New Mexico Wildlife Federation
OUTDOOR REPORTER
Spring 2010

Open Gate: It's like creating more public land

Landowners, hunters embrace new program

By Joel Gay
New Mexico Wildlife Federation

New Mexico sportsmen have more than 30 million acres of public land to hunt and fish on. They got 18,000 more when rancher Bill Wertheim opened his Pecos River valley property to upland game hunters through the state's Open Gate program.

When Socorro-area landowner Johnny Mounyo signed up with Open Gate, hunters got another 160 acres to hunt – plus improved access to 40,000 acres of adjacent federal land.

Jim Frank Richardson opened his 25,000-acre ranch in eastern New Mexico to turkey, quail and dove hunters, and specifically invites youth hunters onto his land for a chance to shoot a deer.

Open Gate does exactly what its name implies – it opens the gate for public sportsmen by leasing land from willing private landowners. Some leases offer good hunting or fishing opportunity. Others provide access to larger tracts of state or federal property. Either way, the landowner gets a check and sportsmen get to chase public wildlife on private land.

New Mexico's program is only a few years old, but so far it's going well, said Aaron Roberts, who coordinates Open Gate for the Department of Game and Fish. Nearly all the landowners who have enrolled in the past continue to sign up, he said, and complaints from hunters and landowners are minimal.

Wertheim, whose ranch is near Fort Sumner, said he's a supporter of Open Gate – and he doesn't even hunt or fish.

"It's working great," he said. "I have not had any trouble with any hunters." In fact, he has talked neighbors into enrolling, Wertheim said.

Open Gate was created in 2005 and began collecting its operating funds the following spring – it gets $1 from each Habitat Management and Access Validation stamp sold. The stamp fees provide about $250,000 a year, but currently only about half the money is being used to lease prop-

See "Open Gate," Page 12

Trophies back once illegal roads closed

Authorities tap 1973 law to curb illegal activity in Carson NF

By Garrett VeneKlasen
Special to the New Mexico Wildlife Federation

It was one of those mid-September outings that public land elk hunters dream of but rarely experience.

By 11 a.m. my cousin Darrell and I had close encounters with five "shooter" bulls, including a 330-class 6-by-6 that was in such a bugling, chuckling frenzy that he brushed my shoulder with his antler!

Elk were everywhere: cows, calves, spikes, satellite and herd bulls spread across the entire three-mile slope of a recently created roadless area in Carson National Forest near Taos.

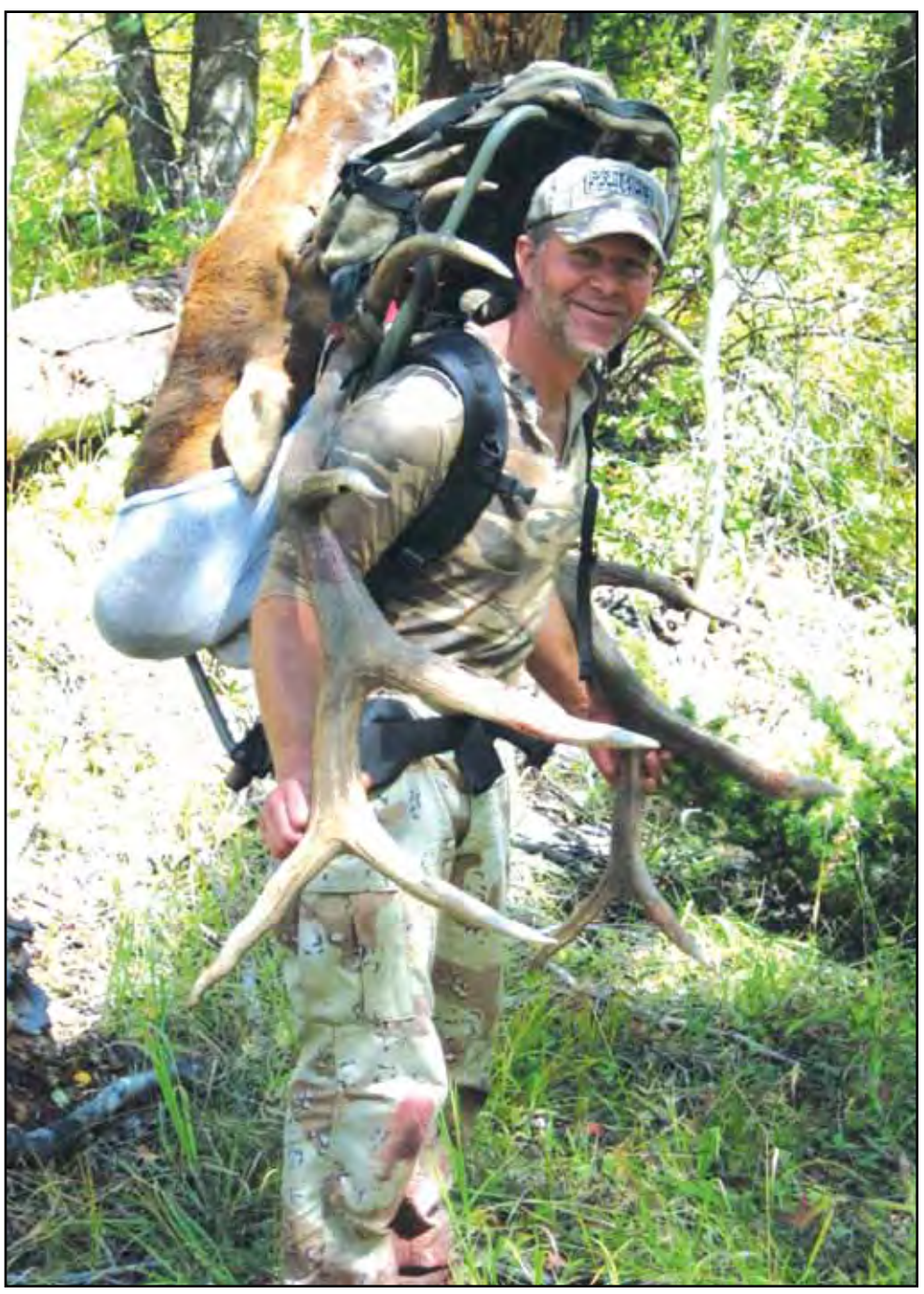
It wasn't just the sheer number of animals that made the hunt so special. The elk were unusually comfortable because the off-road vehicle traffic that once pushed the animals into the dark timber soon after daybreak was no longer present.

I was calling and Darrell had the tag. Darrell passed on five bulls because he glimpsed a sixth that made the others look like raghorns.

We nicknamed him the "moaner" because of his deep-chested, plaintive groans. Now and again we could catch a glimpse of his massive rack as he trotted through the timber trying to rein in his harem.

Late that afternoon we set up on the bull. He was pacing and bugling along a low ridge line above a wallow, and Darrell moved into position about 75 yards below him. Soon I heard Darrell's bow release, the crack of the arrow, and the big bull thundering back up the ridge into the timber. We followed his blood trail for about 100 yards, but with darkness falling we decided to leave the bull alone until the next morning.

We returned at daybreak and found the monarch on a logging road 300 yards from where Darrell shot him. After considerable celebration, we carefully quartered the bull and packed him downhill to the highway a half mile away. This was public land hunting at its finest!



Darrell Johnson heads out of the woods after a successful bowhunt in Carson National Forest. He took the animal in an area where state and federal authorities have started enforcing off-road vehicle laws, allowing game populations to thrive and hunters to enjoy improved opportunity. ***(Photo by Lane Warner)***

But we only have such a story to tell because the state Legislature, in 1973, passed the Habitat Protection Act. The act allows the Department of Game and Fish to work with private landowners or public land management agencies like the U.S. Forest Service to restrict vehicle use when the State Game Commission determines that off-road vehicle operations are damaging wildlife reproduction, management or habitat.

Wherever this act was properly implemented, wildlife flourished. Game and non-game species alike rely on large, contiguous, protected tracts of country for food, cover and breeding habitat. After

See "Carson," Page 5

Turkey season puts spring in step of many

New regulations aim to improve opportunity for 'fans of fans'

By Jim Bates
Special to the New Mexico Wildlife Federation

There's something about the gobble of a wild turkey at close range. It's not so much about hearing the sound as feeling it. The gobble has a certain reverberation that literally penetrates the soul and the psyche.

Those who experience it – and especially those who have called the turkey in – often are awestruck by the encounter. Over time, the pursuit of the wild turkey gobbler during the spring hunt can indeed become an obsession.

My first encounter with an amorous gobbler occurred in a remote canyon in the Gila Wilderness back in 1975. That bird came to my calling on the last day of the spring hunt. I was so transfixed by the performance he put on for me that cold and windy April morning that I was forever changed. As I stood over the magnificent bird, his iridescent feathers glistening in the early morning sunlight just breaking over the pine-covered ridge above, I knew I had found my hunting passion. Here, some 35 years and many, many similar hunts later, the flame that kindled that passion remains strong.

The fact is, I am not at all a rarity in my

See "Turkey," Page 3

INSIDE:

President's Message:

Private lands conservation work important to all

By Ed Olona, President
New Mexico Wildlife Federation

As New Mexico hunters, anglers and outdoor enthusiasts, we spend the vast majority of our time on public land. A survey by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service a few years ago found that more than 90 percent of resident hunters here use public lands. An overwhelming majority of days afield that involve hiking and fishing are also spent on public lands and waters.

So it can be too easy sometimes for the average New Mexico resident to overlook the importance of large and small blocks of private land to our wildlife and outdoor way of life.

We at the New Mexico Wildlife Federation also spend the majority of our time and efforts on public land—working to protect places like the Valle Vidal, Valles Caldera, Otero Mesa, the Rio Grande Gorge, the Organ Mountains, Whites Peak and other places where all citizens can enjoy wildlife and outdoor activities. However, working to implement programs and funding that support private land conservation is also a large and important part of what we do at NMWF.

This issue of the Outdoor Reporter is focused on shining a light on some of the landowners, organizations and programs that are advancing private land conservation in New Mexico.

Overall, New Mexico has been behind the curve on implementation of private land conservation programs, but a few recent developments point to a promising future – if opportunities are taken advantage of.

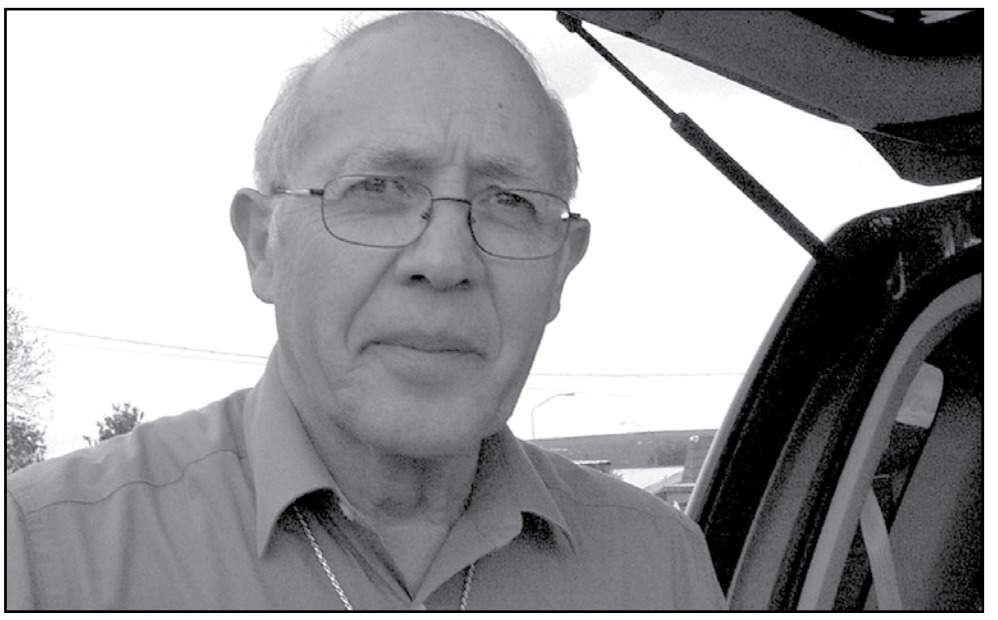
First, whether you use private land or not, I think we can all recognize that nobody wins when a farmer or rancher runs out of economic options and is forced to sell their land for development or subdivision. Even the person who exclusively relies on public lands will suffer from the loss of habitat across the fence, be they a waterfowl hunter who understands the importance of agriculture to migratory bird populations or a big game hunter who understands how critical it is for wildlife to be able to freely move across the landscape of different ownership.

Conservation easements are an important tool for landowners who do not want to see their property developed and subdivided. As Joel Gay explains in this issue, the conservation easement movement has been slow to take root in New Mexico, due in part to a lack of funds and in part to some popular misconceptions. But with the help of local and national land trusts (some of which are profiled on Page 11) and new sources of funding created with the help of NMWF and others, conservation easements are becoming a viable tool for more and more landowners in the state.

Funding for habitat restoration and improvement is a key tool to assist private landowners interested in wildlife conservation. Today, private land conservation programs in the federal Farm Bill total more than the entire budget of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. But even as funds for conservation programs have skyrocketed, the number of staff to implement them has plummeted. Many state wildlife agencies have picked up the slack by hiring their own biologists—a strategy that has proved successful in bringing money to the state and implementing habitat improvements on the ground. A coalition of groups including NMWF are working now with the state Department of Game and Fish to make the first such hire n New Mexico — an important development highlighted on Page 10.

Included in the most recent Farm Bill reauthorization is $50 million for assistance to state access programs like New Mexico's Open Gate. Voluntary access programs like Montana's Block Management or Kansas's Walk-In Access program have proven to be among the most popular things a state wildlife agency can do, with hunters, anglers and landowners alike. States that have dedicated time and resources to implementing such programs have provided an important financial option for landowners and opened millions of new acres of hunting and fishing for the public. New Mexico's Open Gate program (on Page 1), which was started with the help of NMWF, has been slowly growing and grabbing the interest of landowners and sportsmen, and as we were told by program coordinator Aaron Roberts, "The sky's the limit." It isn't known whether the Department of Game and Fish will have the staffing or planning in place to compete for a piece of the $50 million in new federal funding, but it certainly could if Open Gate is seen as a high priority in New Mexico.

Overall, New Mexico has been behind the curve on implementation of private land conservation programs, but recent developments point to a promising future – if opportunities are taken advantage of.



Ed Olona is president of the New Mexico Wildlife Federation, which has helped initiate several programs that benefit landowners and sportsmen alike.

In this issue we also take a look at NMWF's important work trying to involve sportsmen like you in the decision-making process. Part of that effort is encouraging public agencies to be open and transparent and to seek public involvement when making decisions that affect your wildlife, hunting and fishing.

We update you on Department of Game and Fish plans to revise the way it distributes antelope hunting licenses on Page 6. The department's unique and controversial system of transferable licenses differs from species to species but all have one thing in common—any decision affecting the license allocation is guaranteed to become controversial and politicized. Because this transferable license system is the single largest factor affecting your ability to draw a hunting license, it is important for you to stay involved as Game and Fish works through the process to a decision this fall.

We also take a look (Page 8) at the State Land Office's efforts to hide or mislead the public about Whites Peak. It shows why we need to continue asking for sunlight and public input into decisions that affect us as hunters and anglers.

And we examine a rarely used program called unitization (Page 9) that involves trading hunters' access to public land for access to private land, all in the name of resolving disputes for the landowner. Most of the unitizations appear to benefit both sides, but the public has been left out of the decision-making process.

The unitization process is used infrequently – only eight are in place now – but the idea is not new. I have correspondence in my files about the idea dating from 1977.

Back then, William O. Jordan, general counsel to Commissioner of Public Lands Phil R Lucero, wrote to say there is no statute requiring unitization of state lands under the Game and Fish Easement. That provision was put in by the Land Commissioner and the Game Department to take care of conflicts where land ownership is a checkerboard of public and private. The idea was to open additional lands for hunting and fishing that would otherwise be inaccessable for the reason that the hunter would have to get permission to cross private lands. In this connection, the Game Department has been looking after the hunter's interests.

New Mexico Wildlife Federation has been working since 1914 to encourage sportsmen's involvement in the issues that affect them, including working with private landowners to resolved issues that spring up. We believe this has been a successful effort to date and that it should continue into the future.

If you have not done so already, please join NMWF and support the work we are doing to make sportsmen's voices heard and to protect our outdoor way of life in New Mexico. Your support truly makes a difference.

New Mexico Wildlife Federation
OUTDOOR REPORTER

Sportsmen protecting our outdoor way of life since 1914

Opportunity • Habitat • Youth

The Outdoor Reporter is a quarterly publication of the New Mexico Wildlife Federation, a nonprofit group working to protect the rights and traditions of New Mexico sportsmen since its inception in 1914. NMWF is practical, solutions-oriented and successful, finding common ground with landowners and management agencies to produce results that benefit sportsmen and wildlife. To join or sign up for our Sportsman's Alert, visit www.nmwildlife.org.

(505) 299-5404 • 2610 San Mateo NE, Suite A, Albuquerque NM 87110 • www.nmwildlife.org

Join today!

NMWF members have been protecting New Mexico's outdoor way of life for nearly 100 years!

Your donation helps us continue working to protect the outdoor way of life for future generations of New Mexicans.

Members receive the Outdoor Reporter, our exclusive Big Game Hunt Draw Odds Report and more.

And by joining, you'll help shape the future of NMWF and protect the wildlife, habitat and access to public lands in our state.

It's quick and easy to join – Go to www.nmwildlife.org or fill out the form on Page 20.

. . . Turkey hunters rejoice when spring rolls in

Continued from Page 1

fascination with the wild turkey. At last count there were about 2.5 million turkey hunters in the United States, and the number continues to grow as more hunters are introduced to the chase. In New Mexico the number of turkey hunters, especially in the spring hunt when gobbling turkeys abound, has been on a steady increase for the last decade or so. And even though the number of hunters continues to rise, turkey populations have exploded across the country as well, presenting abundant opportunities for sportsmen to try their hand at the game.

Spring gobbler hunting, in particular, is addictive. It is hard to imagine that a 20-pound bird can captivate otherwise normal-seeming folks so completely, but the evidence is overwhelming. I know many hunters who have become star-struck with gobblers.

As far as I can tell, Jim Lane is one of them. His path to that fate started in Kentucky and ended up in New Mexico. After many years working in the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources, Lane is the new chief of the Wildlife Management Division for the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish.

Turkey hunting is big in Kentucky, and Jim and his wife Beth are serious turkey hunters. So naturally, when he accepted the position in New Mexico, his interests gravitated toward the state's wild turkey resource, its management policies and regulations.

As should be expected in anything as dynamic as wildlife management, rules and regulations are in a constant state of "tweaking," changing to suit conditions and the whims of the public. Part of Lane's job is to analyze the available information on our game populations and evaluate the need for modifying the management.

After looking into the status of New Mexico's wild turkey populations, management strategies and hunting opportunities, he said, "One of the first things I noticed was the relatively limited fall hunting opportunities. My initial reaction is that we should be able to provide more hunting in the fall than we are."

He has already recommended moving the fall hunt back from the current Sept. 6-14 dates to allow the young-of-the-year birds to mature, and to expand the season length. He is proposing a fall season that runs Nov. 1-30.

"From the response I have received from sportsmen, they seem to be in favor of trying this," Lane said. "The fall turkey population, from my perspective, is currently being underutilized. We should be giving our hunters more of a chance to take advantage of the situation we have."

He also has recommended changes in the spring hunt regulations. "I like the two-bird bag limit in that it gives turkey hunters added opportunity to participate in a hunt that is, fundamentally, about harvesting surplus gobblers."

He also said there is support for a one-bird daily bag limit as part of the two-bird season limit. The two-bird limit gives hunters more opportunity, but allowing two birds a day "just increases situational harvest," Lane said.

"Many turkey hunters understand that multiple bag limits on turkeys are not necessarily about increasing turkey kills; it's about creating the opportunity for more quality hunting experiences."

Hand in hand with expanding opportunity, the department continues to expand the range of the two main subspecies in the state, the Merriam's and the Rio Grande.

Wild turkeys, particularly in the spring, have a strong following among hunters. An estimated 2.5 million hunters buy turkey licenses every year in the United States. ***(Photo © 2000-2010 N.M. Department of Game and Fish)***

The state's ongoing trap-and-transplant program has gradually returned wild turkeys to areas where they had been eliminated by overharvest. Both subspecies are on the increase in many, if not most, of the habitats they occupy, Lane said.

Regardless of changes in hunting opportunity, Lane is adamant about improving mandatory harvest reporting, "not only for wild turkeys, but for all of our game species," he said. "We cannot reliably assess our hunting programs and our wildlife populations without knowing how many of them we are harvesting each year. This is one thing that I will be pushing for as soon as it can be implemented within the department."

When turkey season begins April 15, Lane and his family will be out chasing gobblers in the wilds of New Mexico for the first time. The setting will be a little different than Kentucky, but no doubt the obsession will be just the same. And when that gobbler comes to their calls, strutting and drumming at 15 yards and then hitting them with a penetrating gobble they will feel right to their soul, they will no doubt feel at home.

Jim Bates of Las Cruces has engaged in various outdoor pursuits in southern New Mexico for nearly 50 years. He is president of the New Mexico chapter of the National Wild Turkey Federation and a member of numerous other outdoor organizations, and is a regular contributor to the Outdoor Reporter.

Turkey rules up for change

The State Game Commission is scheduled to consider a number of proposed changes in the Turkey Rule this year.

Public comment is being taken on the proposals through April, with final action scheduled for Thursday, June 3, in Gallup.

Some highlights of the proposals include:

- Prohibiting hunting turkeys (and upland game birds) over bait.
- Increasing the spring turkey bag limit to two, without purchase of a second license, except in the Valles Caldera.
- Changing the fall turkey season to Nov. 1–30.
- Opening certain additional GMUs to spring and fall turkey hunting.
- Extending legal shooting hours by 30 minutes, closing half an hour after sunset.
- Legalizing crossbow use by any hunter, not just disabled hunters.

For more on the proposed changes in turkey regulations and to comment, go to the Department of Game and Fish Web site, **www.wildlife.state.nm.us.**

Private land a laboratory for wildlife habitat work

by Joel Gay
New Mexico Wildlife Federation

Sportsmen have always known that healthy habitat contributes to plentiful wildlife populations. But exactly what is healthy habitat? How tall should grama grass be to support quail and grouse? Is mountain mahogany better than oak for mule deer? How much piñon-juniper is necessary for elk, and how much is too much?

Private land is helping to provide the answers.

Think of it as a laboratory, said Lou Bender, a wildlife professor and researcher at New Mexico State University. "Private land managers have much more freedom to manipulate their lands than public land managers," he said.

And with private property making up a substantial portion of New Mexico's total land mass, Bender said, "Anything we can do to maximize habitat quality on private lands is going to benefit not only the private lands but public lands as well."

In recent years Bender has been conducting research in ranches in New Mexico, Texas and Mexico on habitat conditions – specifically, what is best for creating the healthiest mule deer and elk. Now he and his students are working with landowners to implement specific changes in their land management techniques.

The beauty of working on private land, he said, is that ranch and farm managers don't need approval to burn or bulldoze. They can plant whatever they want and cut down what they choose. If they want to ban all activities in an area for a week, a month or a year, they can.

Bender's research on mule deer and elk habitat suggests a selective approach works best. One size does not fit all, particularly if the land in question also has livestock on it, he said.

In piñon-juniper country, the forest canopy should be limited to around 33 percent, he said. If the forest is thicker than that, it provides great security for game animals but limits sunlight and restricts the growth of the grasses, shrubs and forbs (nonwoody, nongrassy plants such as clover) that wildlife require. If the canopy is less than 30 percent, the understory thrives, but the animals don't get adequate cover.

Once the forest cover has been thinned to the proper ratio, Bender says prescribed burns are often required, depending on soil type and time of year.

If the soil allows for grass, an appropriate number of livestock can actually benefit wildlife, Bender said. Deer and antelope can more easily reach low-growing forbs if cattle have reduced grass heights.

Research has shown that land managers must encourage a combination of trees, shrubs, forbs and grass to ensure that wild game achieve optimal condition and long-term survival rates. It also shows that the devil is in the details.

Ten years ago, Bender said, "The whole emphasis was to promote forbs," which offer the highest nutritional quality for deer and elk. But in much of the Southwest droughts occur roughly six years of every 10, and forbs are extremely sensitive to drought. If land is managed strictly to encourage forb growth, wildlife populations can fall by 50 percent after two or three years of drought.

Prescribed burns are one of many tools land managers on both public and private land can use to improve habitat for wildlife. ***(Photo © 2000-2010 N.M. Department of Game and Fish)***

New Mexico State University professor Lou Bender studies habitat and its effect on mule deer and elk. Much of his work perfecting habitat management techniques is done on private land. ***(Photo provided by Lou Bender)***

Bender's research suggests that land managers practice a form of xeriscape – encouraging woody, drought-tolerant plants such as mountain mahogany and oak as part of the habitat plan.

"It's not quite as nutritional (for wildlife) as forbs," but in six of 10 years the woody plants provide something to eat when the forbs die out, he said. And when the drought ends, the deer or elk population may be down only 10 or 20 percent rather than 50 percent in areas where they relied solely on forbs.

In central Texas, Dale Rollins is experimenting with land management techniques aimed at improving quail habitat, but with a nod toward white-tailed deer and cattle. That emphasis on both wildlife and livestock mirrors what he sees happening in Texas and elsewhere in the West, he said.

"The new landowner in Texas buys his ranch property not to grow steers or wheat but to grow quail and deer," he said. New Mexico may not be exactly the same, given that ranchers here have lots of public land to graze cattle on. But increasingly, ranch sales throughout the West are driven by the land's potential for wildlife and hunting rather than for livestock and ranching, Rollins said.

He's lucky – he manages the 4,700-acre Rolling Plains Quail Research Ranch as a nonprofit operation. But Rollins estimates that two-thirds of the ranches in his region of Texas get more income from wildlife than livestock. Some ranchers continue to run cattle only, perhaps because of the lifestyle, he said. "(But) they need to realize there's an opportunity cost to that livestock."

Landowners can have both livestock and wildlife, Rollins said, but his research suggests they have to start managing their land differently. It means running fewer cattle and looking at the habitat with new eyes.

In wildlife habitat management, Rollins said, 80 percent of the value comes from controlling just two factors: stocking rates and brush. "If you can tweak those knobs," he said, "you can have a great impact on wildlife."

For example, ranchers typically want to remove all the brush so more grass will grow for their cattle, Rollins said. Those who want wildlife need to leave brush in place, he said. "We focus on 'brush sculpting' – creating a landscape that accommodates wildlife."

If you want quail on your land, you have to reduce the stocking rate of cattle, he said. Birds need thick grass to nest in, which means cattle can't stay in one field until the stubble is down to the ground. Overgrazing is a major impediment to wildlife, Rollins said, and he tells ranchers they have to roll back their stocking rates if they want quail to thrive.

Habitat managers like Dale Hall, who runs the Habitat Stamp Program for the state Department of Game and Fish, say they rely on new research to help inform their decisions.

In fact, Hall said, Bender's work has already affected Habitat Stamp Program efforts. "It's changed a lot of our emphasis," Hall said, particularly the research that showed the importance of lush green growth during the springtime fawning season. "You have to keep that browse in good condition."

. . . Carson ends off-road mess, wildlife rebounds

Continued from Page 1

the act went into effect, populations of elk, deer, turkey, bear, grouse and other species exploded. In a very short period, the Camino Real District of Carson National Forest became one of the most sought-after hunting units in the state.

And hunting was just one activity that benefited from the Habitat Protection Act. Hikers, horseback enthusiasts and mountain bikers flocked to Taos because of the access to pristine and wild country. Today, the South Boundary Trail in the Camino Real District is considered one of the top mountain bike trails in the United States. The revenue generated by nonmotorized recreation in communities surrounding the Carson is at least $13.4 million, and helps create more than 170 local jobs.

The end result of these efforts is both profound and amazing. In just two months, wildlife activity markedly increased....

Since 2003, however, off-highway vehicle (OHV) sales have tripled in the United States, and the frequency of OHV activity has increased exponentially throughout Carson National Forest.

The Camino Real District was especially hard hit due to its proximity to Taos and the fast-growing resort communities of Valle Escondido and Angel Fire. Riders and woodcutters began to open up new routes and to use others left over from timber operations in the 1940s and '50s.

Now the once-pristine, wildlife-filled country is riddled with roads, literally driving out the wildlife. Confrontations between nonmotorized users and an irreverent minority of the OHV community escalated drastically.

But in July 2009, as part of the Travel Management Planning process, Carson National Forest took a bold and unprecedented step to curb this problem. New gates, berms and signs were placed from the end of Forest Road 10 east to Forest Road 706 in an area that was previously closed to OHVs but where illegal intrusions were commonplace.

When the new gates and signs were in place, more than 5,000 acres of prime public wildlife habitat was protected once again from illegal OHV traffic.

A handful of scofflaws have disregarded the closures and removed signs, staining the public image of the off-road vehicle community, but Game and Fish and Carson National Forest field officers have systematically confronted and shut down the lawless activities.

Some closure points had to be signed and bermed again and again. Sting operations were, and still are, regularly performed. Blatant offenders have been given warnings and citations.

Most important, Taos magistrate judges fully supported the prosecution of these citations. Fines and penalties were assessed to the full extent of the law to give the public a clear message that travel restrictions are a serious matter.

The end result of these efforts is both profound and amazing. In just two months, wildlife activity markedly increased – even along heavily used unauthorized routes. A significant portion of the elk herd that fled onto adjacent pueblo lands returned just weeks after the gates were installed. Last September, unprecedented numbers of elk rutted – uninterrupted – throughout the protected area. Turkeys have returned with a vengeance. One can now walk on roads recently traveled by ATVs and dirt bikes and find mule deer, bear, fox, bobcats, grouse and myriad non-game species.

This project was so successful that plans are now in the works to "re-protect" numerous other large contiguous tracts throughout the Camino Real.

The off-road community deserves a place in the national forest system, but OHV users need to have a heightened awareness of their sport's impact on wildlife, wildlife habitat and other forest users.

The OHV community has not been compromised with these new protection measures. In Carson National Forest alone, there are 91 miles of designated motorized trails and 2,641 miles of maintained roads open to the public. That's farther than from Taos to New York City, and more than enough to satisfy ardent OHV enthusiasts.

Field staff of the Forest Service (Kendall Clark, Art Abeyta, Drew Core, Amy Simms, Craig Saum, MaryAnn Elder and Greg Miller) and the Department of Game and Fish (Scott Draney and Gabe Maes) – should be applauded for their role in protecting wildlife and wildlife habitat. They took the initiative on their own accord and should be a role model for the entire state.

Darrell Johnson, Tobin Rippo and Garrett VeneKlasen savor the moment before starting the real work of a hunt — getting the animal home. Johnson took the big bull in an area of Carson National Forest near Taos where new off-road vehicle law enforcement efforts have paid off. ***(Photos by Lane Warner)***

However, other ranger districts, such as the Jemez and Pecos in Santa Fe National Forest, are not taking the lead on resource protection. Unfortunately, the habitat and wildlife degradation caused by OHV misuse will worsen until these folks follow the steps taken by their counterparts in the Carson National Forest.

Fortunately, the Department of Game and Fish understands the urgency of resource protection and plans to increase both education and enforcement efforts to encourage the OHV community to comply with safe, ethical riding practices.

Regardless of our personal stand on travel management, it is our moral obligation to pass precious resources such as public lands on to future generations in a state equal to or better than their current condition. Without the protection of large, contiguous tracts of prime wildlife habitat, these resources are in jeopardy.

It is time that other Forest Service ranger districts follow in the footsteps of the Camino Real. Protective measures throughout New Mexico's national forest system must be taken immediately if we are to maintain healthy and vibrant ecosystems. The benefits are obvious and enduring; the consequences of failing to act are tragic and very likely permanent, especially in our children's lifetime.

Garrett VeneKlasen is a lifetime resident of New Mexico and a contributor in both print and photography to Field & Stream, Outdoor Life, Gray's Sporting Journal and Fly Fisherman magazines.

He also is an OHV enthusiast of 16 years, as well as a board member of the New Mexico Chapter of Backcountry Hunters and Anglers, a national organization that advocates the establishment of public roadless areas.

Carson National Forest has stepped up efforts to enforce off-road vehicle laws, creating the right conditions for game animals to flourish.

Antelope management approaches fork in road

By Joel Gay
New Mexico Wildlife Federation

New Mexico's antelope herds are a prominent feature of the state's mix of public and private lands, and pronghorn management has been much the same – variable.

There is no statewide management plan for antelope. The protocol for determining harvest levels varies from region to region. Local managers are on their own when it comes to divvying up transferable tags to landowners enrolled in the Antelope Private Lands Use System, or A-PLUS.

But that's starting to change. Department of Game and Fish staff have written a statewide plan designed to standardize antelope management in New Mexico. The plan, which will be ready for public review in June, will eliminate variability in survey techniques, establish consistency in setting harvest goals and ensure that pronghorn are managed sustainably, said Cal Baca, manager of private lands programs for the department.

"We want to make antelope management biologically based and scientifically sound," he said.

The new plan will also be the foundation of another change in antelope management, one that resident hunters will be watching closely – a revised approach to allocating hunting opportunity.

Antelope hunting is a sore point for many New Mexico sportsmen because today only about 30 percent of all antelope tags are distributed through the big game draw. The remaining 70 percent are allocated as transferable authorizations to landowners enrolled in the program known as Antelope Private Lands Use System, or A-PLUS.

Department staff spent "a ton of hours" this winter and spring working on proposed changes to the A-PLUS program, said Jim Lane, chief of the Wildlife Management Division. That proposal will be one of four options that will be made public in June and presented to the State Game Commission for approval this fall.

Hunters will be able to weigh in on the proposals at two levels, Lane said. First, a group of stakeholders including hunters, landowners and others will consider all four department options later this spring and may suggest changes to the proposals. Revised options will then go out to the general public for comment in June. A final draft of the options will go before the Game Commission for approval Sept. 30 in Ruidoso.

The first step of the antelope overhaul – the management plan – is nearly complete, Baca said in late March. It will encompass every aspect of pronghorn management, from survey protocols and population models to buck-to-doe ratios and harvest levels.

One change the department hopes wins approval from the State Game Commission is eliminating the current system of "antelope management units," which differ from the game management units (GMUs) used for most other species. "They just don't serve a purpose," Baca said.

One of the last bits of the plan to come together is aerial population survey protocols, Baca said. The department currently surveys antelope herds in the spring, before the new crop of fawns is born. "We want to change the survey flights to late summer or early fall," and start including fawns in the population counts, he said.

Surveys typically give the biologists a good idea of a herd's buck-to-doe ratio, but Baca said New Mexico has never had a consistent strategy for using those ratios to determine optimal population size or composition.

"We don't have a good feel on whether we have too many bucks or too many does" in any given area, he said. As a result, the harvest strategy has varied from region to region, and managers have tended toward the conservative side, he said.

It's too early to say for sure whether the new survey techniques and population modeling tools will allow for a greater statewide antelope harvest, but Baca said an increase looks likely.

"We just feel like we've been very, very conservative in the past. That has affected both the public draw and private landowner allocations," he said.

> ***"We want to make antelope management biologically based and scientifically sound."***
>
> ***Cal Baca, NMDGF***

Hunters in New Mexico are clamoring for better odds in the draw for antelope tags to bring New Mexico more in line with other western states, and the most controversial aspect of the antelope overhaul facing the Game Commission this fall is how to modify the department's unique system of allocating licenses through transferable authorizations.

The antelope harvest is about 6,000 animals a year, but the chance of getting a tag in the big game draw is less than 10 percent. That's because roughly 70 percent of tags are currently allocated outside of the big game draw as transferable authorizations.

Reducing the resident hunter's chances even further is the state law that requires 22 percent of all tags in the big game draw be awarded to nonresidents. Between the transferable license system and the nonresident quota, resident hunters are only guaranteed about 25 percent of the antelope licenses in New Mexico, as compared to 90 percent in Wyoming, Arizona and other states.

Antelope management in New Mexico will come under a single statewide plan in a system being established this spring by the Department of Game and Fish. The new management plan will be the basis of possible changes in the state's unique – and some hunters would say unfair – program for distributing transferable licenses. ***(Photo © 2000-2010 N.M. Department of Game and Fish)***

The Game Commission specifically asked for options to increase resident antelope hunting opportunity. The department will give the commission four options, Lane said, including one that calls for no changes in A-PLUS.

Another option would eliminate A-PLUS altogether, and would allocate most antelope tags through the big game draw. Landowners who agreed to allow hunters on their land would be awarded one free authorization, Lane said.

If that option were approved, many hunters would have to negotiate with landowners (and likely have to pay a trespass fee) if they wanted to hunt on private land, but resident hunters would receive 78 percent of tags in the draw – a dramatic increase over the 25 percent they currently receive.

Many landowners would no doubt oppose such an option. They have grown accustomed to receiving transferable authorizations worth hundreds or even thousands of dollars apiece—and thereby selling access to tags rather than simply selling access to land.

There are other programs, however, that would allow the department to reward landowners for their contribution to wildlife. In many states where most or all tags are still distributed through a big game draw, wildlife agencies have aggressively pursued voluntary private land access programs that make direct payments to landowners for access to game species like antelope. The Department of Game and Fish has such a program, Open Gate, but the program is relatively new and has not used all available funding to lease land and reach its full potential (see Page 1).

A third option for revising A-PLUS will be the department's preferred alternative, and which has been the focus of discussion within the department this spring, Lane said. Dubbed the "2010 proposal," it would maintain A-PLUS, but would make some revisions. In early April, however, the proposal was still in draft form and Lane said he couldn't talk about it in detail.

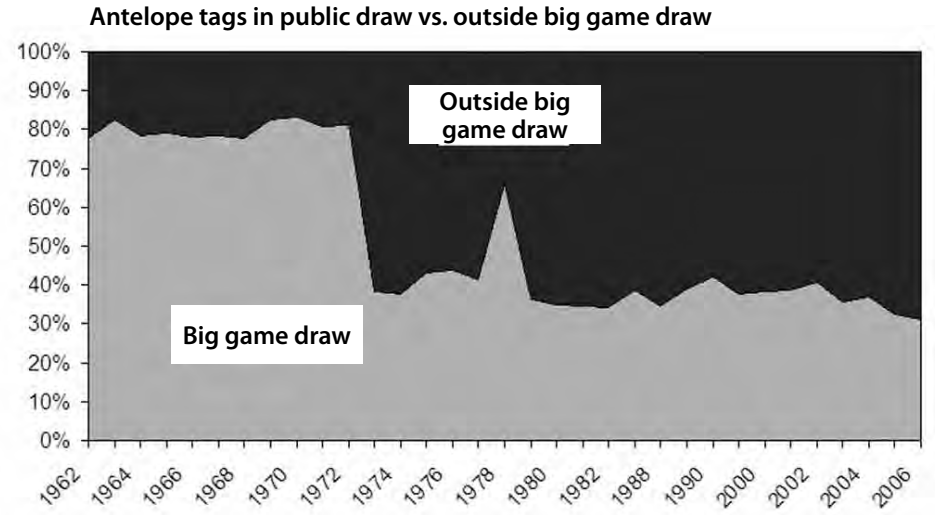
The fourth option is one devised by department staff in 2008 that would revise A-PLUS to more closely resemble the E-PLUS program for elk. It didn't get much support when it was first considered two years ago, however.

Lane said the department will convene a group of stakeholders later this spring to discuss all four options. Each option would be discussed in detail, including biological effects, the changes in hunting opportunity and tag allocation, he said.

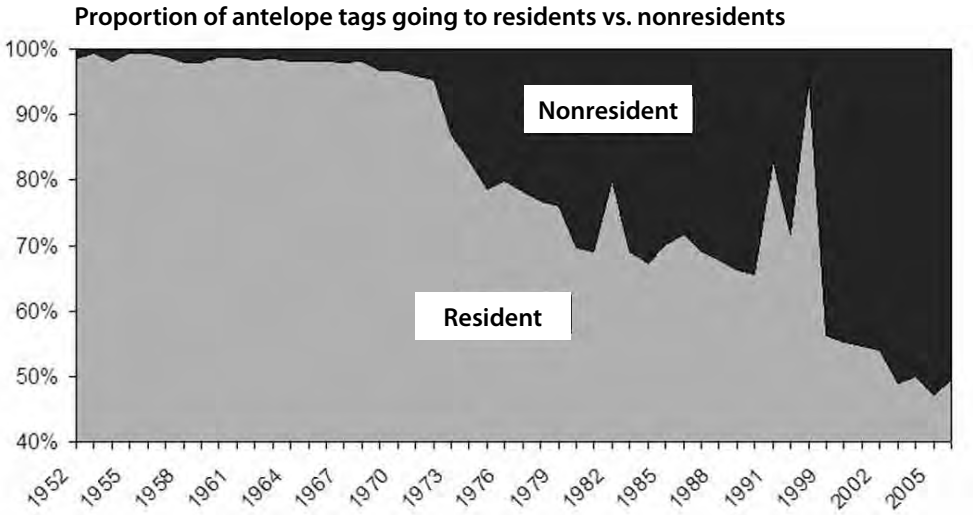
"We want to let the stakeholders hammer out the issues. Maybe there's another option out there the department hasn't considered, or maybe we could tweak something already on the table," Lane said.

Continued on next page

Antelope tags in public draw vs. outside big game draw



Proportion of antelope tags going to residents vs. nonresidents



Graphs are based on the best available data from N.M. Dept. of Game and Fish, but the data is incomplete. Graphs should be analyzed for general trends only, but show the percentage of licenses going to New Mexico resident hunters has declined dramatically over time.

Desert bighorn hunt plans called off for now

Desert bighorn sheep hunters will have to put their dreams on hold. The Department of Game and Fish has decided not to pursue an expansion of hunts this year.

Instead, at the behest of Director Tod Stevenson, the department is taking a step back, potentially to examine whether the desert bighorn sheep, a threatened species in New Mexico, meets the criteria for delisting.

Earlier this year the department announced that efforts to boost the population of desert bighorns around southern New Mexico had paid off and that sheep stocks are above the 500 mark. According to department analysis, there are enough animals to allow a harvest of at least 14 and as many as 26 rams. No more than two licenses are offered now – one through the big game draw and another through an auction or raffle aimed at raising funds for bighorn sheep management.

A public meeting with hunters to discuss the proposed expansion in opportunity was held this winter in Albuquerque where the idea was positively received, according to Elise Goldstein, the state's bighorn sheep biologist. At the time, she said she hoped the Game Commission would approve the additional hunts in time for the 2011-12 season.

But later in the spring, Stevenson put the hunt decision on hold to potentially review whether desert bighorn could be delisted – a process that could up to two years.

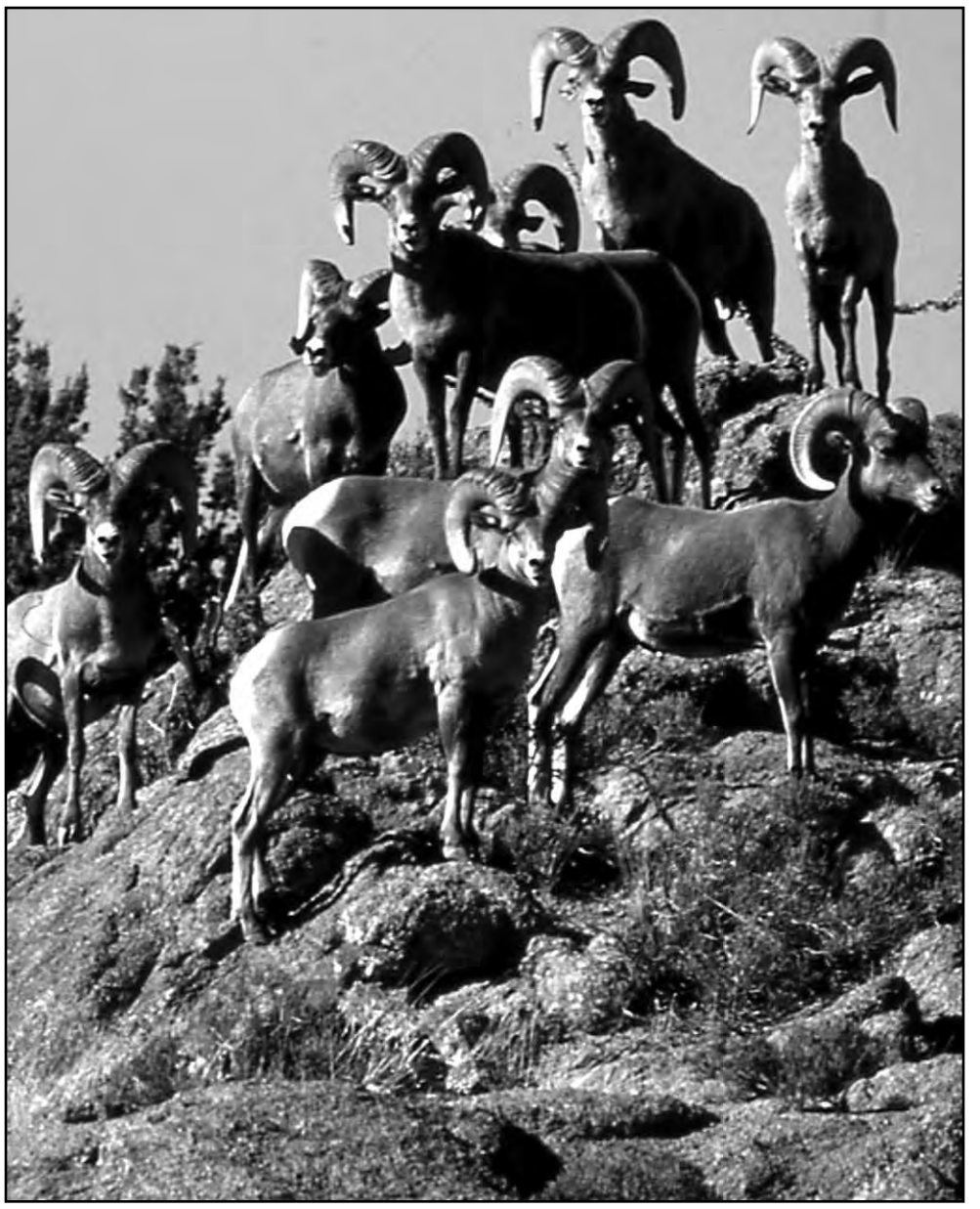
Desert bighorn sheep are on the state threatened species list, not the federal list, which means the delisting process would be somewhat less cumbersome. It would require convening panels of bighorn sheep experts to look over the data collected by the Department of Game and Fish and determine whether, in fact, the population met the criteria for delisting.

According to Goldstein, the criteria for delisting are a statewide population of at least 500, plus three distinct subpopulations of 100 or more each. She said the state's most recent survey found an estimated 550 animals – the midpoint of the fall survey. There also are two populations of more than 100 animals, and a third that is just under 100. That suggests the species is right at the threshold of whether it could meet the criteria for delisting.

If all New Mexico desert bighorn sheep stocks were delisted, it would clear the way for expanded hunts. However the delisting route would have potentially large drawbacks, as it would also remove other protections on desert bighorn habitat.

The state currently offers hunting on one state-listed threatened species, the Gould's wild turkey. It also allows hunts for two desert bighorn sheep in the Peloncillo Mountains – thanks to a move by the state Legislature that removed that particular desert bighorn stock from the threatened species list.

At press time the Department of Game and Fish had not fully worked out how it would proceed. To stay informed on this and other issues as they develop, sign up for the NMWF Sportsman's Alert and the Sportsman's News Roundup via e-mail at ***www.nmwildlife.org***.



Desert bighorn sheep have rebounded in New Mexico, but plans announced earlier this year by the Department of Game and Fish to expand sheep hunting opportunity have been put on hold. ***(Photo © 2000-2010 N.M. Department of Game and Fish)***

. . . A-PLUS revisions possible

Continued from previous page

After that process is through, the department will use stakeholders' comments and concerns and, if necessary, revise the options before putting them out for public comment in June. The department will then hold public meetings where the public can ask questions and learn more about the various options before submitting their own comments, Lane said.

The department will take those comments and revise the options further, and present the entire package to the Game Commission when it meets Aug. 28 in Albuquerque. And after the commission weighs in on the four options, a final version of each option will go out for 30 days comment, then voted on in late September.

"We're looking for a decision on Sept. 30, but the fall-back plan is a decision in December," which is the last chance to revise the 2011-12 regulations, he said.

Sportsmen who want to see additional antelope hunting opportunity in New Mexico need to keep track of the proposed changes and be prepared to speak up. The most recent effort to revise the Elk-Private Lands Use System, or E-PLUS, resulted in a loss of tags from the big game draw.

How will your voice be heard?

While many state wildlife agencies offer nontransferable hunting licenses to landowners and family, the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish's system of distributing transferable licenses is unique.

The transferable tag system is often dubbed a "landowner system." A few years ago New Mexico renamed its program the Antelope Private Lands Use System, or A-PLUS.

The department has had versions of the system in place for decades, but over time it has gradually grown to encompass a larger share of licenses. The percentage of antelope licenses allocated through the big game draw has dwindled over time, from more than 80 percent in years past to about 30 percent today (see graphs previous page).

As the percentage of tags allocated through the draw has declined, the percentage of antelope licenses going to residents has also fallen, from more than 90 percent a few decades ago to less than half today. As most sportsmen know, this system has created a market in which many landowners now sell access to tags instead of access to hunting land. Any reform to the way tags are allocated will prove the most controversial and difficult part of the decision that the State Game Commission will face this fall.

The options under consideration are:

1. The 2010 proposal, which would modify the A-PLUS tag allocation program based on stakeholder meetings.

2. 2008 regional proposal, which would manage antelope on more of a regional basis and is modeled after the E-PLUS program.

3. Eliminate A-PLUS transferable tag distribution system and put most tags into the big game draw. Landowners who agreed to allow public hunters on their land would get one license free.

4. No change in A-PLUS program.

Whites Peak:

Swaps show need for gov't transparency, accountability

By Joel Gay
New Mexico Wildlife Federation

As New Mexico hunters and anglers we rely on resources we all own – public land, public wildlife and public waters – so it is critical that the branches of government managing these resources are transparent and open. That's our best antidote to the sort of pay-to-play politics that too often infiltrate important decisions about how our resources are managed.

Nowhere has this been more clear than in Public Lands Commissioner Patrick Lyons's efforts to push through two large land swaps in the Whites Peak area.

You might think the proposed land exchange was advantageous to the public if all you knew about it came from Lyons' quotes and sound bites. More than a dozen news stories came out after NMWF issued a press release last November that broke the news about the swaps. But here we look at the commissioner's claims and show how our research turned up the real story.

All this is an example of why groups like NMWF and sportsmen like you need to keep demanding transparency and accurate information from elected officials and the agencies charged with managing our public resources.

A view from N.M. 120 looking south at a parcel of land the State Land Office would receive in exchange for prime deer and elk habitat on Whites Peak. ***(Photo by Ed Olona)***

Exposing the details: Loss of acreage, recreational quality

New Mexico Wildlife Federation President Ed Olona, who lives in Springer and has hunted in the Whites Peak area his entire life, said he first caught wind of the proposed trades in August 2009. Several acquaintances had received letters from the State Land Office saying their grazing leases in the Whites Peak area were being revoked and they wondered why.

Olona passed the concern on to the NMWF office in Albuquerque, and on Sept. 1 Development Director Michelle Briscoe asked the Land Office for documents and correspondence regarding the lease revocations. The records reviewed in mid-September showed that many longtime ranchers in the area were being kicked off longstanding leases. It also showed that several land exchanges were under way.

"It goes to show you that sportsmen can have an effect if they get involved."

Ed Olona
President, NMWF

At virtually the same time, mid-September, legal advertisements on the first of the proposed trades appeared in several northern New Mexico newspapers.

But it still wasn't clear what effect the proposed trades would have on sportsmen. It took days to sift through the documents. The Land Office hadn't provided a map of the trades so there was no way to make sense of the tract descriptions until Briscoe put one together. She had to compare the parcel numbers listed on the legal ads with information from the Mora and Colfax county assessors and create her own color-coded map.

That effort prompted Briscoe to submit a second records request, asking for all information about the proposed trades. In response, the SLO in early October turned over a stack of documents nine inches thick.

"That's when we discovered how far back this land trade actually went," Briscoe said.

"We could see the paper trail beginning in late 2007," she continued, "when the State Land Office and certain landowners started discussing it, picking out property and doing appraisals without anyone knowing it – until they sent letters canceling those grazing leases."

Her work showed that the Stanley and UU Bar trades posed a net loss to New Mexico sportsmen of more than 4,700 acres of traditional hunting land in Core Occupied Elk Range (COER) in the Whites Peak area. The largest single parcel the public would receive in the two trades, making up approximately 80 percent of the UU-Bar trade, was a nearly treeless parcel of land along the highway in a different game management unit.

Land Office efforts to publicize exchanges: Slim to none

The Land Office has said it sought public comment on the proposal, but one would never know it by simply reading the legal ads. In fact, at one point the State Land Office told NMWF, "There has not been an official comment period for any of the exchanges, and thus no public hearing or other formal means by which to receive comments."

Despite the controversy that surrounded past attempts to resolve state trust land issues in the Whites Peak area, the newspaper legal announcements did not even mention "Whites Peak" by name. Instead, the ads said the Land Office was considering an "exchange of land by sealed bid" in Mora and Colfax counties, followed by long lists of tract and parcel numbers.

Separate advertisements appeared for the Stanley and UU Bar trades, but neither mentioned those two prominent northern New Mexico ranches. Nor did the ads mention the other trades that appeared in the Land Office documents NMWF received.

So the public knew nothing about the trades until Nov. 20, when NMWF held a news conference on the steps of the State Land Office to publicize the plan. In subsequent days, Lyons called NMWF efforts "inflammatory and misleading," and told one newspaper he would close public lands in the Whites Peak area to hunting if the trade fell apart.

Trespass problems: Overblown in order to justify land trades

In news articles, op-ed pieces and video, Commissioner Lyons has called the Whites Peak area "a problem that demands a solution," where trespassing is "rampant" and an area "impossible to manage."

NMWF investigated these claims, too, and found that while trespass problems exist, they are, in the words of Department of Game and Fish Northeast Area Chief Leif Ahlm, "not unsimilar to any other unit that we have in the state."

His assessment is backed up by law enforcement reports from the Whites Peak area compiled by the Department of Game and Fish. NMWF posted the reports on our Web site and made sure reporters received copies to get a true picture of the law enforcement issues faced in the area.

The reports show a decreasing number of problems — and only two citations and two warnings for trespass in the most recent year for which a report was available. Four citations and warnings are still too many, but it's a far cry from the "rampant" and "unmanageable" situation Lyons misrepresented to the public.

Hunting opportunity: Trades would result in fewer tags

In a video interview by the New Mexico Independent, Lyons discussed the Stanley and UU-Bar trades and stated, "In the end there will be more permits being issued, more hunting opportunity."

Lyons also wrote in a letter to the Las Vegas Optic that the Game Department had been consulted about the trades.

Both claims make it sound as though hunters get a good deal from the trades. But when NMWF investigated, we found there would be approximately 50 fewer elk licenses available to hunters in the big game draw should the Stanley and UU-Bar trades go through.

Benefit to schools: Minimal and hinges on heavier grazing

Following public outcry about the Whites Peak proposals, the State Land Office said the two trades "could" have a yearly financial benefit to the Trust, which is the office's main duty. But a closer look found that the office's projected annual revenues from the two exchanges was just $651, and that was based largely on increased cattle grazing density.

On the street: Opposition to trades clearly majority opinion

News stories also can be misleading, and a front-page headline in the Santa Fe New Mexican that said "Hunters Divided on White Peak Swap" was particularly so. The story was based on an interviews with just three people, two of whom had financial or family ties to the ranches involved in the swaps.

NMWF prepared an inspection of public records request to the State Land Office following the story and found that more than 97 percent of comments received by the land office were against the trade proposals.

Government view: Guv pans, AG sues, court puts on hold

The concerns raised by NMWF and by northern New Mexico residents and sportsmen did not go unnoticed.

Members of the Legislature such as Rep. Brian Egolf of Santa Fe began to question the proposed trades. Gov. Bill Richardson issued a statement calling it an "ill-conceived deal." State Auditor Hector Balderas opened an investigation.

Attorney General Gary King also said his office would investigate, and then found the proposed exchanges so riddled with problems that the office petitioned the state Supreme Court to put the exchanges on hold. In February, the court agreed.

The Supreme Court heard the Whites Peak land trade case in mid-March, but the justices said the hearing raised more questions than it answered. They have asked for additional information from both sides by late April.

How the court will rule is anybody's guess, but NMWF President Ed Olona said he's proud that an organization of hunters and anglers was able to stop the State Land Office steamroller in its tracks.

"This all started with a few simple questions and now we're before the state Supreme Court," Olona said.

"It goes to show you that sportsmen can have an effect if they get involved. You have to be willing to ask the hard questions and to make our public agencies accountable. And then to stand up for your convictions."

‘Unitization’ swaps land to resolve complaints

Goal is to please both hunters and landowners, but concerns raised about process

by Joel Gay
New Mexico Wildlife Federation

A low-profile effort to resolve conflicts between hunters and landowners and simultaneously improve access to good hunting land is starting to take root in southeast New Mexico.

The Department of Game and Fish has approved eight “unitization” agreements over the years, in which an area of state land is closed to hunting but private land nearby is opened. The agreements are designed to benefit both sides, the department says, by eliminating a nagging issue such as trespass while opening the gate for hunters to previously inaccessible private lands.

If you’ve never heard of unitization, it’s little surprise. Negotiations are conducted between the landowner, the department and the State Land Office. Neither the original one-year agreement nor subsequent reauthorizations need the blessing of the State Game Commission. Sportsmen aren’t consulted, either.

The department says the unitization program is working as intended – “It’s a win-win situation” for landowners and hunters, said George Farmer, who manages the program in the department’s Roswell office.

Hunters appear to be taking the program in stride. Farmer said he hasn’t heard much praise from sportsmen, nor much opposition. “Other than one person, we have yet to have any complaints,” he said.

One person who does have concerns is Joe Rivera of Artesia. He and his sons have been hunting deer in GMU 34 for years, usually on thousands of acres of state land just east of Lincoln National Forest. Their jump-off point had been a 640-acre tract of state land that straddles CR 10 in Chaves County and provides access to public land both north and south of the road.

But when he went last year, Rivera said he found the 640-acre tract posted with signs saying “Private property – no trespassing.”

“How in the hell can this be private property,” he asked himself.

It wasn’t. It had been “unitized.”

Since the mid-1980s, the department has approved eight unitization projects, all of them in the southeast area, said Farmer. Although other hunters have said little about the program, pro or con, the questions and concerns raised by Rivera suggest the unitization program could do a better job keeping sportsmen informed about changes in the status of public hunting lands.

According to Farmer, some unitization projects begin when a landowner makes a complaint about hunters’ behavior. Trespassing is the most common problem, he said. The department itself also can propose unitization projects to resolve long-standing complaints, he said.

Regardless who suggests a unitization project, the department investigates the proposal with an eye toward ensuring that hunters don’t lose opportunity. The private land that would open for hunting must offer something equal to or better than the public land being closed, Farmer said. “We’re always looking out to make it better for the public hunter.”

The unitization must be approved by the department officer doing the inspection and the area chief, then by the department director and finally by the State Land Office – which has the power to grant or deny access to state trust lands.

Not all unitization projects are approved, Farmer said. Three have been nixed in recent years because the department thought they didn’t benefit hunters. The Land Office has denied other swaps, he said.

But the department doesn’t have a written policy in place regarding unitizations, and there currently is no scheduled opportunity to comment on proposed new projects or reauthorization of existing ones.

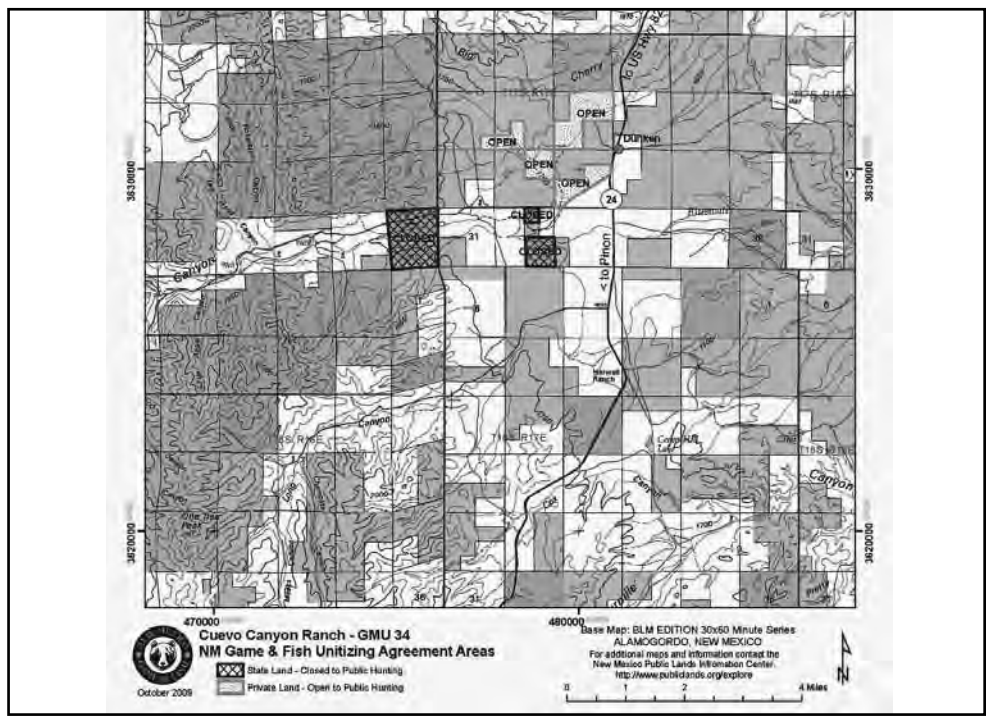
The department recently posted maps of most unitization projects on its Web site ***(www.wildlife.state.nm.us)***. In some projects hunters actually lose hunting acreage. In those cases, Farmer said, the newly opened private land offers better opportunity or access than the previously open public land.

But unless a hunter has personal knowledge of the area, it’s impossible to determine from the maps whether a project actually benefits the public. And in the Cuevo Canyon agreement, the value of the trade is disputed. Farmer said hunters come out ahead. Rivera says they don’t.

Here are some of the details of that trade, which was approved in July 2009:

According to the memorandum that explains the project, the landowner asked the department to close an adjacent section of public land primarily to help control hunters. “One continual problem,” the report says, “… is hunters shooting at deer in his wheat fields next to his house. Sometimes these hunters have shot in the direction of the occupied dwelling.”

Rivera said he was shocked to hear that hunters had fired toward the house, but when he asked for evidence the department had nothing on file, he said. The Chaves County Sheriff’s Department has no record of being contacted about shootings or any other matters by the landowner, a sheriff’s department dispatcher told NMWF.



The Department of Game and Fish considers the Cuevo Canyon unitization project (above) a good deal for all. At least one Artesia hunter disagrees and wants to see a more public process before the department approves projects in the future.

“You can’t close this land just because some guy alleges this to have happened,” Rivera said. “I want to see a police report.”

Trespass was another problem, the landowner told the department. According to the department report, “Officers have responded to this numerous times and have apprehended several violators.”

Rivera said the department could have solved the problem by closing the 640 acres of state land adjacent to the rancher and opening the next section farther west. That would have moved hunters another mile from the house, yet maintained public access on both sides of CR 10.

Instead, the deal eliminates the access point that Rivera and others have long used on CR 10. The department points out there is still access to the foothills where Rivera likes to hunt. But Rivera said hunters now must drive to the next canyon south and walk several extra miles to reach their traditional hunting grounds for deer, and more recently for elk.

The department report says the trade benefits hunters by providing access to four tracts of private land on the north side of Cuevo Canyon that has “high numbers of good bucks.” Farmer said the land may be flat, but it’s not unlike other areas of the state. “There’s a lot of deer in that country,” he said.

But Rivera, a three-term member of the state Habitat Stamp Program advisory committee who says he knows good habitat when he sees it, scoffs at the notion. Hunters got 910 acres of “flat pasture land along the highway that you couldn’t hide a damn jackrabbit on,” he said.

“Unitization is supposed to be a win-win situation,” Rivera said. “If this even resembled a win-win for sportsmen, I wouldn’t mind. But what did sportsmen gain and what did they lose?”

Leon Redman, who took over as Southeast Area chief last fall, said in March that he was reviewing all eight unitization projects to ensure they benefit hunters as well as the landowners. His sense so far is that unitization is working and that sportsmen are coming out ahead, he said.

“It’s been around a lot of years and a lot of people really like it because it gives them access to private land” they would otherwise be locked out of, Redman said.

He said he recently toured the unitization area Rivera has complained about, but in March said no decision had been made about reauthorizing that particular unitization. He encouraged anyone with comments about any unitization agreement to call him in Roswell, at (575) 624-6135.

Asked whether the department might consider creating a link on its Web site where sportsmen could post comments on proposed unitization projects or reauthorizations, Redman said it depended on demand. If enough sportsmen want to comment online, the department would probably consider it.

Even now, he said, hunters can e-mail comments regarding unitization projects to ***ispa@state.nm.us***.

Conservation incentives benefit landowners,wildlife

by Joel Gay
New Mexico Wildlife Federation

More and more landowners are taking advantage of state and federal incentives to voluntarily protect and improve wildlife habitat on their property.

Programs like the Farm Bill and tax incentives that encourage conservation easements are helping New Mexico landowners improve rangeland and riparian habitat on tens of thousands of acres of farms and ranches, both large and small.

New Mexico still lags behind other states in taking advantage of the incentive programs, but if a slew of new initiatives take hold, the number of landowners signing up to make habitat improvements could skyrocket.

Recent efforts by the state Legislature and others should make it even easier for landowners to protect and preserve their property, benefiting not just wildlife habitat but hunters and anglers statewide as wildlife corridors are kept open and game populations move across the landscape of public and private ownership.

Although 95 percent of New Mexico hunters use public land, nobody wins when prime wildlife habitat is lost to subdivision or commercial development, said Jeremy Vesbach, executive director of New Mexico Wildlife Federation. "Programs that help keep ranchers and farmers in business in the long run can benefit wildlife," he said.

The Farm Bill (see sidebar) is usually associated with agricultural subsidies, but it also contains millions of dollars for wildlife habitat improvement on private land. The bill is often called the biggest conservation program in the world.

The money typically goes unspent, however, said Randy Gray, a retired U.S. Department of Agriculture official who worked more than 30 years with Farm Bill habitat programs. The problem, he said, is a shortage of personnel within the Natural Resources Conservation Service, or NRCS.

"There are not enough boots on the ground working with landowners to implement these wildlife programs. There are fewer NRCS employees now then when I started working there more than 30 years ago," said Gray, who now is the Farm Bill coordinator for Intermountain West Joint Venture, a nonprofit based in Missoula, Mont.

Gray and others are hoping to change that in New Mexico. Agencies and nonprofit organizations including the state Department of Game and Fish, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Natural Resources Conservation Service and Intermountain West Joint Venture have been working together in hopes of hiring a biologist whose primary function would be to help landowners make conservation improvements, in part by tapping Farm Bill programs.

Gina Dello Russo, an ecologist at Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge and a member of the coordinating effort, said the new biologist would be based in Socorro with a goal of assisting landowners who want to conduct conservation efforts on their land in the middle Rio Grande corridor.

The Malpai Borderlands Group (see Page 11) was formed by ranchers in the Bootheel of New Mexico and across the border in Arizona in 1993 to protect and conserve fragile habitat on private lands within that million-acre region. Warner Glenn, one of the co-founders of the Malpai group, put his 23-section cattle ranch into a conservation easement. Here he is taking a break from ranching to exercise his hounds. *(Photo by Raymond Harris)*

"The middle Rio Grande has a lot of unique pressures on it," including the ongoing loss of agricultural land and water rights, both of which affect wildlife, Dello Russo said. The coordinating group would like to see similar positions established elsewhere in New Mexico in the future, she said.

The jointly sponsored private lands biologist would be a first in New Mexico, but there are about 150 around the country, including four in Colorado, three in Utah and two in Arizona, according to Gray. They are liaisons between landowners and state and federal agencies with the express purpose of helping assist landowners who want to improve their land as wildlife habitat, he said.

"There are not enough boots on the ground working with landowners to implement these wildlife programs."

Randy Gray, Retired NRCS official

Applying for a Farm Bill grant can be a daunting process, according to those familiar with the paperwork. The new private lands biologist will know what Farm Bill programs are available, could help guide the landowner through the application process and provide links to other resources.

"When these partnership biologists go to work, they're not thinking about center-pivot irrigation," Gray said. "They're thinking about habitat. They're biologists."

The private lands biologist – who Dello Russo said should be hired this year – will start off with an important boost. The Natural Heritage Conservation Fund, which the Legislature approved and Gov. Bill Richardson signed in March, is a new source of capital for, among other things, conservation projects that need matching funds for federal grants.

The conservation fund was passed with the support of NMWF and other groups that support conservation efforts on private and public lands.

Lack of cash has been a stumbling block to some conservation efforts, said Michael Scisco of the New Mexico Land Conservancy. Establishing conservation easements requires surveys, legal documentation and other expensive work, and some landowners shy away from them simply because of the costs. The new fund could help pick up the tab, permitting more landowners to participate, he said.

The conservation fund also could allow landowners to take advantage of Farm Bill programs that require a non-federal matching grant. For example, Colorado has received more than $10 million in the Farm Bill's Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program; lack of matching grants has limited New Mexico to $800,000, Scisco said.

Cecilia McCord of the Rio Grande Agricultural Land Trust said efforts that help preserve agricultural land and the farming way of life in the Rio Grande valley also benefit wildlife. When a farm is broken up and subdivided, the land can no longer support wildlife to the same extent, McCord said.

"Fragmentation of farm land and loss of water rights are key," she said.

In the rapidly developing Rio Grande corridor, even small conservation easements can help preserve open space and provide wildlife habitat. The New Mexico Land

Continued next page

Conservation Easements 101

A conservation easement is a voluntary agreement between a landowner and a qualified conservation organization that helps landowners protect significant resources such as productive agricultural land, ground and surface water or wildlife habitat.

One thing conservation easements don't do is automatically allow public access – not unless the landowner wants it.

Landowners who voluntarily give up development rights on their property get something tangible in return: tax relief. Because land is worth less without development rights, the easement is considered a charitable donation. The easement provides certain short-term state and federal tax deductions for the landowner, as well as lower property taxes.

A conservation easement also reduces the potential estate tax, which can mean the difference between keeping the land "in the family" and having to sell it just to pay the IRS.

New Mexico is one of several states that offers an additional incentive. Property owners who don't have enough income to use all the tax credits from a conservation easement can transfer their unused tax credits to a third party for cash.

This important transferable tax credit helped Colorado protect more acreage by conservation easements than are in the state park system. NMWF and other groups helped convince the New Mexico Legislature to adopt the same program here.

Farm Bill offers billions for private land conservation efforts

Congress reauthorizes the Farm Bill every six years, and in recent years the bill has provided billions of dollars for conservation programs on private land. The 2008 bill nearly doubled the amount available for conservation, to $7.9 billion. Highlights include:

• Authorized $50 million for a new Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program, which will fund programs like New Mexico's Open Gate (see Page 1).

• Reauthorized $85 million annually for the Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program, or WHIP, which has been used for projects like the installation of wildlife watering facilities on overgrazed land near Estancia, creating a safe haven for wildlife.

• Expanded the Environmental Quality Incentives Program by more than $1 billion, helping fund projects like that of Portales-area rancher Jim Weaver. He has received EQIP grants to improve lesser prairie chicken habitat on his ranch near Causey.

• Extended federal tax credits for conservation easement donations by private landowners.

Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture

Land trusts come in many shapes, sizes, interests

NM Land Conservancy works statewide

Vernon Casados had worked on the 200-acre farm as a boy and teenager, then bought it from the man who treated him like a son. On the banks of the Rio Chama he raised cattle and hay. But after developing cancer, he couldn't work the land like it required. He lost markets. Then the economy tanked. Reluctantly, he put up his farm for sale.

"The first guy had three questions: If I owned the water rights, if they were transferable, and what were the subdivision rules in the county," Casados recalled from his new home near Las Cruces. "I knew this guy wanted to chop it up into little ranchettes, and I didn't want that."

Instead, he worked with New Mexico Land Conservancy to put his ranch into a conservation easement, then sold it to the wool-growers cooperative in Los Ojos "with the assurance that it was never going to be subdivided, broken up or trashed," he said. "It was a win-win situation – it gave me some cash and the land stayed in the community."

New Mexico Land Conservancy has about 76,000 acres in easements, including a growing collection around Alegres Mountain, south of Pie Town. Current or proposed agreements protect the southern flank, and landowners on the north side are talking about the same, said the conservancy's Michael Scisco.

"It's our ultimate goal to protect all the property" ringing the mountain, creating a wildlife corridor between Apache and Cibola national forests, he said.

Sid Goodloe has been clearing brush and doing other habitat conservation work on his ranch for more than 50 years. He and his wife Cheryl created the Southern Rockies Agricultural Land Trust specifically to help working ranches in New Mexico continue to exist by putting them into conservation easements. ***(Photo provided by Sid Goodloe)***

Trust for Public Land sets sights on forests

Protecting agricultural land from development is a common type of conservation easement, but the Trust for Public Land is working at higher elevations – forest lands in private ownership.

Working with willing landowners and partners including the U.S. Forest Service, the state Division of Forestry and the nonprofit Forest Trust, TPL has helped protect tens of thousands of acres of privately owned forest land from subdivision or commercial development in New Mexico since 1982.

One recent example is east of Tierra Amarilla, in the Rio Vallecitos drainage near Hopewell Lake. TPL Executive Director Greg Hiner said his group is helping a family put its 11,700-acre ranch into a conservation easement, ensuring that the ranch will never be developed and protecting valuable habitat for elk and trout in the Rio Vallecitos headwaters.

The basis of much of TPL's work in New Mexico is the Forest Legacy Program, which is funded by the U.S. Forest Service and administered by state forestry agencies. To date almost 2 million acres of private forest nationwide have been protected through the program.

Southern Rockies Agricultural Land Trust focuses on working ranches

Sid Goodloe had been doing conservation work on his 3,500-acre ranch north of Capitan the old-fashioned way for more than 50 years – with shovels, chainsaws and heavy equipment. But he put the ranch into a conservation easement after pondering his own mortality, he said. He feared that taxes would force his heirs into selling the ranch.

"I knew the buyer would be a developer, and all the work I'd done in wildlife habitat and wetland protection would go down the tubes because the ranch would be covered in roofs and pavement."

When he first considered the conservation easement idea, New Mexico cattlemen were not interested, Goodloe said. Their brethren in Colorado turned out to be more concerned about them. In fact, the Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust now has conservation agreements on more than 350,000 acres – more land than is contained in Colorado's state park system.

Goodloe could have gotten an easement through another land trust, but decided New Mexico farmers and ranchers needed their own. In 1999 he and his wife, Cheryl, launched the Southern Rockies Agricultural Land Trust, which now has agreements on 13,000 acres. The participating ranches are still working ranches. The land trust simply monitors them to make sure the conservation agreements are upheld.

Ranch property values in his area have risen more than 10-fold as southcentral New Mexico gets "discovered" by rich retirees. But Goodloe continues to run cattle, raise some crops and whack away at the ever-encroaching pinon-juniper forest with his chainsaw, he said.

Since protecting his own ranch with a conservation easement, "Nothing's changed at all, except that it can't be developed," Goodloe said. "When I die, it will be valued as agricultural property only. I don't have to worry any more."

Malpai Borderlands Group tackles regional issues in Bootheel

In the Bootheel of New Mexico and across the border in Arizona, a unique group of landowners is working together to improve the million-acre area on a landscape scale basis.

Malpai area ranchers had been meeting since early 1990 and organized as a nonprofit land trust in 1993. They established a grassbank in exchange for conservation easements on ranch lands. The original grassbank included the Animas Foundation, which had purchased the Gray Ranch in 1994 and agreed to allow other grassbank members to "rest" their land by transferring their grazing operations to the Gray Ranch.

Since then, activities have included purchase of conservation easements, fire planning and prescribed burns, watershed improvements, a multi-species Habitat Conservation Plan, and cooperation with government agencies and other nonprofits.

In the Malpai area, there are approximately 77,500 acres of private land under Malpai Group conservation easements. Members also have worked with state and federal agencies to restore native grassland and savanna and expanded the use of prescribed fire as a natural landscape process.

Malpai spokeswoman Wendy Glenn said both wildlife and the general public benefit from the wide-ranging work of the borderlands group.

"Instead of having all kinds of buildings and roads in that area, there are large areas of open space land that cannot be disturbed," she said.

. . . Idea of conservation easements gaining ground among landowners

Continued from previous page

Conservancy has easements as small as two acres (in Corrales). It also has one of 50 square miles, near Magdalena.

Conservation easements and other habitat-enhancing programs have been embraced by some landowners. The larger agriculture community has been slow to embrace the concept, but is starting to come around, according to Sid Goodloe, a rancher near Capitan.

He said his fellow cattlemen were either neutral or opposed to the concept of conservation easements when he started talking about them more than a decade ago.

"You didn't just go up to a rancher in southeast New Mexico and start talking about them," he laughed. "You'd get run off."

Goodloe and his wife persevered, creating the Southern Rockies Agricultural Land Trust. The trust was created by and for working ranchers and now holds conservation easements on 13,000 acres.

Other ranchers are starting to see the benefits of conservation easements, he said. The New Mexico Department of Agriculture has even put out publications explaining what easements are all about, he added.

Nowadays Goodloe said he gets a warmer reception when he brings up conservation easements, especially with those who are thinking long-term.

"If people on working ranches are interested in protecting that property for their families," he said, they should be interested in conservation easements. "We give them all the help we can."

. . . Open Gate gives landowners cash, sportsmen access

Continued from Page 1

erty, Roberts said. That reflects the state's decision to expand the program slowly and carefully. It also means there's a lot of room to grow, he said.

When Roberts took over the fledgling operation two years ago, it was leasing 20,000 acres. Last year, Open Gate offered 120,000 acres and had right-of-way agreements that provided access to another 60,000 acres.

Asked how big the program could get, Roberts said 500,000 acres is a goal. By way of comparison, Montana has about 8.5 million acres enrolled in its Block Management program.

In all, about 30 landowners have enrolled in Open Gate, he said. Why do they do it? "I think the money is the driving force," said Roberts. With the average lease paying around $1 an acre, however, "This isn't going to make anyone rich."

But there's more to it than that, he added. "A lot of landowners support the hunting heritage and really like to participate in providing sportsmen with opportunity," Roberts said.

Richardson, who has leased a 25,000-acre ranch in GMU 41 for more than 20 years, said he appreciates the money and likes helping out sportsmen, but also sees two sides to Open Gate. Most bird hunters are courteous and respectful, he said. When he opened his ranch to youngsters who had drawn a deer tag, it was heartwarming, Richardson said. "To see those little kids and the fun they had was just great."

But Open Gate has a flip side, he said. He has had a few hunters drive on muddy roads and leave ruts or discard their spent shotgun shells. It doesn't happen often, and he was quick to say he doesn't take it personally.

"I called Aaron and told him to get ready – I was going to send him a big old box of shotgun shells," Richardson said with a laugh.

All in all, however, Richardson said the pros of Open Gate outweigh the cons. And he'd even start encouraging his neighbors to enroll if the program adopted a few changes.

Isaac Martinez, 13, of Española, rests after harvesting a white-tailed deer on Jim Frank Richardson's ranch in GMU 41. Richardson's ranch is one of many enrolled in the Open Gate program. ***(Photo provided by Derwin Martinez)***

IF YOU GO

Check out the Open Gate program at ***www.wildlife.state.nm.us.*** There are maps and information about opportunities for upland birds, turkey and deer.

In fact, changes are already in the works. As part of this year's overhaul of all big game rules, the Department of Game and Fish is proposing several "sideboards" that Roberts said should improve Open Gate for hunters and landowners. This is the first major review of the program since it was established.

One critical need, Roberts said, is the ability to track who is using Open Gate properties. Right now, no one knows.

The department might adopt an online check-in system, though probably not until the 2011-12 license year, he said. The system could work for hunters and anglers like a golfer who needs reservations to use a course, Roberts said. Before going to one or more Open Gate properties, sportsmen would have to check in. "If you plan ahead, that shouldn't be a problem," he said.

Registration would help in several ways, Roberts said. Game and Fish could use the information to tell how many people use each lease property. The data could be the basis for adjusting lease payments or determining future Open Gate needs, he said.

Online registration would also help landowners like Richardson figure out who left behind a box of empty shotgun shells or trashed a road. Currently, anyone enrolled in the Open Gate program can require sportsmen to check in, but some ranches are enormous or perhaps the manager is off-site, making it difficult for hunters to stop by the owner's house.

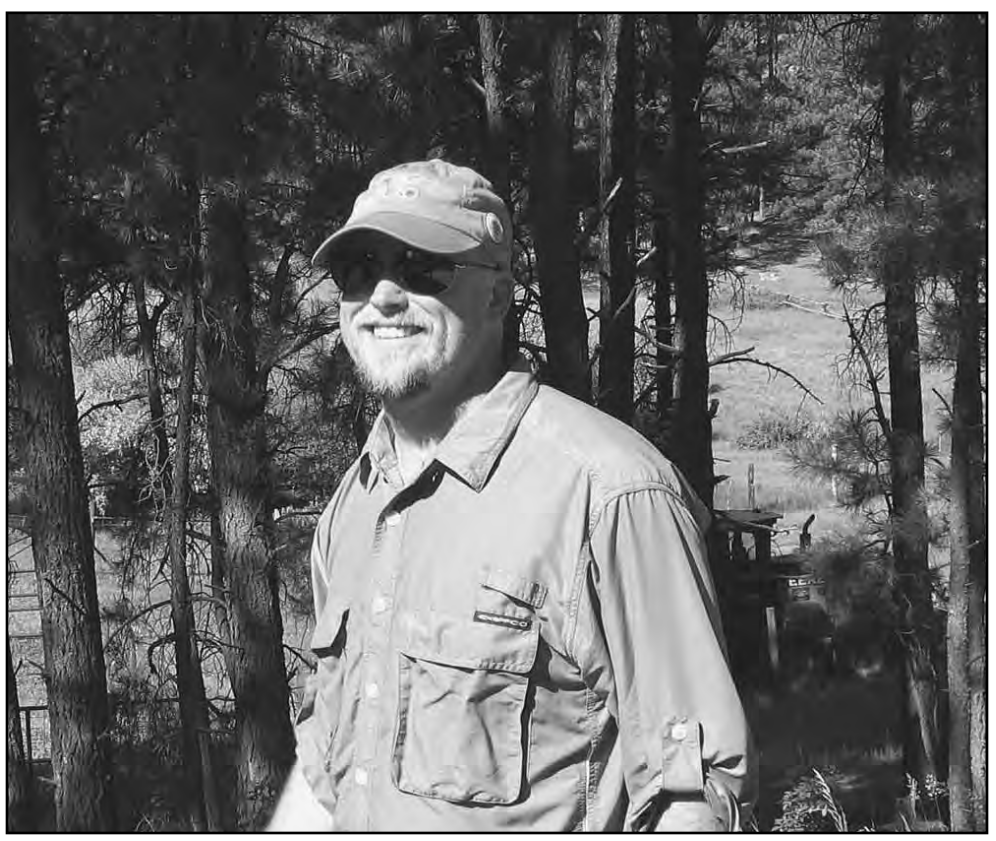
The other top priority for amending Open Gate is to "give the program some teeth," Roberts said. "Now it's up to the individual sportsman to be ethical, responsible and respectful of the private land." The proposed regulations will contain a list of dos and don'ts, from vehicle restrictions to an alcohol ban. Violators of the Open Gate rules could be charged with trespass.

"Once these rules are in place, we will have the authority to enforce them" and ensure that sportsmen treat the land with respect, Roberts said.

New Mexico has a long way to go before matching Montana or Wyoming in terms of leasing private land for sportsmen's access, but it's a start, Roberts said. The Open Gate program could easily double in size, to around 250,000 acres, using the existing fee structure. With additional funding (see Farm Bill sidebar below), the state eventually might provide access to as much as 1 million acres, Roberts said.

He is optimistic that landowners will flock to the Open Gate program as improvements are made and as word gets out about it. Roberts relies on participating landowners to advertise the program, although he also made a bid to attract ranches through the Antelope Private Lands Use System, or A-PLUS.

Eventually he hopes to see competition among landowners to enroll their lands in Open Gate. Additional funding may be available to assist landowners with habitat improvement projects, Roberts said, making their land even more attractive to game animals, and therefore to sportsmen.



Aaron Roberts, Open Gate coordinator for the Department of Game and Fish. ***(Photo provided by Aaron Roberts)***

Farm Bill could give Open Gate huge boost

The federal Farm Bill that Congress approved in 2008 contains $50 million for states to use for land lease programs like Open Gate. A cash infusion could help the program expand dramatically.

Unfortunately, there's a hitch. The U.S. Department of Agriculture, which controls the funding, still hasn't approved the final rules that will make the money available, said Terry Riley of Tijeras.

Riley should know – he helped write the funding measure in 2002 when he worked for the Wildlife Management Institute. "We'd been working on it since the 1990s," and it took until 2008 to get the language in the Farm Bill. Now everyone is waiting for the rules, he said. "You have to be persistent."

Once the rule is approved, states could apply for grant money. As the rule is currently written, the federal funds could be used to lease land through programs like Open Gate, or to help private landowners improve wildlife habitat on their property for public hunting or fishing.

Programs like Open Gate are a boon to both the public sportsman and to landowners, Riley said, particularly in states where virtually all the land is privately owned. But even in New Mexico, which is roughly half public and half private land, access programs are important.

"These have been the most popular programs in every state they're in," he said. Even more than a win-win situation, Riley said, "It's a win, win, win, win, win."

NMWF analysis

Is full fee up front system working as intended?

By Michelle Briscoe
New Mexico Wildlife Federation

In the 2009-10 hunting season that recently ended, the Department of Game and Fish began implementing full fee up front for online applicants. This was an initiative passed by the Game Commission in December 2008 with the hope of increasing hunters' odds in the big game draw.

The assumption was that requiring the full fee up front for everyone applying for a hunt would reduce the number of applicants to those truly committed to hunting. No public comment period or formal analysis of the impacts of full fee up front were completed prior to its adoption.

Due to the short window to implement the requirement, only the full fees for pronghorn, bighorn sheep, ibex, javelina and Barbary sheep were required up front for the 2009-10 season. Full fee up front was applied to all species for the upcoming 2010-11 season, but data for that drawing is not yet available.

New Mexico Wildlife Federation members were split on the full fee up front initiative. A survey of members in June 2009 found that nearly 38 percent favored the system, while 27 percent opposed it. But the largest group of respondents, just under 40 percent, said the system "should be evaluated on what effect it has on the number of applicants and the department should request my input before further changes are made."

NMWF has begun analyzing the full fee up front system in an effort to determine its effects. This analysis is preliminary, however. The first year did not require full fee up front for the most popular hunts – deer and elk – so more years of data will better illustrate the trends. It is also impossible to isolate the effect of full fee up front from the overall economic downturn and other changes like rising application fees. And even relatively small changes in tag allocations – such as the number of bighorn sheep tags rising from 15 to 16 – can dramatically affect the odds.

Given those caveats, there are a few trends worth noting:

1) Applications for all species were down, whether they were full fee up front or not. This is likely due to the economy. The largest single drop in applicants was nonresident elk hunters—which was not yet a full fee up front species—with 3,481 fewer applicants than the year before.

2) But applications dropped at even higher rates for full fee up front species. For instance, nonresident applications for bighorn sheep, (the cost of which rose from $8 to $3,172) fell by 57 percent. The drop in nonresident sheep applications also affects resident hunter odds because there is no quota applied to bighorn, oryx or ibex.

3) It is difficult to isolate the effects of full fee up front after its first year. Since the fee change applied only to less popular species, it is hard to determine how much effect it is having. For instance a drop of 1,524 resident applications for bighorn sheep (a full fee up front species) is an almost 40 percent change. But a larger total drop of 1,992 resident applications for deer (not a full fee up front species) is less than a 4 percent change from the year before.

The bottom line is that it seems full fee up front is making a difference in the number of applicants. How much difference is unclear, but another year of data will help to illustrate trends.

We also do not yet know anything about who is dropping out of the draw. For instance, are youths leaving at a higher rate? One of the concerns we often hear from NMWF members is the family's financial ability to submit applications for their children or others they would like to take hunting. Youths often apply for unrestricted (adult) hunts and are not easily tracked in the draw odds reports. While the proportional reduction in first choice applicants for youth-only bighorn sheep and ibex hunts were even higher than for unrestricted hunts, drastic shifts in available licenses for other species like javelina and deer actually resulted in more youth applicants. These issues greatly skew the analysis so trends are impossible to determine without a detailed analysis.

We hope to see a comprehensive analysis from the state Department of Game and Fish regarding the impact of full fee up front in the future, but until then New Mexico Wildlife Federation will continue to analyze the data and keep you informed.

Changes in draw odds in first year of new system

Species	License Year	Resident Licenses	Resident 1st Choice Applicants	Resident Draw Odds	Resident 1st Choice Applicants Change	% Change Resident 1st Choice Applicants	Nonresident Licenses	Nonresident 1st Choice Applicants	Nonresident Draw Odds	Nonresident 1st Choice Applicants Change	% Change Nonresident Applicants
FULL FEE UP FRONT											
Antelope											
	2008-09	1,111	13,912	7.99%			308	3,417	9.01%		
	2009-10	1,108	11,541	9.60%	-2,371	-17.04%	312	2,227	14.01%	-1,190	-34.83%
Bighorn Sheep											
	2008-09	4	3,857	0.16%			11	5,513	0.16%		
	2009-10	10	2,333	0.34%	-1,524	-39.51%	6	2,359	0.34%	-3,154	-57.21%
Ibex											
	2008-09	106	2,758	3.32%			54	2,058	3.32%		
	2009-10	134	1,925	6.03%	-833	-30.20%	51	1,145	6.03%	-913	-44.36%
Javelina											
	2008-09	1,746	3,068	56.91%			154	182	84.62%		
	2009-10	2,240	2,393	93.61%	-675	-22.00%	120	125	96.00%	-57	-31.32%
FEE PAID IF DRAWN											
Deer											
	2008-09	26,054	51,800	50.30%			5,028	11,216	44.83%		
	2009-10	26,187	49,808	52.58%	-1,992	-3.85%	5,238	9,616	54.47%	-1,600	-14.27%
Elk											
	2008-09	15,629	45,314	34.49%			3,714	20,224	18.36%		
	2009-10	15,530	43,824	35.44%	-1,490	-3.29%	3,837	16,743	22.92%	-3,481	-17.21%
Oryx											
	2008-09	1,836	11,879	14.86%			398	3,152	14.86%		
	2009-10	1,801	10,481	16.51%	-1,398	-11.77%	366	2,645	16.51%	-507	-16.08%

Bank of America took in $740k from NM tag fees

Editor's note: The Rio Grande SUN, Española's weekly newspaper, ran this story on May 28, 2009. It is reprinted here with permission of the SUN. The story provided an important analysis of what happens with the nonrefundable application fee hunters pay with each species they apply for, and another important effect of the new full fee up front system passed by the State Game Commission.

By George Morse and Sarah Welsh
SUN Staff

Hunters who wanted fairness in New Mexico's game-license application process ended up with a new system in which everyone is paying more, and the main beneficiary is neither the state nor hunters but a single financial entity — Bank of America.

According to state documents [from early 2009], the state Department of Game and Fish projected that it would pay Bank of America more than $740,000 in credit-card processing fees for the 2009-10 license lottery. To cover that expense, the department raised the application fee for all licenses to $9 for residents and $12 for nonresidents.

In the previous year, the application fee was $8 for all. [This year it is $10.]

The banking fees skyrocketed because starting [in 2009], the state required hunters submitting online applications for antelope, bighorn sheep, ibex and javelina to charge the full license fee — which topped out in 2009 at $3,160 for a nonresident bighorn license — to their credit cards. In previous years, online applicants were only being charged the application fee.

The volume of transactions is enormous, and the bigger each transaction is, the more the bank benefits. Hunters submitted 166,490 applications for the 2008-09 lottery cycle, and department Assistant Director Pat Block said online credit card applications make up about 80 percent of that total.

The department contracts the running of the online system to Bank of America, which charges a flat rate of 1.3 percent per transaction, Block said.

"You can imagine the cost," Block said. "That's why we had to raise the application fee."

The new system benefits Bank of America in another way. Before, the tens of thousands of hunters who applied online but did not draw a license were only charged the $8 application fee. Now those hunters are charged the full license fee up front, and if they do not draw a license they receive a refund.

The refund constitutes a second credit-card transaction and is also subject to the 1.3 percent fee, Block said.

Block said requiring the full license fee to be submitted with online applications is the result of complaints from hunters who applied by mail. In previous years, those applying by mail were required to send the entire license cost along with their mailed-in application, while those applying online were only charged the application fee.

By law, the department cannot make money on the game lottery itself, only on the subsequent sale of licenses.

"It's required that what we charge and receive for the application fee doesn't exceed our cost of running the drawing," Block said.

But with so many applicants, hunters often argue that the department is taking in more than $1 million in application fees and that it shouldn't cost that much to hold the drawing.

According to a department budget breakdown, the state will actually spend more than $2.03 million to administer the 2009-10 lottery. Based on a figure of roughly 160,000 applicants, it estimates the cost per applicant to be $12.71.

Game wardens upping ante against poachers

by Joel Gay
New Mexico Wildlife Federation

State Conservation Officers Mike Perry, left, and Chris Larsen load a deer decoy into the back of a truck. As the Department of Game and Fish grapples with having fewer resources, law enforcement officials are working on a plan that will focus attention on illegal activities like poaching, which affect law-abiding hunters and the public. ***(Photo © 2000-2010 N.M. Department of Game and Fish)***

Economic times may be tight, but poachers beware: The Department of Game and Fish isn't letting down its guard just because it's running a little short on staff.

In fact, the department's top cop says enforcement efforts will soon step up, selectively targeting those who steal public wildlife and reduce the law-abiding sportsman's hunting opportunity.

Dan Brooks, chief of law enforcement, said he and other department officials are revamping the day-to-day priorities of the state's 60-plus game wardens. The idea is to take aim at illegal activities that cause the greatest damage, then manage Law Enforcement Division personnel more strategically, he said.

"With the resources we have – and knowing we aren't going to get any extra resources in the near future – how do we make the best use of the people we have?" he told NMWF in an interview.

Technically, the state has 67 conservation officer positions, but only 61 are currently filled, Brooks said. It's typical for the department to have a few vacancies among game wardens. When one leaves, it takes about a year to train and prepare a replacement.

But these days the vacancy problem is exacerbated by a statewide hiring freeze that has prevented new vacancies from being filled. Game and Fish, which is funded by sportsmen through license fees and sporting goods taxes, has requested an exemption from the freeze, but it hasn't come through yet, Brooks said.

In addition, Gov. Bill Richardson has ordered every state employee – including conservation officers – to take five furlough days in the last half of the current fiscal year, which ends June 30. With the state budget crisis expected to continue next year, additional furlough days are possible.

The hunting and fishing public may not even notice as Brooks reorders the priority list for conservation officers and the new schedule goes into place, which could occur as early as this fall. The number of contacts between game wardens and the public may not increase.

"In fact, the number of contacts may go down," Brooks said. "And I'm OK with that if we're protecting our wildlife resources at a vulnerable time and there's an increase in the number of animals for us all to enjoy."

Poachers will be a major target in coming years, simply because every animal they take illegally is at least one less available to law-abiding hunters, Brooks said. But wardens will not focus their primary attention on what he calls the "uninformed" poacher, the hunter who shoots a turkey on the wrong property or who didn't take the time to read the rule book.

They're the poachers who, when approached by a game warden, don't attempt to hide their kill because they don't know they've done anything wrong, he said.

The game warden vacancy problem is exacerbated by a statewide hiring freeze that has prevented new vacancies from being filled, even though the Department of Game and Fish is funded by sportsmen's licenses, permits and taxes.

The department is more concerned about the second level of poacher, who Brooks calls the "opportunistic" hunter. It's someone who got so excited about seeing a big mule deer that he shot it – even though it was elk season. "If the opportunity presents itself, they take it," he said. They know they've broken the law, and do their best to hide it.

But the main focus needs to be on what Brooks calls the "expert" poacher. "They go out in search of animals that are concentrated and vulnerable," such as on wintering grounds, and where they can take the head or horns quickly. They have no qualms about leaving an animal behind if they fear being caught, he said.

By killing animals illegally, they directly affect the number available for law-abiding hunters. But they also harm hunters in the long run by removing the biggest animals from the gene pool, Brooks said.

"Those top-level violators have the ability to negatively affect the resource in any area they operate in," Brooks said. And unfortunately, he added, "It's the experts we're not catching."

Expert poachers will likely be the new top target of law enforcement once the department's review is complete, Brooks said.

He doesn't downplay the seriousness of issues like failure to buy a Habitat Stamp or littering, "but those don't affect our resources," Brooks said. "I think it's more important to work on the issues that affect our natural resources, our opportunity and the protection of our wildlife."

Brooks said he hopes the new schedule will be in place by this fall.

A poacher took only the head and the hindquarters, then left this elk to rot near Watrous, in northeast New Mexico, in 2008. ***(Photo © 2000-2010 N.M. Department of Game and Fish)***

How does New Mexico compare?

The state Department of Game and Fish has 67 conservation officer positions in a state with 2 million residents and 121,355 square miles of territory. If every position were filled – and only about 60 are currently – that works out to one officer per 1,800 square miles and every 30,000 residents. Here's a look at some other western states:

Arizona: About one officer per 1,200 square miles and 69,500 residents
Colorado: About one officer per 713 square miles and 34,246 resident
Wyoming: About one officer per 1,940 square miles and 11,000 residents

Sportswoman of the Quarter

Nine questions for Tina Buchen

Tina Buchen of Santa Fe is a rarity in the world of hunting and fishing – a woman who owns and operates a hunting supplies and gun shop.

She clearly feels at home behind the counter at Tina's Range Gear, which she bought six years ago and where she worked for 10 years before that. She seems to know every customer on a first-name basis, knows their interests – by caliber – and has a ready smile and laugh for all.

As both a hunter and a business owner, Buchen also keeps an eye on the world beyond her shop doors. She worked to save the Valle Vidal from oil and gas development, and says state laws and regulations that limit big game tags for resident hunters have affected her bottom line.

Although she's not as involved in environmental and regulatory battles as she once was, she sounds ready to raise her voice again when needed. Here is our interview with Tina Buchen, condensed and edited by Joel Gay.

NMWF: Your shop is filled with John Wayne photos, posters, even a replica of a gold-plated Winchester 44.40 lever-action. What's the story behind all of that?

BUCHEN: My sister worked for John Wayne when he was doing a movie here in Santa Fe, "The Cowboys." I was like 8 or 9 years old and he became my hero. I had a few pieces, then customers started bringing me other things, and I got more.

NMWF: What's your background in hunting and fishing?

BUCHEN: I grew up in Los Alamos, but nobody in my family hunted or fished. My father went elk hunting one time. He was going to be the camp cook and he was the only who ended up harvesting an animal – it basically ran through camp. Nobody else in my family does it.

I've been hunting for 23 years [she is 48]. The first time I went was with a friend of mine in the Jemez. I just thought it would be fun. And we harvested an elk.

Then I met my husband and he taught me how to shoot a bow. I started bowhunting, and I haven't stopped since.

NMWF: What's the highlight of your time afield?

BUCHEN: Every day out in the woods is a highlight. I think harvesting an animal is fabulous, calling elk in is wonderful, but everything leading up to the harvest is just as good.

NMWF: What is your ideal outdoor excursion?

BUCHEN: Elk hunting in October, anywhere in northern New Mexico. Valle Vidal would be fabulous, but I've given up those dreams. I don't win the lottery either. I think autumn in New Mexico is the most wonderful time in the most wonderful place in the world.

NMWF: How did you get involved in conservation work?

BUCHEN: There was a plan to run electric lines from Abiquiu Dam over the Jemez Mountains, and I and all my hunting partners spoke out against that. I don't think I stopped it personally, but it didn't happen [thanks to the combined efforts of many].

I got involved in the Valle Vidal campaign because I think the Valle Vidal is like heaven. It's one of the last places in New Mexico that's a wilderness area that anyone can have access to. Oil development is more than just the wells. It's the traffic, it's everything.

I haven't really been involved in other conservation issues since Valle Vidal. Nothing has risen to that same level. There's all sorts of issues that need to be addressed, but I don't think you can save everything.

NMWF: How has the business side of hunting changed?

BUCHEN: The hunting market is drying up a little bit. I do a lot more now with law enforcement. I couldn't survive on just hunting. The fact that most locals don't get drawn for elk tags or deer tags cuts down the business a lot. The economy is affecting the business, too. People in northern New Mexico are not overwhelmed with money, and what I do is not necessarily a necessity of life.

I don't have trophy hunters here. Most of my customers are people who just want meat in the freezer. I think in the long run the current policies [on tag allocation] are bad for game management, because a lot of people, if they don't have money and they don't have meat, end up poaching.

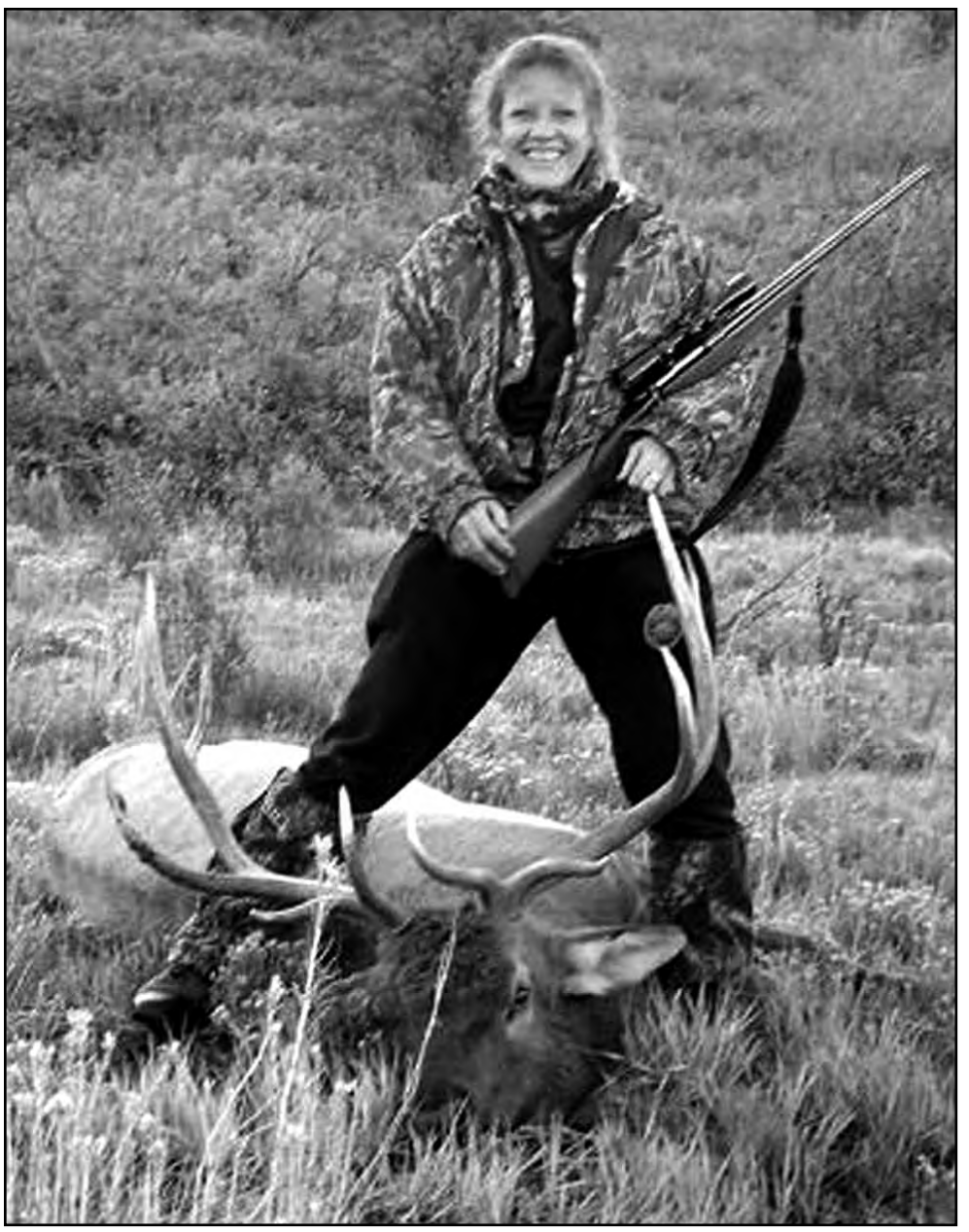
"The fact that most locals don't get drawn for elk tags or deer tags cuts down the business a lot."

Tina Buchen
Owner, Tina's Range Gear

I don't speak out at meetings. I don't think it does any good. The Game Commission is run by land owners whose primary concern is their landowner tags and the money they're going to get off of those.

NMWF: What could the state Legislature and Game Commission do to improve things for hunters?

BUCHEN: I think they should provide more resident tags. I know the big money is in the nonresident tags, but I think they need to provide more resident tags. I have people come in here all the time saying they haven't gotten an elk tag in seven or eight years. People start getting discouraged. I know a lot of people who quit hunting because they haven't drawn a tag in so long. They just give up.



Tina Buchen, owner of the popular Santa Fe gun shop Tina's Range Gear, started hunting as an adult, and now considers a fall elk hunt in the Valle Vidal her idea of heaven. ***(Photo provided by Tina Buchen)***

It's an economic issue for me. When people don't get drawn, they don't come in here to buy ammunition. They don't come in to buy a new hunting knife. They don't buy rifles. It's foolish to buy a rifle to go hunting when it sits in your closet and you can't use it.

The resident tag allocation tremendously affects me. I can remember when it was over-the-counter deer tags, shortly after I started working here. We actually had people lined up, standing behind each other, waiting to buy rifles. It hasn't been like that since then.

NMWF: You don't see many women involved in hunting, although a recent U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service survey found that one of the few groups of hunters that was increasing in number was girls and young women. Are you seeing any increase among women hunters?

BUCHEN: I have many customers with daughters and many of them are getting into hunting and going out with their dads. But I have not really seen a great increase in just women coming in and wanting to get into the sport. I am sure nationwide there are more women getting into hunting but Santa Fe is not really a gun- or hunting-friendly town.

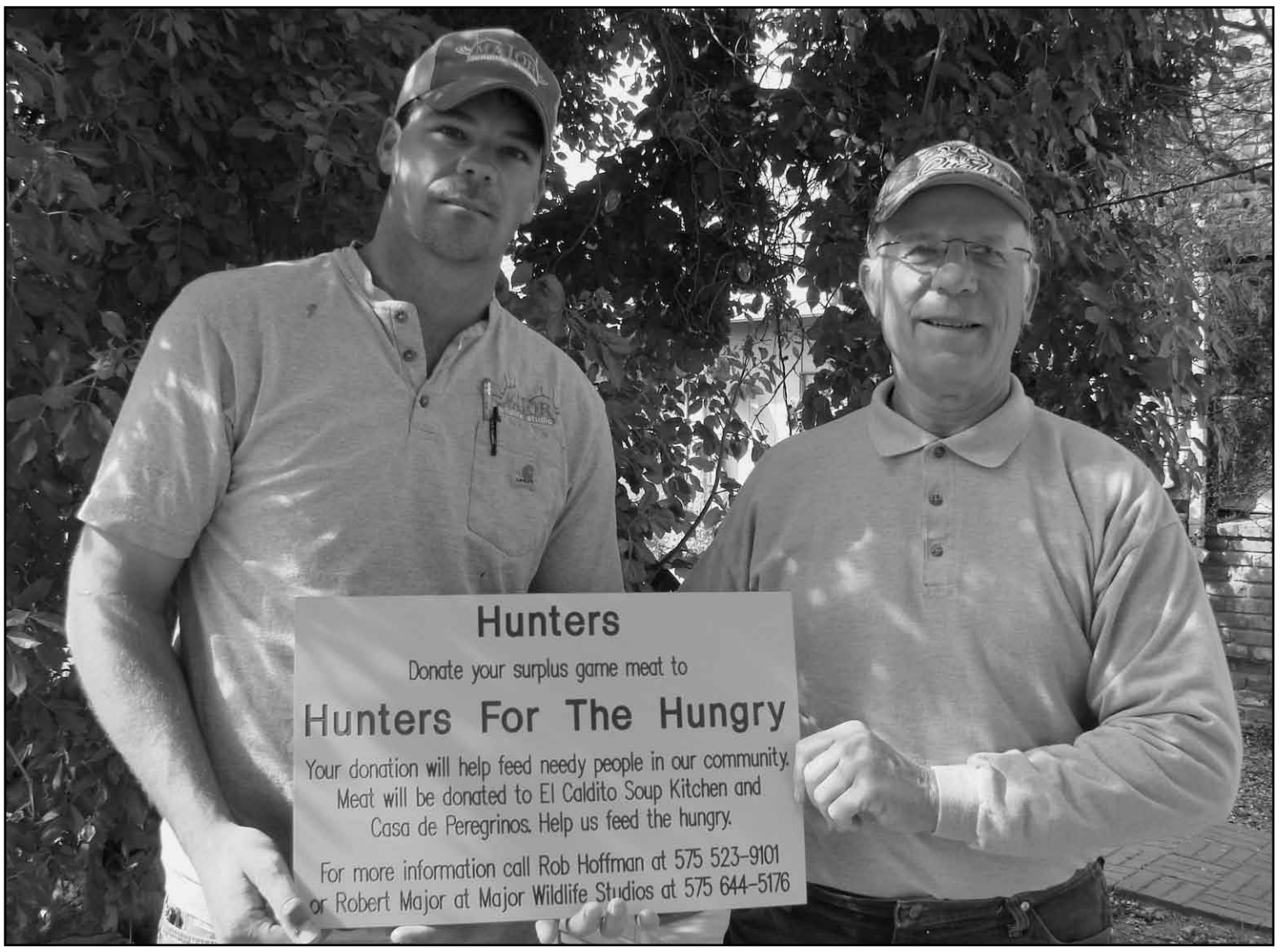
I think the Department of Game and Fish program "Becoming an Outdoors Woman" program is great, as I do feel that women quite often are intimidated by being involved in a male-dominated sport, and this program allows them to hang out and learn with other women.

NMWF: What's your favorite wild game recipe?

BUCHEN: (Laughs) Anything that anybody else cooks. I would just as soon leave the cooking to someone else. One of the city police officers brought me some venison stew. It was fabulous. He also brought me the recipe. It hasn't gone anywhere. I'd be happy to give you the recipe.

Las Cruces hunters seek game meat for the hungry

By Joel Gay
New Mexico Wildlife Federation



Robert Majors (left) and Rob Hoffman show one of the signs they have put up around southern New Mexico to encourage support for the new Hunters for the Hungry program that Hoffman has established. He is hoping the Las Cruces effort will encourage other sportsmen around the state to get similar programs going. ***(Photo provided by Robert Majors)***

A popular national program that provides food banks and homeless shelters with big game meat donated by hunters has taken root in Las Cruces.

Rob Hoffman, an avid hunter and retired New Mexico State University chemistry professor, said he spent more than two years setting up the local version of a "Hunters for the Hungry" program.

After establishing a paper trail to keep track of the donations, arranging transportation for it, rounding up butchers to process the meat into hamburger and charities to distribute it, he said, "Now we're just waiting for carcasses."

Hoffman said he started the program after hearing other sportsmen say they like to hunt but don't want or need all the meat they harvest.

"To me that means a lot of meat that's getting thrown out," perhaps because it sits in the freezer too long or because a family doesn't like the taste, he said. "I just can't see killing a magnificent animal like an elk without using it. It's just something that goes against my grain."

Sportsmen in many states have started Hunters for the Hungry programs – particularly in areas like the East and the Midwest where there is a lot of game available, Hoffman said. The National Rifle Association supports the effort by hosting a Hunters for the Hungry Information Clearinghouse and putting interested individuals in touch with programs in their areas.

According to the clearinghouse, hundreds of thousands of pounds of game meat – organically grown and naturally low-fat – has been donated to food banks, soup kitchens and homeless shelters through the many programs nationwide.

A group of hunters in Santa Fe operated a similar program in the past, Hoffman said, but it no longer appears to be active. When he started his quest in 2008, he was essentially on his own, and had to build up the program from scratch.

The state Department of Game and Fish was very supportive of his efforts, Hoffman said, but it also has a legal mandate to ensure that the game wasn't poached. The department requires a paper trail for every donated carcass, ensuring that the hunter had the proper license.

He had been told that carcasses could only be processed in facilities inspected by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, but that turned out to be wrong. After spending several days on the phone, a U.S.D.A. representative in Denver assured Hoffman that unless the game meat is mixed with beef, pork or chicken, the carcass can be butchered in any processing facility.

"Now we're just waiting for carcasses."

Rob Hoffman, Hunters for the Hungry

Several custom processors in southern New Mexico have agreed to butcher the game meat – including cutting out and discarding the blood-shot portions and grinding the rest into burger – for a reduced price.

Hoffman said an anonymous donor has agreed to pick up the processing costs. If those costs rise in the future, sportsmen's groups in his area have agreed to help raise funds for the program, he added.

The meat will be distributed through the West Texas Food Bank, which is based in El Paso but also delivers food to New Mexico's needy. The food bank has a special federal certification that protects it from liability in the event someone was injured after biting down on a bullet fragment or piece of bone in the meat, Hoffman said.

That protection extends to any agency that accepts donations from the food bank, such as two popular Las Cruces organizations, the soup kitchen El Caldito and the food pantry Casa de Peregrinos.

The butchers and food banks are ready for donations and there are plenty of hungry folks in Las Cruces. Now all Hoffman needs is meat – and that's where hunters come in.

The Armendaris Ranch already has agreed to provide buffalo and oryx, as soon as it gets hunters who only want the hides and horns, Hoffman said. He plans to approach other large hunting ranches and outfitters to see if their hunters might have donations, also.

In many states, Hunters for the Hungry programs rely on the high number of tags any single hunter can purchase, such as Virginia, where you can buy six white-tail deer tags over the counter. In New Mexico, where hunters can often go for years without drawing a tag, Hoffman said he isn't expecting lots of donations from locals.

Still, it doesn't hurt to ask. Hoffman said he plans to put up posters around Las Cruces gun shops and sporting goods stores asking hunters for meat they don't want or that they want to donate to a good cause.

Another potential source of game meat for the hungry is from state-sanctioned population reduction hunts. If ranchers have too many deer, antelope or elk on their property, Hoffman said hunts to cull the herds could serve the needs of both the landowner and the food banks of southern New Mexico.

Eventually, Hoffman said he would like to see other "Hunters for the Hungry" programs develop in New Mexico. It's not feasible to harvest an elk or antelope in northern New Mexico and get it down to Las Cruces for processing and distribution, so if anyone wants to start a similar program elsewhere, contact him at (575) 642-1032 or at ***rnrhoffman@cybermesa.com***.

Sportsmen need habitat funding in energy bill

By Joel Gay
New Mexico Wildlife Federation

The U.S. Senate is expected to tackle an issue this spring that could have a profound and long-lasting effect on hunting and fishing nationwide – and sportsmen need to speak out and make sure their voices are heard.

On tap is an energy bill that would rein in carbon pollution and create thousands of new jobs in the rapidly growing field of renewable energy.

Sportsmen also want the bill to incorporate a separate measure introduced in the Senate last year by Sen. Jeff Bingaman. His bill, S. 1933, would dedicate millions of dollars annually to protect, restore and conserve natural resources, ensuring that wildlife habitat is protected from the effects of rising temperatures.

But unless hunters and anglers speak out this spring and demand that S. 1933 is included in the pending energy bill, the Senate may leave out or cut back significantly the natural resource protection that is essential, said Oscar Simpson, conservation policy chairman for the New Mexico Wildlife Federation and former State Game Commission member.

"It will be critical that sportsmen make their voices heard and get this crucial provision in the energy bill," Simpson said. "This is the most important piece of conservation legislation in recent times and we need to make sure we get this included in the Senate's energy bill."

The bipartisan energy bill is being crafted by Sens. John Kerry of Massachusetts, Lindsey Graham of South Carolina and Joe Lieberman of Connecticut. It could be introduced as early as April 22, Earth Day, and could be debated for passage this summer.

Details of the Kerry-Graham-Lieberman bill are still being worked out. But the bill is expected to require power plants and other major industries to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions gradually over time and set a cost on carbon pollution, probably through a direct carbon tax.

The Bingaman proposal calls for using some of the new revenue to directly fund state wildlife conservation agencies, among others, to do natural resource protection.

In New Mexico that could mean a multimillion-dollar boost to ongoing efforts such as improving habitat for game animals and the threatened Rio Grande cutthroat trout, restoring overgrazed public lands, thinning dense stands of trees and shrubs that reduce vital forage for game and other wildlife, reducing erosion, and fighting invasive species that are crowding out native fish and game and replacing native forage.

There is abundant evidence that the world is getting warmer, and that the increase is happening more rapidly than previous episodes of climate change, said Dave Gutzler, a professor of earth and planetary sciences at the University of New Mexico. Regardless the cause, something is happening and it's happening fast, he said.

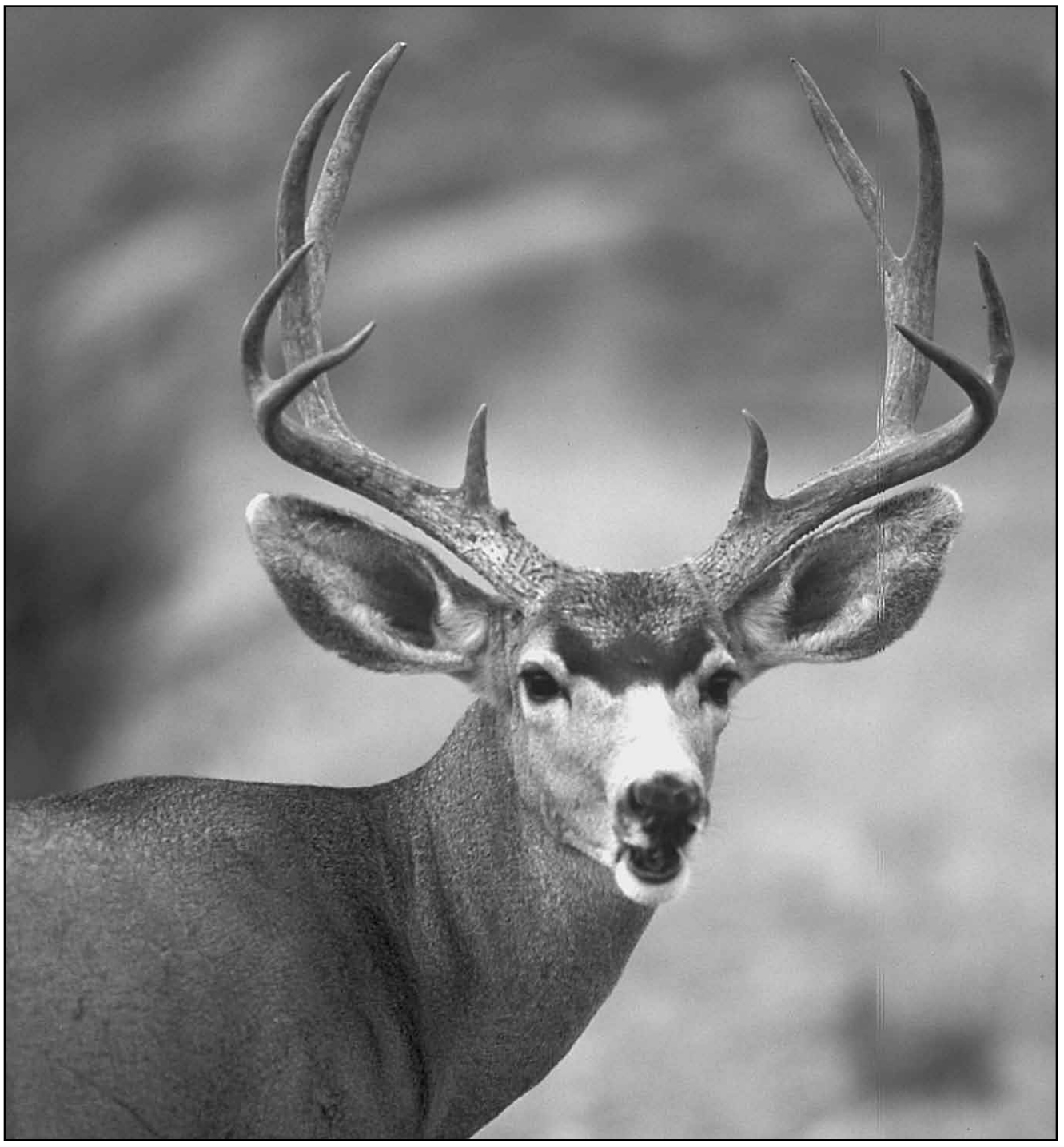
"We are starting to see the effects already," he said. Winters are one or two degrees warmer than just 20 years ago, and the trend suggests temperatures will be seven degrees higher yet by the end of the century.

"That's a gigantic change," Gutzler said. It means Albuquerque will be like current-day Las Cruces. Las Cruces and points south will be hotter than humans have experienced in that region. "It's a very different climate than the animals, plants and people have experienced here – forever. We're headed into uncharted territory if the predictions come true."

Some argue that the climate models could be wrong, and that little or no future change may happen. That may be possible, Gutzler said. But then the opposite may also be true: the models may be too conservative. "That's where things get catastrophic," he said.

The climate models are less clear about precipitation. Some say the Southwest will be dryer, some say wetter. Gutzler, whose research has focused on this area, said it's probably safe to assume that precipitation in the future will be much like it is today – extremely variable. But the warmer temperatures will make the droughts far worse, he said.

Warmer winters will mean lower snowpacks and earlier runoff, which means the ground will dry out over a longer period before the summer monsoons. His research suggests that future droughts in New Mexico will be deeper and longer, simply because the ground will hold less moisture because of the warmth.



Researchers at New Mexico universities say the Southwest is warming rapidly and could soon see higher temperatures than plants, animals or humans have experienced in this region. Sportsmen's groups nationwide support Sen. Jeff Bingaman's bill S. 1933, which would provide funding to help the nation's natural resources adapt to the warming climate. ***(Photo © 2000-2010 N.M. Department of Game and Fish)***

Another UNM researcher, associate professor of biology Blair Wolf, said humans will likely figure out ways to adapt to the changing climate, but said he is worried about wildlife. As a hunter and angler, he said he dreads the warming temperatures.

The rising average temperatures encourage the spread of invasive species and pests like the pine beetles that are ravaging forests throughout the Rockies, both of which are substantial threats, he said.

> ***"Between higher temperatures and lower precipitation, there will probably be less food for animals, particularly less plant growth in the spring."***
>
> ***Blair Wolf***
> ***UNM researcher***

"Between higher temperatures and lower precipitation, there will probably be less food for animals, particularly less plant growth in the spring," said Wolf, who has been doing research at Sevilleta National Wildlife Refuge near Socorro. From there, "It goes up the food chain."

Some animal populations will be able to migrate to cooler temperatures or better forage, either farther north or farther up in elevation. But some species may not make it. That loss of biodiversity is especially worrisome, Wolf said.

"When you start pulling species out of the system, you change the way that system works," Wolf said. "When I go out to shoot an elk, I don't want a sterile environment. I want to see other wildlife, not just the thing I want to hunt."

The Bingaman bill would help wildlife and other natural resources adapt to the changing conditions by doing more for habitat. That might mean establishing wildlife corridors as migratory paths change, stronger efforts to stop the spread of invasive species or more restoration work like that currently done by the state Habitat Stamp Program.

The future for wildlife looks bleak unless greenhouse gas pollution is halted and reversed, according to "Beyond Seasons' End," a report commissioned by Trout Unlimited, Ducks Unlimited, the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies and other national hunting and fishing groups. (The full report is available at ***www.seasonsend.org***.) The report says animals' ranges eventually will shift, wetlands and prairie potholes could dry up, species may go extinct, invasive species may drive out natives – the dismal list goes on.

Not surprisingly, the report continues, "Hunters and anglers are likely to be among the first to experience the impacts of climate change, due to their familiarity with game species and their habitats." Climate change not only threatens wildlife, the report says, but also family fishing and hunting traditions that may go back for generations.

In the meantime, sportsmen can step up like we have so often in the past to help ensure the future health of fish and wildlife habitat in New Mexico and beyond by encouraging Senate leaders to include Bingaman's natural-resource enhancement funding in the Kerry-Graham-Lieberman bill.

"Senator Bingaman's natural-resource funding bill could go down in history as one of the milestones of wildlife conservation in America – if it is incorporated into the Senate's climate and energy package with adequate funding," said NMWF Executive Director Jeremy Vesbach.

"Climate change is a serious issue with a lot of uncertainty," he added. "Senator Bingaman's bill makes sure we are doing what we can for the future of wildlife, hunting and fishing in New Mexico."

First-time mountain lion hunt a learning experience

By Jason Amaro
Special to the New Mexico Wildlife Federation

It took days of following tracks in the snow, but Jason Amaro and his guides finally treed this male. Amaro, an avid SIlver City sportsman, learned that mountain lion hunting is all about the dogs. ***(Photos provided by Jason Amaro)***

This lion hunt started with a coyote hunt in 2008. I had set up in a brush pile and had been calling for about 30 minutes when I noticed something moving in a bush about 10 yards away. At first I thought it was a bird, but I soon figured out that it was the black spot on the tip on the tail of a mountain lion.

To this day I have no idea how he got so close without me spotting him. There is no doubt he could have been on me in one jump. When I got home that night I knew I needed to learn more about lions. I also knew I needed to match wits with one.

After searching the Internet and talking to a ton of people it became obvious that lions are either killed by hunters who just happen to stumble on one or they are hunted with dogs. Never having hunted behind dogs, I had some questions about it. But everyone I talked to said that while the shot itself would be easy, staying with the dogs was the tough part. Unlike deer hunting where you can hunt at your pace, I would need to hunt at the dogs' pace.

Let's be honest – I will be fighting my genetics forever. My body style is more that of a Hobbit than a track athlete. If I was going to keep up with the dogs and the dog handlers I was going to need to put in a lot of miles at the gym and in the mountains. My plan was to drop about 20 pounds and work myself up to running and walking five-plus miles in an hour, three to five times a week.

Also, I needed to be smart during the actual chase. Some hunts last a quarter of a mile and some stretch out for 10 miles. I needed to get to the cat at my pace and not burn out too soon.

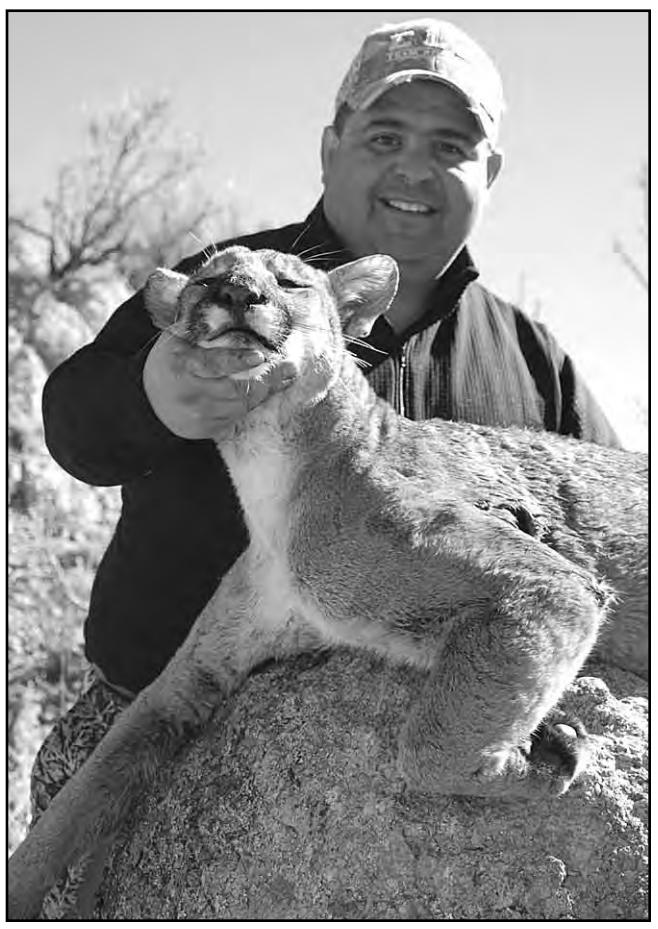
Now that I had a plan, all I needed was to find someone with dogs who was willing to work with me. Luckily, in Silver City the hunting community is pretty close. I made a few calls and I was able to connect with Wayne Billings of WB Guide Service. Wayne just loves to hunt lions with dogs. He is young but very knowledgeable and a solid outdoorsman. Now I had a pack of dogs to follow and someone to show me the ropes.

Working as a team, the plan was to cover as much of the Gila as possible. Wayne, his hunting buddy Brandon and I would be in different areas looking for tracks in the snow. Once a track was "cut" we would contact each other, come up with a plan, release the dogs, chase the dogs that were chasing the cat, find the cat trapped up a tree, figure out if it was a shooter, shoot the cat, drag it to the truck, skin it and then eat it.

Pretty easy, huh?

I have never prayed for snow so hard in my life, and in mid-December we got a decent storm. Wayne asked me to cover an area close to town. When I went out, I quickly realized I had no clue what I was doing. It was a pretty day but I might as well have been sightseeing.

I realized that I had never paid close attention to tracks in the snow. When I got home I downloaded a file from the Colorado Division of Wildlife on mountain lion identification and tried to soak it in. After reading up on big cats I felt like I was ready to roll.



Jason Amaro with his cat.

A few weeks later we had another storm and Wayne decided we should go together this time. We covered about 50 miles by truck but didn't see anything. It looked like the storm had completely missed the section of the Gila we were hunting.

Day 4 involved more windshield time and more trackless roads, but after four days of trying it was looking pretty dim. This lion hunting was turning out to be a hit-or-miss affair. Thank goodness we had the deer archery season to break up the time.

About a week after deer season we got pounded by a great snowstorm. Off to the mountains we went, all in different directions and keeping contact via phone or text. None of us had any luck because the wind quickly filled in the tracks, and again we called it a day.

On my way back to town I stopped at Fort Bayard National Cemetery to visit my dad's grave and brush the snow off his headstone. My dad never really liked the cold but I bet he would have loved the view. I also know he would be cheering for me on this hunt, and the way things were going I needed all the help I could find.

The following Monday Wayne called and we decided to split up again. My morning was pretty slow as far as mountain lion tracks went but I saw mule deer everywhere. Then at about 7 a.m. Wayne sent a text saying Brandon had cut a track. Wayne and I met at some corrals, loaded my gear into his Polaris Ranger and left to find Brandon and the dogs.

If you have ever hunted the Gila you know it is big country. We thought it would be tough to find Brandon and his dogs, but Wayne knew the frequency of the dogs' collars and we soon had the general location dialed in.

It took about an hour to get to the area, where we soon found two sets of tracks. Brandon clearly had gotten out of his vehicle and looked at one set, but it looked like he drove right past the second set. It also looked like two different lions.

We reconnected with Brandon, and after some false starts we found a fresh track. Once the dogs got the scent they were off – and I mean OFF. These dogs were bred for situations like this. Right behind the dogs were Brandon and Wayne. A little farther back I was tracking Brandon and Wayne.

This was the part of the hunt I had been most concerned about. The only thing you can do is put one foot in front of the other as fast as you can and hope you can get to where the dogs have cornered the cat before any damage occurs.

About three-quarters of a mile from the truck and 500 vertical feet uphill I caught my first glimpse of the younger dogs running on a ridge. They seemed to be going back and forth, which was a good sign. That meant the scent was heavy in the air and the cat was close.

I finally made it to the tree where the dogs were barking. Even knowing the cat was in the branches, it was still hard to see. These animals have an amazing ability to hide. But as I got ready for the shot, the cat jumped. When a cat bails from a tree it usually takes off like a rocket. This guy turned and faced the dogs and was ready to rumble.

Fortunately, Rocky called his bluff and the cat took off down the mountain.

So we were off again, me chasing Brandon and Wayne who were chasing the dogs, who were chasing the cat. This time it was straight downhill. The cat treed again, but bailed before we could get to him.

When he treed a third time in an old oak, he didn't come down alive.

Hunting lions isn't about the shot. It is about the dogs, the chase, the challenge of getting to the cat and just the adventure. This turned out to be a quite an adventure for me.

Jason Amaro works in the health care industry and operates the blog "New Mexico Sportsman," where this story originally appeared. He is also an avid bowhunter. He can be contacted at amaro_jason@hotmail.com.

IF YOU GO

New Mexico has an estimated 2,000 to 3,000 mountain lions. Hunting is allowed Oct. 1 to March 31 on public land (April 1 to March 31 on private land) with harvest limits set for each of 17 Cougar Management Zones. The bag limit is one per year. The statewide, five-year average annual harvest is about 220.

Hunters may not take spotted kittens or females accompanied by spotted kittens. But because the majority of female mountain lions have dependent kittens throughout the year, hunters are encouraged to learn to identify females and make informed decisions when they hunt.

The New Mexico Department of Game and Fish has an online Cougar Identification Course that explains how to determine the sex and approximate age of a mountain lion, as well as a short exam to test your knowledge. You can find the course on the state's Web site, ***www.wildlife.state/nm.us.***

Sportsmen write in, sound off

Kudos from Texas

I read a copy of the Outdoor Reporter while on a trip to New Mexico in December and I agreed with all that y'all are trying to promote.

I sure like hunting in New Mexico and would love to hunt there often in the future, but I also think that New Mexico ought to take care of their own and make sure they have the opportunity to hunt and fish in their own state more so than those outside of the state. The ones who live in the state (past, present and future) have probably done or will do more for the natural resources than any out-of-state person could ever hope to do. Even though I may be shooting myself in the foot by saying so, it's the right thing to do from my limited point of view.

Well, I hope to come to New Mexico again to hunt this year if possible. I'd like to get that elk, but I'd be very satisfied with a bear or mountain lion, too.

Todd Hope
Henrietta, Texas

Keep an eye on Lyons

I read your articles about the deal that Pat Lyon is making with the selected ranchers over around Whites Peak. It makes me sick to think a man elected to an office to uphold the people's best interests will embezzle our land to his advantage. I truly hope the Attorney General's Office can default the deals made and start the proceedings for Pat Lyons to be tarred and feathered.

The AG should also look into the sweet deal that Mr. Lyons made with two ranchers so the new Spaceport could be built on our public trust land, which was leased at the time.

(Editor's note: The New Mexico Spaceport Authority had to pay both the State Land Office and two ranchers who were leasing the state land in order to build the new space travel facility near Truth or Consequences – essentially forcing the state to pay twice for land it already owns.)

I don't know the lease laws, but the land commission should have avenues to terminate a lease without paying a ransom.

P.S. I hope we get right of way to our state and federal lands. I support the Habitat Stamp Program and Habitat Management and Access Validation fees, regardless of the types of land hunted; all hunters should pay the same fees. I was glad to see the state GAIN program come along, too, as hunters shouldn't be the only ones to maintain our precious land.

John McKinney
Albuquerque

No longer in the dark

Thanks for your support of sportsmen. Without you we would be in the dark and at the beck and call of politics and big business.

George T. Thorning
Rio Rancho

Lessons from afar

Recently, there has been a great deal of rhetoric in support of privatizing and commercializing public wildlife – in newspaper columns and in a book instructing readers on how to increase wildlife on their property and how to develop trophy horns and antlers on their animals.

Some legislators are also claiming an injustice because public wildlife animals eat thousands of tons of forage that should be used by the livestock. With a large number of draft legislative bills dealing with wildlife management this session [of the Montana Legislature], I would be surprised if at least one isn't proposing a program such as Ranching for Wildlife for Montana. Such a program would allow landowners to sell tags and/or licenses directly to "clients."

I believe these folks need to have a history lesson. Let's start with the U.S. Supreme Court in 1842, when justices addressed the idea of the King's Deer:

"The people are the sovereigns. What once belonged to the King now belongs to the people."

The same court followed in 1896 with a more precise decision: "Control of wildlife is to be exercised as a trust for the benefit of all people, and not for the government, as distinct from the people, or for the benefit of private individuals, as distinguished from the public."

Thus, the Supreme Court made it abundantly clear that wildlife is to be connected to the people and not to the land (as it is most of Europe).

As for forage consumed by wildlife, the Montana Supreme Court addressed this issue in two cases. In both Sacksmen and Rathbone, the court stated:

"Wild game existed here long before the coming of man. One who acquires property in Montana does so with the notice and knowledge of the presence of wild game. Accordingly, a property owner in this state must recognize there may be some injury to property from wild game for which there is no recourse."

Beyond the court decision that wild game on the land is a condition of acquisition (much the same as recognizing the fact that the wind will blow and rivers will periodically flood), private livestock eats forage on several million acres of public land that could be available for public wildlife. The token charge of $1.40 per animal unit month for public land grazing amounts to nothing more than a subsidy.

Landowners, many of you honor and respect the fact that wildlife is held in trust for the public, and we appreciate that. We also do not dispute the fact that you have complete control of who many hunt on your land.

To others who would ignore history and the courts, please remember, you don't own wildlife, and you can't sell it or the legal authority to harvest it. The citizens of Montana have hired the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks, and no one else, to manage our wildlife.

John Gibson
Billings, Mont.

John Gibson is president of the Public Land and Water Access Association. This piece first appeared in the Billings Gazette.

Shoot us a line!

Have a question, comment, good hunting story or anything else you want to share? Send it to **NMWF Inbox!**

Address correspondence to letters@nmwildlife.org or New Mexico Wildlife Federation, 2610 San Mateo N.E., Suite A, Albuquerque, NM 87110.

And if you have a question, call us at (505) 299-5404.

Patience rewarded for parents, son on first elk hunt

by Carla Mattila
Special to the New Mexico Wildlife Federation

My husband Jeff and I love to archery hunt. The quality time we share when we're sneaking though the woods in pursuit of elk is priceless.

So when we had our two sons we talked about the future of hunting as a family. Would our sons take to hunting as we have? Would our passion be their passion? We could only hope, knowing that "hunting isn't for everyone." But it seems as though their interest has sparked.

Spending spring break studying the hunter safety manual and sitting through two full days of hunter safety class may have seemed like a tedious task for a mother of an 8-year-old, but that's what my son wanted to do so that's what we did. Justin had me up at 6 a.m. every day of spring break with the words, "Mom, are you ready to study?"

He was only in second grade but his dad and I had promised when he was a good enough reader, he could take hunter safety. He was the youngest in the class but seemed to be one of the most motivated and prepared. With every question the instructors had, his hand was up ready to answer.

After class was finished we continued at home, practicing the different firearm carries and crossing the fence using a broom. When it came to the test, Justin gave me orders not to mess up and cause him a bad grade as I was his partner for the fence-crossing portion. But he did everything just right and passed both the written exam and the demonstration with flying colors. All of the time and effort were well-spent.

Justin went on his first elk hunt the following year, when he was 9. It was a cold and windy hunt. With Dad as his guide, and with his little brother and me as spectators, we were all pulling for him. But the opportunity to shoot never really presented itself.

The following year brought another opportunity. Again, with Dad guiding, the whole family headed into the woods in pursuit of a bull elk. The first morning, Dad put Justin on what he considered a "monster bull." The adrenaline flowed as Dad instructed Justin on when and how to shoot. But there was no shot that day. And really no explanation other than "I just didn't feel comfortable."

The Mattila family, (from left) Jordan, Carla, Justin and Jeff, with Justin's first elk. ***(Photo provided by the family.)***

That evening in camp as Dad pondered why Justin didn't shoot, various thoughts came to mind. "Maybe he's too young." "Maybe he is not really interested in hunting and he's just doing this because we want him to."

Every morning, however, Justin was up and ready to go. On the fourth day of the hunt, younger brother Jordan and I dropped off Dad and Justin and headed to a meeting point. We took our time getting there. And as we got out of the truck we heard a shot. Not saying a word about it, we just waited. A short time later a call came over the radio.

"Mom, are you there?" "Yeah," I answered. "Well, I'm done hunting. I shot an elk. Can you drive the truck to come meet us?" I did as instructed.

In the meantime, Dad started walking toward us. As he walked he couldn't control the tears. It took about 10 minutes for us to meet up, but when we did the hugs and tears were plentiful. We were so proud of our son's accomplishment.

As Justin and Jeff told and retold the story, Jeff said he learned a lot about patience and ethics from his son. The story goes something like this:

As they came up on a herd of elk with one 3-by-3 bull, Dad told Justin to get into position and when he was comfortable, shoot. Fearing the elk would sense them and bolt, Jeff kept saying "Shoot, Justin, shoot."

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, the gun sounded: KABOOM! The thought came to both of them that Justin missed, but after a quick turn and a 70-yard dash, the elk went down. Then the high fives and hootin' and hollerin' began.

And when Jeff asked Justin what took him so long to shoot, he said that either the elk was moving or there was another one behind it. But most important, he said, "I didn't want to make a bad shot and just wound him."

With those words a rookie hunter brought his dad to tears again.

My reward for sitting through two days of hunter safety and countless hours studying was being there when my son shot his first elk. What most people would consider a small bull was a monster in my book.

I look forward to the future when both of our sons are hunting with us. It brings back memories of the first time I hunted with my dad. Although I was much older than my son is now, I will always cherish the bond it has created between us. This will continue to be a family affair for years to come.

The Mattila family lives in Grants.

New Mexico Wildlife Federation
OUTDOOR REPORTER
Spring 2010

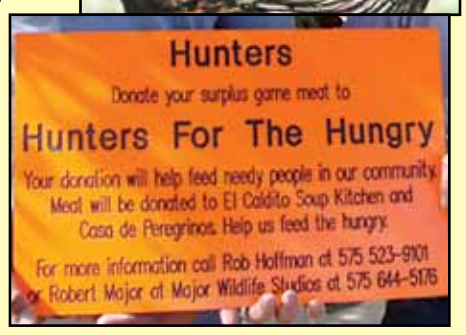
New Mexico Wildlife Federation
2610 San Mateo Blvd., Suite A
Albuquerque, NM 87110-3162

NONPROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
ALBUQUERQUE, NM
PERMIT NO. 204

INSIDE:

FINDING THE BALANCE between public wildlife and private land is not always easy, but efforts are underway

Also in this issue:



Be ready for next turkey season with this Remington 870 12-gauge shotgun!

The winner of our next **NMWF raffle** will take home this Remington 12-gauge shotgun, perfect for waterfowl, upland game or turkeys, courtesy of **Charlie's Sporting Goods** in Albuquerque.

Members of the NMWF Sportsman's Alert network are entered automatically. If you're not a member, SIGN UP NOW! Help us protect New Mexico's outdoor tradition – maybe you'll win a new shotgun!
And you don't have to join NMWF to enter the raffle (see below).

To join NMWF and get on the Sportsman's Alert e-mail network, fill out this form and mail it in, or join online at www.nmwildlife.org.

You can also enter the raffle without joining NMWF. Just check "Not now" on the form and send it in.

YES! I want to support New Mexico Wildlife Federation. Enclosed is my membership contribution of:

☐ $25 Basic ☐ $50 Supporting ☐ $100 Sponsoring ☐ Other $_____ ☐ Not now, but enter me in the raffle.

NAME _____

COMPANY _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ STATE _____ ZIP CODE _____

PHONE _____ EMAIL _____

Please make your check payable to New Mexico Wildlife Federation and return it along with this form to:
New Mexico Wildlife Federation, 2610 San Mateo Blvd. N.E., Suite A, Albuquerque, NM 87110