

---

## **MULE DEER MANAGEMENT IN SOUTHEASTERN MONTANA**

Melissa A. Foster\*, Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks, Baker

Ryan M. DeVore\*, Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks, Broadus

Dean J. Waltee, Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks, Sheridan

John T. Ensign, Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks, Miles City

In 1982, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Region 7 implemented a five week regionwide general license either-sex plus additional antlerless B license harvest structure for mule deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*). This harvest strategy implemented three important changes from previous years. First, the regionwide harvest structure eliminated the use of small hunting districts and allows the law of diminishing returns to operate: hunters tend to avoid areas with low deer numbers and focus on areas with higher densities. Second, general licenses were made either-sex, rather than antlered-only for mule deer. Third, following natural population

declines (e.g., due to severe natural stressors), biologists began increasing antlerless quotas soon after populations began to recover, rather than waiting until populations were at or above long-term averages. This management system has maximized opportunity and flexibility for hunters while simplifying regulations and enforcement. In the 30-plus years since implementation, Region 7 has seen a reduction in game damage complaints, and an increase in buck-to-doe ratios. Mule deer populations and harvest have been stable long-term, and population fluctuations have decreased in magnitude. This harvest strategy has produced similar results in both Region 7 as a whole (75% private lands) and on the Custer National Forest, a 436,000-ac block of public land.