALL MANAGEMENT GOALS:
Nevada's overall goals are: 1) to maintain and enhance mule deer populations; 2) to maintain and improve annual population status and trend measurements; and 3) to provide for safe utilization of the resource.

Our harvest, census, and hunting programs are integrally tied together. We are constantly trying to improve each facet. The latest improvement has been privatization of the hunter reporting system.

Because our harvest program is very conservative, its impact is measurable, but cannot be considered a controlling factor. The recent severe drought is by far the most significant influence on deer population trend. We are working with land agencies to protect and improve deer habitat, but this work is difficult to assess.

LONG-TERM STRATEGIC PLAN:
Nevada does not have a long-term strategic plan.

STATEWIDE POPULATION TREND/ESTIMATE:
Nevada's mule deer population is about 125,000-130,000 adults. This is down from a recent high of over 250,000 in 1988, and it is similar to levels seen in the mid-1970s. We do not have specified population goals.

HARVEST DATA COLLECTION:
Big game hunters are required to report on their hunt via a return card that comes attached to the deer tag. The hunter provides the postage and his completed card must be returned before January 31. This is mandatory with a penalty of ineligibility to apply for big game tags in the succeeding season or a $50 administrative fine.

Reporting has averaged over 95% for 10 years or more. Adjustments are made in quotas or season length to achieve desired success levels.

Administration of the return card program was privatized in 1993. The contractor is improving the program as the 3-year contract progresses. Results have been very positive to this point. Hunter-initiated telephone reporting is expected next year.

"QUALITY" MULE DEER HUNTING OPPORTUNITIES:
Our mule deer program is intended to provide "quality" almost exclusively. All hunting is controlled by quotas. Quotas are tied to relatively small areas (unit groups) corresponding with coherent populations. Posthunt buck ratios are managed to exceed 20:100 does. Season lengths are meant to maintain hunter success at 50% or better.

ANTLERLESS MULE DEER HARVEST:
While backing away from antlerless harvest in recent years in response to the deer population declines resulting from the drought—due more to political considerations than biological—Nevada normally attempts to hold antlerless hunts in all units.

As populations recover from the drought, more antlerless hunting will be recommended to our Wildlife Commission. When deer populations have recovered from the drought, antlerless hunting should be occurring statewide.

CONTROLLING HUNTER DENSITY AND DISTRIBUTION:
The full quota system acts as our control. We have turned to multiple seasons to further control hunter congestion in a few areas.

SEASON STRUCTURE CHANGES IN LAST 10 YEARS:
The basic structure has not changed in over 15 years, but there have been many minor changes. Most notable of these in recent years are increasing numbers of special weapons seasons, special guided hunter tags, and landowner damage compensation tags.

DEVELOPING SEASON STRUCTURE:
Hunter kill measured by mandatory hunter reporting and intensive postseason and spring helicopter censuses for population composition provide us with inputs for annual population estimates—either change-
in-ratio or computer modeling are used. The annual estimate is the basis for quota recommendations.

Several additional controls are used to maintain standards. These include posthunt buck ratio objectives, recruitment/kill ratio objectives, and hunter success objectives. Wildlife Division recommendations are presented to the public through a formal review process that includes local hearings in each county before the Wildlife Commission sets seasons and quotas.

DATA COLLECTION METHODS:
See Developing Season Structure.

POPULATION MODELING:
Nevada uses both a modified change-in-ratio estimator and a modified version of POP-2 from Fossil Creek for most identified populations. The computer models are updated annually as data is acquired. Models are prepared for over 95% of Nevada's deer populations.

DEPREDATION POLICY:
Responses have varied over the years. Depredation hunts allowing sportsmen some recreation have been the preferred technique if applicable. Fencing has been loaned to ranches with chronic problems. We have no provisions to make payments for depredation by mule deer.

For the last 2 years, ranchers have been awarded special depredation compensation tags for deer and antelope if they qualified. Ranchers can dispose of these tags as they see fit. This program was mandated by legislative action.

While many employees were apprehensive about this program, we have found it to be very positive. It has resulted in decreased depredation complaints and increased tolerance for big game on private property.

RESEARCH EFFORTS/RESEARCH CONTACT PERSON:
Nevada is not conducting research on mule deer presently.

CURRENT MANAGEMENT ISSUES:
The drought has been the major influence on Nevada's deer management in the last decade. In 1988, Nevada offered 57,000 deer tags and sold 51,000. About 14,000 deer tags were sold in 1994 for a decline in available tags of 75% in 6 years.

The politically most divisive issue recently has been the allocation of tags among weapon user groups. After years of wrangling, the Wildlife Commission adopted a tag allocation system based on hunter demand as demonstrated by applications and hunter success rates for the user groups. We are in the third year of using this demand/success system.

FUTURE MANAGEMENT ISSUES:
The following factors will become of increasing importance to mule deer management in Nevada in the future:

1. Habitat losses to urbanization. This is mainly a problem in the Reno-Carson City-Tahoe metropolitan area.

2. Closing of forest and woodland canopies. Management of pinyon-juniper habitat will become increasingly important as time goes on if recent deer numbers are to be maintained.

3. Increasing dominance of cheat grass. As wildland fires from human causes increase, this trend should continue. It may represent the biggest problem for mule deer in the long run.

4. Decreasing number of hunters as the social acceptance of hunting declines. Deer hunting could be banned in the foreseeable future. I think this is a very real possibility considering the recent explosive urban growth in Nevada.