

Commission decision on Arizona tags is a “win” for all

A fundamental responsibility of every member of the Arizona Game and Fish Commission is to ensure that the ethical standards of the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation are supported and defended in the management of our state’s wildlife, which is held in the public trust for all Arizonans. The model is a set of principles that challenge us as stewards every day.

At a public meeting in June 2024, the Commission directed the phasing out of “auction format” sales of what are called special big game license tags, or Commissioner’s tags. For years, those hunt tags were purchased by the “highest bidder” — and often for hundreds of thousands of dollars. For those other hopeful hunters who might not have had the same financial resources, their chances of being able to raise their hand and bid on a prized hunt tag were zero.

As a result, only a few individuals were securing these hunt tags, sometimes year after year. The program had essentially become an opportunity for a few wealthy individuals. So, per the Commission’s direction, the last auction format hunt tag has been sold, and a new opportunity has been created based on the traditional ethos of hunting. This opportunity demonstrates the commitment to uphold the principles of the North American Model for Wildlife Conservation — specifically, one of the seven tenets that every person has an equal opportunity under the law to participate in hunting and fishing.

The Commission once again will allocate up to 30 special big game license tags for qualified 501(c)(3) wildlife conservation organizations at a public meeting June 13. These organizations are responsible for marketing and selling the hunt tags to raise money for wildlife conservation. A year ago, the groups were encouraged to develop new and creative ways to sell these hunt tags, in accordance with Arizona Revised Statutes. While a legally conducted raffle is an option, other programs have been created that will provide unique opportunities. Keep in mind that all proceeds from the sale of these hunt tags are sent back to the AZGFD; dollars that are directed to support management of specific species. For example, proceeds from the sale of these hunt tags to harvest an elk can only be directed toward the management of Arizona’s elk herds.

To provide some history and context, the Commission put the issue of auction format hunt tags on the agenda, on multiple occasions providing the opportunity for the public to offer their input. A major concern directed to the Commission was the large amounts of money that a few affluent individuals were willing to pay for these prized hunt tags, while supporters of the auction format pointed out the millions of dollars that had been raised to fund conservation work.

That statement is absolutely true, and wildlife management is better off today because of these dollars. What was not acknowledged is that a handful of wealthy bidders, often non-residents, repeatedly got the opportunity to experience a “once in a lifetime” hunt in Arizona for some of the best-managed big game species in the nation. The public debate left the issue on the table

of whether a few people, receiving the benefit of a public resource that others couldn't afford, was providing an equal opportunity "for all." In the end, four of the five Commission members voted to support the ethical principle of equal opportunity for all, over capitalizing on the unfairness of bidding, regardless of the amount of funds raised.

It's important to understand that in Arizona, big game species such as elk, bighorn sheep, pronghorn, mule deer, and more are managed solely to create healthy herd sizes of all species for current and future generations. Arizona's wildlife isn't managed to produce "trophy" or record-book animals. In fact, the word "trophy" does not appear in Arizona Game and Fish Department (AZGFD) statute, rule, procedures, or any Department policies. Does Arizona produce some record-sized species? Absolutely, but it isn't the focus of the Department's science-based wildlife management practices, nor is it the direction from the Commission.

AZGFD and the Commission have partnered with our wildlife conservation organizations, and hunters and anglers across the state for almost a century to develop a nationally recognized Department and wildlife management programs. The decision to transition to a more equitable opportunity for the sale of special big game license tags is an acknowledgement of the continued support by those who fund the majority of conservation efforts.

The Commission is looking forward to this new era, and anticipation is high that by providing an equal opportunity for all to participate, we will have created a "win" for wildlife conservation in Arizona.

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