

BIG GAME ADVISORY COMMITTEE REPORT

APRIL 3, 2024

PRESENT: Neil Wiens, Chair; Gerry Giesler, Vice Chair; Jeff Bevilacqua; Dr. Chris Davies  
Roy DeCorte; David Dixon; Kelsi Doughty; Rob Hare; Tony Jackson; Rick Moore Eric Smith; Ben Storey

ABSENT: Troy Blackwell; Allison Hannah

STAFF: Mark Ryckman, Liaison; Katelyn Norrie, Intern

MNRF GUESTS:

Christie Curley; Stephen Mills; Peter Carter; Larissa Nituch; Tamara Gomer Joe Northrup  
Brent Patterson; Kevin Middel; Kyle Morrison; Taylor Philips Lindsay Noyes

The meeting commenced at 6:00 pm with a welcome to all and a round of introductions. The committee was reminded that some of the discussions to follow may include items of a sensitive nature and require a level of confidentiality at this time. Stephen Mills from MNRF thanked the committee on behalf of Ministry staff for the invitation and opportunity to present to the committee.

Moose

We jumped right into the meeting agenda with Stephen providing some updates on MAIs. The planned implementation of a full suite of aerial inventories was hampered by the poor winter conditions. Only four of the total MAIs planned for were completed. The WMUs successfully flown included 25, 29, 31 and 32. This will require an ambitious 2024/25 MAI schedule to keep the rotation within prescribed limits in core moose range. It is expected that a changing climate will continue to make it difficult to complete MAIs. As such, work is being done within the Ministry to develop some modelling that will facilitate the use of other collected data to help inform moose population changes and potential management directions. As well as huntercollected data, other methods of ascertaining moose populations such as infra-red technology are being explored.

Kyle provided some statistical data. In keeping with a commitment made by MNRF, harvest management changes for the 2024 season were focused on only those WMUs which had the completed aerial inventories. Tag changes were as follows: WMU 26-increase of 6 tags, WMU 29- increase of 27 tags, WMU 31- decrease of 62 tags and WMU 32- decrease of 70 tags. Tag allotments in all other units were maintained at 2023 levels. Kyle also provided some information to show that on a provincial basis the required number of points to obtain a tag is declining except for applications to cow/calf bow tags. A deep dive to this data at the WMU level has not been conducted to date. Changes to tag numbers and/or hunter applications within WMUs will impact minimum point requirements from previous years but overall, the system appears to be working as designed and concerns around point creep have not materialized. Hunting parties have been able to use the system to their advantage when determining which party member should be accepting an awarded tag.

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Moose Research

Joe led the committee through the background of a research project being planned in WMU 13. The moose population took a significant drop and the response to reduced tags and the corresponding reduction in harvest to almost nothing has not resulted in any positive recruitment. This project has the potential to provide insights into uncovering limiting factors to herd growth. Some of these will include impacts of predation, harvest vulnerability, proportion and age of bulls in the population, reproduction/recruitment, and habitat carrying capacity. The initial

steps have included the collaring of 10 animals with the intention to follow the cows to calving sites in order to capture and collar newborn calves for the study. It will include collaring of wolves and engagement with moose hunters to help in the collection of DNA samples and harvest data on collared moose. The committee feels that this type of project warrants a collaborative effort between MNRF and OOD to provide the public with information on this research.

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#### Chronic Wasting Disease

Larissa and Tamara provided an update on CWD monitoring. Ongoing surveillance is necessary as it is not “if” CWD comes to the province but rather “when” and the need to be alert at the earliest stage is critical in managing it as best can be done. There is no cure, and it is hard to detect. A regular risk-based schedule for monitoring groups of WMUs has been in place since 2019. There have been over 15,000 tests since the inception of the program, and all have proven to be negative. A total of 554 samples were tested in 2023- all negative for CWD. There is concern that hunter participation, which is critical to the surveillance program, appears to be declining. There has been some research in other jurisdictions in hopes of developing a vaccine as well as trying to develop methods to clean up habitat sites to make them prion free. Cervid movement is controlled through a permit system operated jointly by both MNRF and OMAFRA. However, since there is no dedicated registration of cervid holding facilities a full accounting of cervid movement within the province is not possible. CWD collection sites will be focused in the southern region for 2024 in WMUs – 68a, 71, 74a&b, 81a&b, 82ab&c, 84, 85b.

#### Fish and Wildlife Licensing

Time has a way of flying by. The current licensing system operated by Sovereign Sportsmen Solutions will soon be ten years old and expires at the end of March 2027. MNRF is getting set to look at a request for proposals for the next iteration of licensing systems. Lindsay provided the committee with an early look at an opportunity to upgrade the system with the implementation of digital tags. MNRF is looking for some feedback both positive and negative in order to assist them in determining if this should be pursued in the development of the future licensing system. She took us through the concept from downloading a mobile app through to validating the tag when an animal is harvested. It was made clear that paper tags would still be available, but a hunter could make a choice to have the tag digitally along with appropriate licenses. The committee welcomed the idea of having this technology available but did indicate throughout the discussion that there were some pitfalls that needed to be considered before it could be put in place.

#### OFAH Updates

Mark provided the committee with some updates on items of interest.

CWD: A positive case of CWD was found near Winkler, Manitoba. While still a fair distance from Ontario it was noted that it was also a good distance away from previously detected cases. Manitoba has imposed restrictions on movement, feeding and baiting to combat the spread. Hunters have the option to extract and submit tissue samples themselves.

In B.C., two positive cases were identified in the Kootenay region. The province plans to kill and sample 25 additional deer in close proximity to the identified area and the Chief Veterinarian has issued an order making it mandatory for road killed cervids to be tested.

Feed Ontario: There is a collective of hunger-relief organizations which includes food banks, industry partners and local communities that have reached out to us for support to help combat hunger and food insecurity by allowing for

the donation of wild game. Currently it is not legal to donate wild game to food banks in Ontario, yet it is not only allowed but encouraged in some other jurisdictions.

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Feed Ontario has reached out to and received general support from the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry and Ministry of Agriculture. The proposed model imitates Alberta's existing system. Details of Alberta's system is available to Board members by contacting Mark Ryckman. This item was also discussed by the Small Game Advisory Committee and this committee concurs their recommendation to support this collaboration and initiative.

Sunday gun hunting: Expansion of opportunities continues with new Sunday hunting allowances in Springwater, Minto, Scugog, Amaranth, Oro-Medonte and potentially in Haldimand.

Respectfully submitted,

Neil Wiens  
Chair