



FINDING DIRECTION

By Don Backman, OHA Board Chairman

More Bang for Our Bucks

It's frustrating to be asked to pay more for less in return. To Oregon hunters who have witnessed a decline in the quality of the state's deer and elk hunting in recent years, being asked for a license and tag fee increase seems like adding insult to injury.

The Oregon Hunters Association recognizes both the need to restore the quality of big game hunting in Oregon and to maintain the present level of services provided by the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife and Oregon State Police game enforcement.

A hike of 18 percent on average across the board in hunting license and tag fees will come as a bitter pill to swallow for many Oregon hunters. However, when one considers that it has been four years since the last increase in fees, it's not much more than 4 percent annually, which is more like a cost-of-doing-business adjustment, and it's fairly consistent with most other cost increases in recent years – gasoline and diesel notwithstanding.

It's pretty simple math to figure that the fish and wildlife management and enforcement budget can't continue to absorb increases in expenses without increases in revenue. That's simply balancing the budget.

One of the key causes of revenue shortfalls, however, is a decrease in license and tag sales, which may be blamed on declining quality of hunting. A bump in fees may only result in fewer licenses and tags being sold.

OHA would prefer that the state's wildlife management revenue increases be the result of robust license and tag sales, rather than charging fewer hunters more fees for poorer hunting. To do so, of course, means recruiting more young hunters and keeping those we already have in our ranks.

To address recruiting youngsters, OHA has asked for lower fees for juvenile hunters, including a Juvenile Sport Pac OHA proposed. The state's new Mentored Youth Hunter Program and other hunting opportunities for youth will serve that end, as well.

To keep the interest of the hunters we have now, OHA sees the need to increase deer and elk numbers in Oregon, which in turn means recognizing and addressing the causes for the declines. Loss of critical wintering habitat, spread of disease and reduction of logging may be tougher factors to address than the one overriding factor OHA believes has devastated herds since the passage of Measure 18 in 1994 – cougar predation.

With the adoption of Oregon's new cougar management plan and the passage of the law OHA supported that enables ODFW to use citizen hunters as agents of the state for removing cougars with dogs, ODFW now has the tools to address cougar predation.

OHA has told ODFW Director Roy Elicker that his agency has the conditional support of OHA for a license and tag fee increase in the 2009 Oregon Legislative Session provided ODFW embark on aggressive programs to increase declining big game herds (Director Elicker has committed the Department to this), and that the following proposals by the External Budget Advisory Committee remain in the approved budget:

- Lower youth fees;
- Miscellaneous, occupational and commercial fees;
- ODFW wildlife veterinarian and OSP DNA crime lab;
- Restore two OSP game enforcement troopers in eastern Oregon.

OHA also asks that ODFW review current programs and management activities for efficiency and cost effectiveness.

OHA has notified ODFW that we will be closely monitoring the progress toward restoring our deer and elk herds to management objectives.

One member of the budget committee made the remark that the fee increases were "simple economics." But OHA recognizes that you can't continue to balance the books by charging fewer customers more money for a poorer product. If you want to stay in business, you better give your customers a better bang for their bucks.