



AGENDA ITEM SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

2027 Big Game Harvest regulations

The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (department) conducts a comprehensive, science-based process each year to develop proposed big game harvest seasons and regulations for consideration and adoption by the Fish and Wildlife Commission (Commission). This annual effort includes evaluating big game population trends and herd composition through field surveys, assessing historical harvest rates, analyzing hunter survey data, input from the public, and applying established biological objectives to ensure sustainable management.

Based on this analysis, the department prepares recommendations for the 2027 big game and western gray squirrel season dates and open areas, dates and locations of cooperative travel management areas, tag numbers for big game controlled hunts, associated hunting regulations, and cougar target area proposals.

Big Horn Sheep Management

Bighorn sheep were reestablished in the Trout Creek Mountains within the Whitehorse Wildlife Management Unit through releases that occurred between 1987 and 1990. The source herd for this reintroduction was Hart Mountain. The Trout Creek Mountains population has declined from an estimated 290 individuals in 2007 to 170 in 2024. In recent years, the department has become aware this population has lower genetic diversity (heterozygosity and allelic richness) than the source herd and lower than has been reported in native populations of desert bighorn sheep. The department believes low genetic diversity to be a factor in reduced performance of this herd. The department has successfully used translocation to increase heterozygosity and allelic richness in Steens Mountains and Leslie Gulch bighorn sheep herds. In an attempt to increase genetic diversity in the Trout Creek Mountains herd, the department translocated 15 bighorn sheep into the herd in 2024 but only 3 of these sheep survived one year post release with 6 mortalities attributed to cougar predation.

The 2017 Oregon Cougar Management Plan (Plan) establishes the option of using targeted administrative removal of cougars, referred to as cougar target areas, as a management action to meet certain objectives. Within cougar management Zone F, which includes the Trout Creek Mountains, the Plan establishes the option of targeted cougar removal with the objective of ensuring viable ungulate transplants when evidence indicates cougar predation threatens success of or viability of transplant. Appendix M of the Plan provides the framework for identifying, developing, and approving cougar target areas, and requires that proposed target areas be submitted to the Commission concurrently with annual big game regulation proposals. This integration ensures transparency, biological justification, and consistency with the broader big game management process.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Consistent with past practice, the department used several approaches to conduct outreach and gather input on the 2027 Big Game Hunting proposals. Targeted emails were sent earlier in the year to share specific proposals and obtain feedback. The department advised the public when draft proposals were published on the agency website in late June 2026 through a news release. The department held four regionally-focused web-based meetings in early July to provide information and solicit input on draft proposals. The department also published notice of the proposed rulemaking and invited written public comments in mid-July through mid-August. The public also has an opportunity to provide verbal comment during the hearing that occurs at the Commission meeting.

ISSUE 1

Proposed 2027 game mammal seasons and associated hunting regulations.

ANALYSIS

A summary of staff proposals for the 2027 big game and western gray squirrel seasons and species-specific information is included in Attachment 3. Controlled hunt proposals for 2027 contain season date and structure changes including deletion of hunts, addition of new hunts, combining hunt areas, and expanding hunt boundaries. Changes to deer, elk, bighorn sheep, pronghorn, black bear, and mountain goat hunts reflect responses to local changes in both populations and animal distribution. Proposals for hunting regulation changes include calendar year date shifts and modification to cooperative travel management area rules.

ISSUE 2

Proposed tag numbers for 2027 controlled big game hunts.

ANALYSIS

Overall, total controlled hunt tag recommendations for 2027 are proposed to decrease by 1% from 2026. A summary for each of the big game species is provided in Attachment 3.

ISSUE 3

Proposed Cougar Target Area.

ANALYSIS

Department staff propose one new Cougar Target Area for 2026-2028 in the Trout Creek Mountains as described in Attachment 3.

OPTIONS

1. Adopt staff recommendations
2. Amend staff recommendations

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

1. Option 1 Adopt staff recommendations

DRAFT MOTION:

I move to adopt the staff proposals in Attachment 3, amend OAR Chapter 635, Divisions 045, 060, 065, 066, 067, 068, 069, 070, 071, 072, 073, and 075 as proposed by staff and approve initiation of a Cougar Target Area in the Trout Creek Mountains as proposed by staff.

Effective Date: *Upon Filing*