

## Wildlife

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acknowledged that it can be more difficult to conduct wildlife enforcement on CWMUs compared to public lands, where wildlife law enforcement can move about freely.

With CWMUs, officers may have to coordinate with the landowners to conduct investigations. "Most operators just give you a key for whenever you need to be there," Jones said.

He also acknowledged that abuses have happened in the past with CWMU operators, but said they have been isolated.

"As a cooperative operator, they are actually agents of the division, so we hold them to a pretty high standard," Jones said. "If you want to participate in this program you have to keep your nose clean."

Last year, the CWMU advisory committee recommended banning a CWMU operator from the role for four hunting seasons, after he was charged with taking wildlife while trespassing in Wasatch County and later entered a plea in abeyance to a reduced, attempted version of the misdemeanor. After he met the plea deal's conditions, the case was dismissed.

The operator had been with a group of hunters who left the CWMU boundaries in 2021 and shot a trophy bull elk 800 yards onto adjacent private property, according to a police report and discussion before the committee.

After any violation of the wildlife code by an operator, committee member Greg Wilding noted, "we are to consider whether the applicant should be approved to participate in the program."

The CWMU was placed on probation for a year for failing to know and mark its boundaries. The operator's misconduct was not connected specifically to the operation of the CWMU, since it was managing deer, a police report noted. The elk hunt that day was on the same land, but as private property, the officer explained.

Still, CWMU operators are held to a high standard, committee members agreed. "My thoughts are the operator didn't live up to a higher standard... the operator should probably be removed," member Tim Freiss said.

The advisory committee's recommendation wasn't forwarded to



A mule deer is spotted on the Alton Cooperative Wildlife Management Unit in Kane County in 2022.

the Wildlife Board for a final resolution because the operator "agreed to sit out for three years," the DWR said, and the CWMU engaged a different operator.

### 'WILDLIFE LOVERS' INSTEAD OF WILDLIFE HATERS

Jones said he sees Utah's CWMU program as "the best public-private partnership for wilderness in the West. It's awesome."

In some states, landowners can sell hunting tags without offering anything to the general public, he noted. In other states, private landowners can own thousands of acres of land and not be able to get a deer tag for their own property.

The Utah CWMU requirement that landowners offer access to a small number of hunters who have public tags, he notes, gives average hunters a chance to hunt better lands that ordinarily would be reserved for high-priced guided hunts. According to the DWR, there are 134 CWMUs across the state providing public hunters access to nearly 2.3 million acres they might not otherwise be able to hunt.

While the vouchers for permits that can be sold are lucrative for hunting guides and landowners,

### The Alton Cooperative Wildlife Management Unit

Kane County Commissioner Wade Heaton, who operates the Alton Cooperative Wildlife Management Unit, came under investigation for alleged illegal big game baiting on the property.



Source: Google Maps, Utah Division of Wildlife Resources

those tags don't bring in more revenue for DWR than general use tags.

According to records from DWR, CWMUs brought just over \$7.5 million in revenue from 2019 through 2023 in applications, permit sales and certificates of registration.

Over that same period, Heaton's Alton CWMU brought in \$119,156 in revenue to the state.

"We're focused on herd health, not money," Jones said.

More benefit goes to the landowners, he said, and keeps them

from viewing wildlife on ranches as pests.

"It provides an incentive to not develop that ranch and it maintains higher wildlife populations," Jones said. "It makes landowners into wildlife lovers instead of wildlife haters."

When Heaton was young, he told The Tribune in 2009, "the sentiment among landowners and ranchers was us against the wildlife." We hated deer and elk. They destroyed fences and hung out in alfalfa fields."

After the CWMU program was put in place, he said, "it is kind of amazing to listen to landowners now. They talk about ways to help wildlife thrive on their land and they get really passionate about it."

Before the state's ban on baiting was put in place, there were some restrictions on the practice. Utah law, for example, forbids luring bears to a bait station and then pursuing the animal with dogs — as a guide involved in a hunt with Donald Trump Jr. is accused of doing.

In 2020, The Utah Investigative Journalism Project requested closed investigation records into the guide. The agency had closed the case, but reopened it after the records request was submitted. That resulted in felony wildlife destruction charges being filed against the guide; one charge was dismissed but another is still being litigated.

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