Proposed Season Structure and License Allocation Changes

As the population of Colorado grows and the popularity of bow hunting follows suit, particularly for elk, there are several concerns that should be addressed by CPW with regards to hunting season structure and license allocation.

The overlap of muzzleloader and archery season has become incompatible forms of hunting and harvesting. While both these methods are considered “traditional” in nature the simple fact is muzzleloaders are not really “traditional” weapons anymore. They are capable of shooting accurately at much longer distances than a bow can. Additionally, the safety concerns that arise from fully camouflaged archery hunters pursuing elk, and mimicking their calls, in the same close proximity as a hunter in blaze orange with a firearm in their hands lend credence to a need for separating the seasons.

A proposal could be to allow muzzleloader season to exist in two separate seasons. A 5-day starting the Wednesday after archery concludes would be the first muzzle season (nearly a week off could still be provided before the beginning of 1st Rifle). The second muzzle season would be late, perhaps combined with 4th rifle or a 4 or 5-day hunt starting the Wednesday or Thursday following 4th rifle. A rollover option for unsuccessful first season muzzle hunters into the second season could be explored as well.

A second point of growing concern is the overcrowding of hunters in OTC units. These units appear to be experiencing more and more archery hunters in particular out in the woods as the sport’s popularity rises. Implementing caps on a few OTC units initially as a trial could be a way to ease into this change but eventually it would be help to have all OTC units capped. These caps would apply to OTC rifle hunts as well. By doing so, a couple goals could be achieved:

1) CPW would have the ability to regulate how many hunters are in a given unit versus it being a free-for-all. In particular, archery hunters rely on stealth, calling elk and close shots. When elk get called at too much or are constantly running into hunters trying to imitate elk sounds, they drastically change their behavior. This degrades the archery hunter’s experience, reduces harvest opportunity and, in some instances, affects elk breeding negatively (bulls bugling less, herds getting continuously broken up or disrupted);

2) Another positive attribute of capping OTC archery units would be the possible reduction of preference point creep issues. By making all OTC units draw for archery and rifle, hunters would be forced to use points and not constantly choose them for their first choice only, which contributes to point creep. To clarify, OTC units would still be available to hunt each year for residents and non-residents alike (that is, drawn with 0 points) but the difference is it would channel all hunters through the draw and remove point creep potential by making hunters pick a unit to hunt.

It would be important to allow residents to have very high odds of drawing, even though they’re going through a draw system. So in essence, residents would potentially still draw their desired archery license annually just as they would with the OTC system. However, placing caps on the number of licenses would still aid in reducing the number of archery hunters in the field.

Colorado is a world-class hunting destination, especially for elk and mule deer. As elk hunting becomes more popular and accessible, and the influx of people continues into CO, it would be wise to put some limits on how many hunters are in the woods. CPW has increased license costs which was certainly needed but now hunters are paying more for a potentially poorer quality hunt which may result, over time, in fewer people wanting to hunt here and looking to other states with healthy elk herds and offering a better experience, such as in ID, MT or WY.

By eliminating the overlapping of archery and muzzleloader seasons and placing caps on OTC units/hunts, Colorado will continue to be the best state in the west for elk hunting…for all methods and seasons.

A third item has to do with legal hunting age for big game. Currently, CO allows youth to begin hunting big game at age 12. Unfortunately, by age 12, which is typically the age of a 7th grader, most kids are up to their eyeballs with other events. Sports, social engagements…all these things are a big presence in the world of a 12 year old. Friends and social opportunities often become more important than time with mom and dad. How is hunting all of sudden supposed to fit in to this realm?

By lowering the age to 10, which some states have already done, it would allow youth to get going at an earlier age. By providing the opportunity to hunt big game at an earlier age, when accompanied by an adult, they’ll be able to participate when they’re not so occupied with other non-hunting engagements. This could be the difference between whether a kid decides to hunt each year or they play a fall sport instead. Additionally, sales for licenses could benefit with more youth having the chance hunt at an earlier age.

At the state and national level, wildlife agencies are struggling with recruitment and retention of new hunters. This could be a possible step towards addressing this concern.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this very important and growing issue.