

# With Colorado's mule deer population declining, wildlife officials seek help

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Saturday's Western Slope Mule Deer Strategy Summit addressed several ways Coloradans can help maintain mule deer population. Getty Images file

**GLENWOOD SPRINGS** — Even if you don't hunt deer, you still might be killing them.

That's one of the conclusions emerging from Saturday's [Western Slope Mule Deer Strategy Summit](#) addressing the recent, dramatic decline of mule deer in Colorado and throughout the West. But it's among the most significant.

The reality is that most Coloradans don't hunt mule deer. Those who do kill somewhere from 35,000 to 40,000 deer per year. Yet, despite a series of downward revisions in mule deer population objectives by Colorado Parks and Wildlife, herd numbers remain about 125,000 below the goal.

CPW's most recent population estimates continue to show a significant statewide decline in mule deer, down about 36 percent to 390,600 in 2013 from 614,100 in 2005. Across the West, the iconic, big-eared deer have decreased by about 10 percent during that time span. And the nation's largest mule deer herd, located in northwestern Colorado, has decreased in the past decade by more than two-thirds — to 32,000 at latest estimate, down from 105,900 in 2005.

As a result, wildlife officials have reduced the number of deer hunting licenses from 130,106 in 2007 to about 80,000 for this year. Hunters typically see about a 45 percent success rate, countered by annual reproduction. In some areas, doe harvest has been eliminated. But herd numbers continue to decline.

So what gives?

That's essentially the question wildlife managers and stakeholders set out to answer, and ultimately remedy, with Saturday's presentation of CPW's [Draft Colorado West Slope Mule Deer Strategy](#) plan. To an audience made up primarily of mule deer hunters, it became quickly evident that the population decline is not a hunter-specific problem.

"Necessarily and rightly, the public that you've been addressing in the process for this has been hunters," former Grand Junction mayor Jim Spehar noted during a Q & A with CPW officials. "But most Coloradans don't hunt. I wonder what the plans are to get into a broader arena with the general public and beyond the hunters for issues like this."

Spehar was among many to note a gap that needs filling as it relates to the list of strategic priorities identified by wildlife managers as management concerns. Although hunting license fees fund the majority of wildlife management budgets, the continued decline of deer populations — and the ripple effect in loss of revenue — is a statewide issue.

"We're all guilty of it. The last 10 to 20 years there has been a lot of growth in homes in the country with the new roads, driveways, dogs, horse pastures and traffic. It takes away habitat and puts stress on the animal," said Brad Weinmeister, a biologist in CPW's Durango office.

For the time being, CPW has narrowed its focus to seven strategic priorities based upon input received by the public. The draft plan currently includes:

- 1.** Landscape-scale habitat management to improve habitat quality. Creating landscape management plans with the specific habitat needs of deer in mind.
- 2.** Predator management where predation could be limiting deer survival. Including increased mountain lion and bear harvest in target areas and identifying potential sites for coyote control efforts.
- 3.** Protect habitat and mitigate development impacts to lessen rates of habitat loss. Maintaining a habitat protection program for mule deer using habitat stamps, Great Outdoors Colorado and other funding sources while coordinating land use plans with government agencies, industry and private landowners to protect critical habitat and mitigate impacts of energy development.
- 4.** Reduce the impacts of highways on mule deer survival, movements and migration. Coordinate with CDOT to increase highway permeability for deer, collaborating to install overpasses and underpasses with appropriate fencing.
- 5.** Reduce the impacts of human recreation on mule deer. Coordinate with federal land management agencies and local jurisdictions to seasonally close or restrict human activities in critical habitats.
- 6.** Regulate doe harvest and provide youth opportunity. Manage doe harvest conservatively in units that are well below population objective while enhancing youth hunting opportunities in herds that are at or above population objective.
- 7.** Maintain a strong ungulate population and disease monitoring program and conduct applied research to improve management of deer populations. Include the use of ongoing population monitoring of deer and elk to identify areas where elk may be negatively impacting deer.

The strategy will next be submitted to the Colorado Parks and Wildlife Commission for approval, after which CPW will begin incorporating outcomes into management processes. If you have comments on the Draft Colorado West Slope Mule Deer Strategy, e-mail them to Jody Kennedy at [muledeer@state.co.us](mailto:muledeer@state.co.us).