



UNDERSTANDING MULE DEER AND ANTLER POINT RESTRICTIONS

Fact Sheet #6

Antler restrictions are harvest restrictions that limit buck harvest to animals that meet specific antler criteria. The most common type of antler restriction is a point restriction. Antler point restrictions have been used as a harvest strategy with the hope they will increase the number of large-antlered bucks in a mule deer population. Experience of many states and provinces with antler point restrictions suggest this harvest strategy has very limited potential to produce more trophy bucks and could result in other unintended challenges.



BACKGROUND

Increasing the number of big-antlered bucks is typically the basis for hunter demands to implement antler point restrictions. The idea seems straightforward and promising; if we just don't allow hunters to harvest young bucks, they will grow older and bigger and be available for harvest later. Most western states and provinces have, at one point in time, employed some type of antler point restriction attempting to increase the number of "trophy" bucks in their herds.

THE GOOD

- Decreases hunter pressure and total buck harvest by discouraging some hunters who do not want to be restricted to a particular antler-sized buck. This can be beneficial when harvest is heavy in relation to the number of available bucks, but not heavy enough to warrant changing to limited quota seasons.
- In some cases, antler point restrictions have increased the proportion of bucks in the population, but this effect may not be long-lasting.
- In remote areas with limited access, antler point restrictions have been used in combination with general seasons to maintain hunter opportunity.

THE BAD

- Antler point restrictions focus all the hunting pressure on the oldest age classes of bucks, gradually decrease the average age of the buck segment of the population, and make it more difficult for bucks to reach the older age classes due to the displaced harvest pressure.
- Antler point restrictions have been shown to reduce the number of trophy bucks over time by protecting only the smaller-antlered young bucks.
- Antler point restrictions do not increase fawn production or population size. Even in herds with very low buck:doe ratios (<10:100), pregnancy rates are well over 90%. Large increases in buck ratios result in relatively few, or no, additional fawns.

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Shawn Gray

Antler point restrictions often fail to provide the intended benefit as this large two-point mule deer buck is not typically what hunters aspire to create or maintain with antler point restrictions.

THE UGLY

- Antler point restrictions dramatically reduce hunter participation, harvest success, and total harvest.
- Antler point restrictions increase the number of deer shot and illegally left in the field; this can be significant, and has been documented in Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, Oregon, Nevada, and Montana.
- Antler point restrictions can cheapen the value of young bucks by changing the threshold for success from “a buck” to a quest where only a big buck will do.
- Antler point restrictions may discourage hunters (especially beginning and young hunters) by increasing the difficulty of locating and identifying legal deer.

CONCLUSIONS

After decades of use and many evaluations reporting disappointing results, most western states and provinces have discontinued statewide antler point restrictions. The two main reasons for abandoning widespread antler point restrictions are (1) unacceptable accidental-illegal kill, and (2) harvest mortality was increased (focused) on the very age classes they intended to promote. Available data and experience suggest antler point restrictions result in no long-term increase in either the proportion or number of mature bucks, or the total deer population. A few jurisdictions still have limited areas with antler point restrictions, due to hunter preference. The use of antler point restrictions in a combined strategy with general seasons is used in at least one case to maximize hunting opportunity.

There are additional reasons why the widespread use of antler point restrictions has not been successful. Research has shown buck fawns born to does in poor body condition have difficulty outgrowing the effects of poor body condition at birth, and may never reach their genetic potential for antler growth. Regulations protecting these bucks from harvest are counterproductive to the intended benefit.

Most western states and provinces have concluded that sustainable improvements in buck:doe ratios and the number of mature bucks can only be realized by reducing harvest through 1) a limited-quota license system that decreases overall total buck harvest while allowing some level of doe harvest, or 2) setting a very short hunting season in early fall when more mature bucks are less vulnerable.

It has been suggested while antler point restrictions may increase the proportion of bucks in certain populations with low buck:doe ratios, there is no evidence they substantially increase the total number of adult (mature) bucks.

More information on mule deer can be found at www.muledeerworkinggroup.com