



Report Back and Recommendations for Strategies to Reduce User Conflicts During Moose Hunting Seasons.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Moose are an important economic resource and an iconic species for Maine. Modern-day moose hunting was re-established in 1980 by permit via an annual lottery and is often considered a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Moose are not only a valued hunting resource providing outstanding table fare and an honored family adventure but are also a highly sought viewing opportunity by outdoor enthusiasts and visitors to Maine.

Non-consumptive outdoor recreation and eco-tourism has been growing for decades in Maine, including amateur and commercial moose viewing trips. Enjoyment of moose viewing opportunities can be maximized during peak fall foliage that coincides with the time of year when bull moose are displaying their impressive antlers. This popular fall activities coupled with fall fishing and open hunting seasons for moose, small game (particularly ruffed grouse), and black bear has the potential to lead to overcrowding of Maine's woods and waters, potentially creating conflict between users and with landowners. There has been recent sentiment by some of Maine's sporting public and landowners that under the current moose hunting season framework, overcrowding and conflict is an issue, is likely leading to dissatisfaction by some hunters, provides some potential disruption to forest management activities, and needs to be examined more closely.

Maine, like other state fish and wildlife agencies, adheres to the Public Trust Doctrine and the North American Model of conservation, where wildlife resources are a public trust to be managed for the benefit of all citizens. In 2017, the Department engaged in a planning effort that sought public input about moose (and other big game) management priorities for the next 10 years. This public planning process led to several management goals including maintaining public satisfaction with Maine's moose population. To achieve this goal, it is critical that the Department employs strategies to ensure that opportunities exist for all Maine's people to enjoy moose.

During the 1st Regular Session of the 131th Legislature "L.D. 831 An Act Regarding Low Success Rates for Moose Hunting", sponsored by Representative Steve Wood was introduced to the IFW legislative committee. This bill originally proposed requiring the Commissioner of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, when establishing rules that manage moose hunting seasons, to: 1) take into consideration the moose hunting success rate of each wildlife management district (WMD) when establishing the beginning date for moose hunting in that district, and 2) directs the Commissioner to establish two independent moose hunting seasons in WMDs 7 and 8. The committee, in response to testimony, amended the bill to create a resolve, "*Directing the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife to Examine Issues Related to Moose Hunting Seasons.*" The resolve directed the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife to establish a stakeholder group to examine issues and make recommendations related to the timing and length of Maine's moose hunting seasons and strategies to reduce conflicts and report any findings and recommendations to the Joint Standing Committee of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife by January 15, 2024.

Membership of the stakeholder group was identified in the Resolve, bringing together a diverse group of expertise to examine the issue. Membership included representatives from the Maine Professional Guides Association, Maine Sporting Camp Association, North Maine Woods, Inc., Office of Outdoor Recreation, Maine Forest Products Council, Sportsman's Alliance of Maine, Maine Trapper's Association, the town of Rangeley, legislators from the Joint Standing Committee on Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, an IFW Advisory Council member, and an MDIFW Regional Biologist and Game Warden (Appendix E). Members of the stakeholder group didn't always share the same opinion on each topic, however the majority reached consensus on the issues and recommendations which include:

1. Develop a supplemental hunter educational course specifically for moose permit holders to complete prior to their hunt.
2. Survey hunters, landowners, ecotourism participants, and local businesses to better understand the level of conflict during moose hunting seasons and use the results to better inform potential future changes to the moose season framework.
3. Modify the September grouse hunting season.
4. Use survey results to further assess the extent of the issue and if needed, through rule making, adjust moose hunting season framework to better distribute moose hunters to reduce conflicts.

BACKGROUND

Moose Management and Season Framework Review

Moose Management

MDIFW has publicly derived management goals and objectives for many of the species it manages, including moose. Current moose management goals and objectives were developed as part of the 2017 Big Game Management Plan and shifted from moose density objectives to that of overall moose health given the findings from the Department's 7-year Adult Cow and Calf Survival Project. Health is defined by increased survival of newborn and overwintering calves, increased productivity of adult cows, and reduction in prevalence of disease and parasites in Maine's moose.

For over a decade, Department staff have conducted and completed aerial surveys to estimate moose density and determine composition of bulls, cows, and calves in the majority (83%) of our state's core moose range (WMDs 1-6, 8, 9, 11 and 19). Although WMDs 7, 8, and 10 are not surveyed because of mountainous terrain, IFW biologists can estimate moose densities in these WMDs based on modeling moose population parameters including harvest rates, survival/mortality rates, age distributions and productivity. Harvest regulations are adjusted as necessary to address adult sex ratios as well as bull age composition. This includes ensuring minimum ratios of mature bulls to cows and a minimum ratio of mature bulls among all bulls in the population.

With the collection of reproductive data (ovaries) from harvested moose, mortality estimates from telemetry studies, and aerial survey data, IFW can reliably assess moose abundance, population composition, and reproduction and survival to inform population estimates and harvest recommendations. Thus, the annual allocation of moose permits is informed by publicly derived management goals for each WMD and moose population trends. Permit levels can be adjusted if significant changes occur in moose population trends, population composition, or if management objectives have been reached. Those publicly derived goals include:

1. Maintain a healthy, sustainable moose population while providing hunting and viewing opportunities.
2. Continue researching the relationships between moose, parasites, habitat condition, climate, and management.
3. Ensure public satisfaction with Maine's moose population and increase the public's understanding of moose biology, ecology, and management.

Moose Season Framework

In recent years, each Maine moose permit holder can hunt moose for 6 days during one of three-season. The September bull season includes WMDs 1-6, 10, 11, 18, 19, and 27/28; the first October bull season includes WMDs 1-15, 17-19, 27 and 28; and lastly, the second October antlerless season includes WMDs 1-6 and 8 (Appendix A, B, and C).

Moose Permit Allocation

In WMDs within southern, central and Downeast Maine (outside of the core range), moose populations are at lower densities and there is less empirical data to inform management decisions. Therefore, permit allocations are determined based on the amount of available habitat and hunter densities.

In our most northern WMDs (1, 2, 4, and 5), considered Maine's core moose range, the Department strives to balance hunting opportunity with landowner needs, recognizing forest operations can be stressed by the additional hunting-related traffic on private roadways during a 6-day moose hunt.

2017 Big Game Management Plan

In 2016, MDIFW initiated the process for developing a Big Game Management Plan (2017-2027) that included directing moose management priorities over the next 10 years. This process involved significant efforts for public engagement and opportunity for input into the species planning effort. This included a Steering Committee of stakeholders to guide the effort, the formation of technical subcommittees for each of the four game species, completion of a formal scientific survey of public attitudes and opinions, as well as qualitative input from public hearings, open public comment periods and web-based forums and focus groups.

The moose technical subcommittee was charged with examining public survey and input, reviewing the draft moose species assessment, identifying moose management needs, and developing draft goals, objectives, and management strategies. For each of these goals, the technical committees developed several objectives, and a series of specific management strategies to guide moose management over the next 10 years. Each management strategy fell within three broad categories: research and monitoring, policy and regulation, and outreach and communication. To view the plan, visit: <https://www.maine.gov/ifw/fish-wildlife/wildlife/species-planning/big-game-species-plan.html>

The most relevant moose management goal for this resolve is goal three, which had the following objectives: 1) Minimize agricultural conflicts with moose and the number and severity of moose-vehicle collisions; 2) Increase viewing opportunities for moose; 3) Maintain a world-class moose hunt in Maine's core moose range; 4) Clarify and improve moose hunting regulations to ensure a legal and ethical moose hunt; and 5) Maintain or increase current levels of satisfaction by moose hunters in core moose range.

Working toward achieving this goal, the following management strategies have been addressed:

- Consider adjusting the current hunting season framework so there is always one week between the September season and first October season.
 - ✓ *This change was considered in 2018 by MDIFW but was not forwarded through the rule making process due to challenges with aligning with other seasons start and end dates that change with the calendar year.*
- Expand the September season to additional WMDs by splitting the annual permit allocation of antlered moose to increase ability to call bulls and minimize conflicts between hunters:
 - ❖ Open a September hunting season in WMDs 10, 11, 18, 27, and 28.
 - ✓ *Through the rule making process, the Department opened a September hunting season in WMDs 10, 11, 18, 27 and 28 in 2018.*
 - ❖ Engage stakeholders to gauge impact/feasibility of opening a September season in WMDs 7-9, 12-14, 17.
 - *The stakeholder group formed for this resolve led to preliminary investigations but has demonstrated the need to engage a broader user base.*
- Combine WMDs 27 and 28 when issuing permits to allow hunters to pursue moose in either WMD.
 - ✓ *This change was enacted in 2018 and helped inform our decision to pursue a similar system in WMDs 7&13, 12&15, and 14&17 in 2023, where there are challenges for hunter access and success.*

Recent Legislation

In 2023, During the 1st Regular Session of the 131th Legislature “L.D. 831 An Act Regarding Low Success Rates for Moose Hunting”, sponsored by Representative Steve Wood was introduced to the IFW committee, originally proposed to require the Department to consider hunter success rates when determining the opening of a moose hunting season in each district and establish through rule making 2 independent moose seasons in WMDs 7 and 8.

During the public hearing and work sessions, several discussion points about conflicts between moose hunters, landowners, and other outdoor users emerged. As a result, the committee decided to alter the bill’s language and create a resolve, “*Directing the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife to Examine Issues Related to Moose Hunting Seasons.*” The resolve directed the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife to establish a stakeholder group to examine issues related to the timing and length of moose hunting seasons and explore strategies to reduce conflicts during moose hunting season. Finally, the resolve required the Department to provide recommendations and report back to the 2nd session of the legislature in January 2024.

The Stakeholder group convened three times this fall to examine the issue and provide recommendations. A summary of the issues, related discussions, proposals with consensus, and stakeholder and Department recommendations are provided below.

ISSUES IDENTIFIED BY STAKEHOLDER GROUP

- 1. Overall concern that there is overcrowding of roadways and Maine’s woods during fall moose hunting seasons**, leading to some feeling of dissatisfaction by consumptive and non-consumptive users (in some areas).
- 2. The overlap with other hunting seasons (e.g., September grouse and bear)**, increases the number of hunters using finite space and creates the feeling of overcrowding and potentially causing conflict. Most of the perceived conflict comes from additional grouse hunting opportunity provided with the September grouse opening established in 2019.
- 3. Higher volume of hunters and other outdoor users creates potential conflicts with landowners**, potentially causes damage to roadways, disruption of logging activities, and other landowner conflicts.
- 4. Habitat for moose in peripheral zones (WMDS 12-15 and 17) is limited.** Moose in these zones occur at lower densities, thus causing the potential to concentrate hunters in certain parts of WMDs and increasing the potential conflict between hunters and other outdoor users.
- 5. Access to private land is challenging in some wildlife management districts (WMDs) leading to potential hunter crowding.**

OTHER STAKEHOLDER DISCUSSION

1. Need to address user safety and enforcement issues with any changes to the current moose season framework. If moose hunting seasons were extended into late November and December to reduce hunter density and potential conflict, it could increase misidentification of bull/cow-with early antler drop.
2. Opening additional WMDs to a September moose season may increase success rates and hunter satisfaction in those units by reducing moose hunter numbers during the October season.
3. Adding or lengthening a season to reduce hunter density may negatively impact the eco-tourism industry during peak fall foliage and wildlife viewing periods.
4. Adjusting the timing of moose hunting seasons could create biological challenges or impacts. Having continuous weeks of bull hunting from the last week of September through the first week of October can disrupt breeding behavior and therefore negatively impact breeding success and calf productivity.
5. Current moose season framework constrains some guides and some meat cutters (supply can't meet the demand).

PROPOSALS WITH STAKEHOLDER CONCENSUS

1. **Develop a supplemental hunter educational course specifically for moose permit holders to complete prior to their hunt.**

Rationale: Although the Department and its partners have increased the amount of information about moose hunting, landowner relations, and other outdoor recreational opportunities, requiring all moose hunters to participate in a moose hunter education course could improve hunter behavior, reduce conflicts with other users, and reduce damage to private land and roads. This educational effort would also provide tips for locating moose and avoiding other hunters (e.g., encourage less use of roads) that could help distribute hunters and limit conflicts. The ideal course length will be determined by the content, but the goal would be to keep the length as short as possible (< 4 hours to complete).

Benefits:

- No changes to the moose season framework, which avoids confusing moose hunters with frequent regulatory changes.
- Improved hunter awareness and potential to change hunter behavior and help reduce conflicts as well as potentially reduce damage to private roads.
- Encourages less use of roads while hunting moose.
- Can provide information and increase confidence in carcasses handled away from roads.
- Increase hunter knowledge of moose biology, behavior, habitat use, and locating sign and areas of activity.
- Aligns with Moose Management Goal #3, outreach and communication strategy #2, work with partners to improve education and outreach, and strategy #9, encourage hunting further from roads and provide information on how to extract moose from remote locations.

Challenges:

- Resistance from some hunters to participating in additional training.
- Additional investment from Department and partners to develop curriculum for the course and host educational workshops.

Additional Considerations: While the stakeholder group reached consensus that this should be a top priority, there was a variety of opinions on whether this educational component should be voluntary or mandatory. There was considerable disagreement on the parameters of certification, if this course were made mandatory. This course could also be paired with Department sponsored “next-step” hunting workshops, which are designed to be hands-on experiential workshops to further develop specific hunting and/or outdoor skills. These could be attended and beneficial for all outdoor user groups.

2. Survey hunters, landowners, ecotourism participants, and local business to better understand the level of conflict during moose hunting seasons and use the results to better inform potential future changes to the moose season framework.

Rationale: A targeted survey could provide broader perspective of the issues and the amount and type of conflict to assess the need and direction of future moose season framework changes. Similarly, obtaining input from a larger audience likely would reduce the need to repeatedly revisit this issue.

Benefits:

- Provides a timely representative sample of the issue to help address future changes.
- Allows for a deeper investigation into root causes of conflict and level of use by broader range of end-users.
- Aligns with Moose Management Goal #3, Outreach and Communication strategy #11, maintain satisfaction of landowners and hunter for current hunter densities and if necessary, work to reduce conflicts.

Challenges:

- This would require a delay in any regulatory changes until the survey could be employed and analyzed.
- There would be additional costs and administrative tasks for this approach and since this survey would be similar in scope and size to the recent 3rd party effort conducted for issues surrounding Sunday Hunting.

Additional Considerations: The stakeholder group agreed that a 3rd party, scientifically conducted survey should be conducted to better understand issues surrounding conflicts during moose hunting seasons and inform any potential changes to the moose hunting framework. However, the group felt that this should be done within the next year, so any potential changes could go through rule-making for the 2024 or 2025 moose hunting seasons.

3. Modify the September grouse hunting season.

Rationale: In 2019, the Maine Legislature enacted LD 265 – An Act to Increase Opportunities for Hunters, Anglers, and Sporting Camps by Extending the Seasons on Upland Game. This bill amended the general hunting season provisions by directing the Commissioner of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife to extend the open seasons on upland game starting the last Saturday of September, annually. Modifying the opening of the

grouse season will reduce the number of competing users during moose hunting seasons and potentially reduce conflicts.

Benefits:

- May reduce some user conflicts and roadway congestion.
- Higher quality moose hunt in September

Challenges:

- Will reduce opportunity for bird hunters, however bird hunters have a lengthy hunting season relative to the short 6-day moose hunt.
- Will reduce opportunity for moose hunters or members of the moose hunting party to hunt grouse.

Additional Considerations: The stakeholder group did not reach consensus on this proposal, however, the majority (9 out of 11 members) believed that adjusting the grouse hunting season to provide one additional day, the last Saturday in September, rather than starting on that day, would help reduce conflicts during the September bull hunting season. The other members believed that the grouse hunting season should be restored to October 1st, no member was in favor of keeping the current grouse hunting season structure.

OTHER PROPOSALS

Several options to adjust the season framework were discussed but no consensus on the appropriate path was reached. The group felt that any season changes should be informed by additional information, provided that additional information could be collected in a timeline to affect change in the 2024-2025 season. It was noted that any potential adjustment to season framework that were discussed during the meetings were socially or politically motivated and that any changes should be informed by additional information. Some options discussed were:

- a. Leave the season framework as it currently exists.
- b. Through rule making, include WMDs 7-9, 12-15 & 17 in the September bull-only season, splitting the annual permit allocation across the September and October bull-only seasons.
- c. Through rule making, include WMDs 7 & 8 in the September bull-only season, splitting annual permit allocation across the September and October bull-only seasons; move all the annual permit allocation from WMDs 12, 13, 15, & 17 to the September bull-only season and remove any permit allocation from the October bull-only season; and retain WMDs 9 & 14 as they currently exist.
- d. Through rule making, add an additional October bull-only week coinciding with the antlerless week (after foliage season) in WMDs 7-9 by redistributing the annual permit allocation.
- e. Through rule making, revert changes back made in WMDs 7,12, 13, 14, 15, 17 for the 2023 hunting season, which allow a permit holder in those districts to also hunt an additional adjacent district.
- f. Through rule making, add bull-only permits to the October antlerless-only season in WMDs 1-6 & 8.
- g. Through rule making, create an additional hunting week in WMDs 1-6 to distribute hunters during the 3rd week in October immediately following the October bull-only season, but before the October antlerless season (last week in October).
- h. Through rule making, create sub-districts for certain WMDs to reduce hunter density and distribute hunters across space.
- i. Consider modifying the bear hunting season framework.

STAKEHOLDER RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Increase education and awareness for moose hunters and other outdoor users to reduce conflicts between users and with landowners.
2. Although some moose hunters and other outdoor users have expressed dissatisfaction or experienced conflicts with current moose hunting framework, the Department should investigate the opinions and actual level of conflict from all user groups before making regulatory changes.
3. Ensure that the Department continues to provide annual distribution of outreach and educational information to moose hunters and other outdoor users.
4. Consider modifying the September grouse hunting season to reduce conflicts.

DEPARTMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Develop and initially offer a voluntary moose hunter education course to be available by the 2024 moose season.
2. This year, with a third-party vendor, survey hunters, landowners, and ecotourism and local businesses to identify the amount of conflict with the current moose season framework to inform future regulatory changes, if necessary. The Department will report back the findings and any recommended changes to the moose season framework by January 15, 2025. This type of survey is similar in scope and duration of other Department public surveys conducted during our Big Game and Furbearer Planning process.
3. Continue to distribute the Department's annual moose hunting guide, post social media, and send emails to increase moose hunter and other outdoor user's awareness of how moose are managed and their role in a maintaining relationships with landowners and other users while recreating in Maine. Consider development of an outdoor user guide to supplement the moose hunting guide and continue education of other outdoor users to help reduce conflicts.
4. Modify the September grouse hunting season to include only the last Saturday in September, which was the original intent of the prior legislation.

APPENDICES

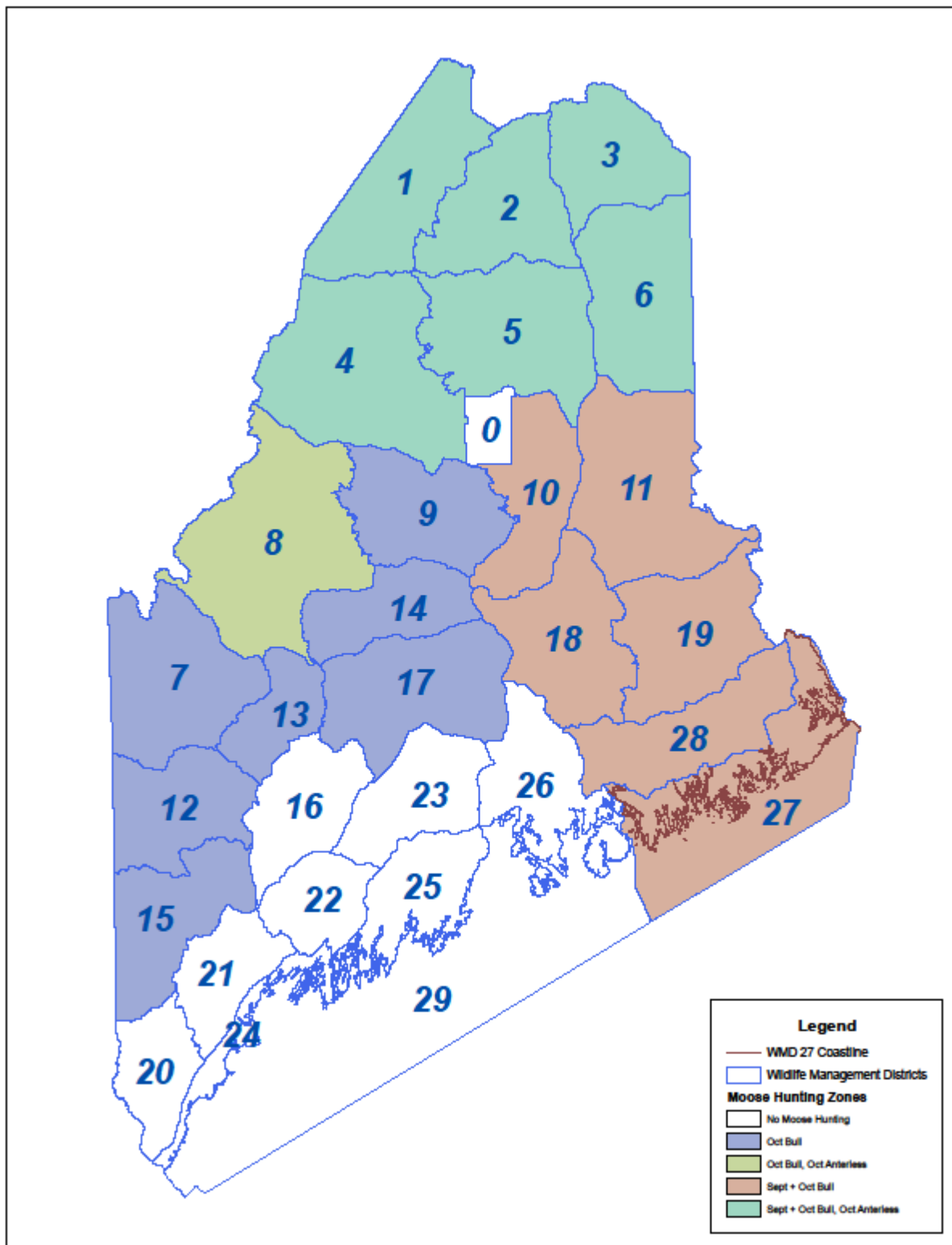
Appendix A: History of Significant Changes to Moose Hunting Season Framework, 1980-2023.

Year	Timing	Number of Seasons	Season Length	Notes
1980	Sept 22-27	1	6 Days	
1982	Sept 20-25	1	6 Days	
1986	Oct 20-25	1	6 Days	
1994	Oct 3-8	1	6 Days	
1995	Oct 2-7	1	6 Days	
1996	Oct 7-12	1	6 Days	
1997	Oct 6-11	1	6 Days	
1998	Oct 5-10	1	6 Days	
1999	Oct 4-9	1	6 Days	
2001	Sept 26-Oct 1, Oct 10-15	2	6 Days/6 Days	MDIFW obtained rule making authority for moose hunting seasons, and established two separate six-day hunts
2003	Sept 22-27, Oct 13-18	2	6 Days/6 Days	
2008	Sept 22-27, Oct 13-18, Nov 3- 29	3	6 Days/6 Days/25 Days	Establishment of southern Maine moose hunt coinciding with deer firearm season (WMDs 15, 16, 23 and 26) *WMD 22 and 25 were added in 2011
2010	~Last Week of Sept, 2nd Week of Oct, 1st week of Nov, Month of Nov	4	6 Days/6 Days/6 Days/25 Days	Creation of an Antlerless-only Moose hunt the first week of November – creating a third six-day moose hunt
2016	~Last Week of Sept, 2nd Week of Oct, Antlerless season week before Firearm opener, Month of Nov	4	6 Days/6 Days/6 Days/25 Days	Antlerless moose hunt moved to end of October
2023	~Last Week of Sept, 2nd Week of Oct, Antlerless season week before Firearm opener	3	6 Days/6 Days/6 Days	No longer issuing moose permits for the southern Maine (WMD16, 22, 23, 25, 26) with deer firearm season.

Appendix B: Timing of Fall hunting seasons.

Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7	Week 8	Week 9	Week 10	Week 11	Week 12	Week 13
8/28 to 9/2	9/4 - 9/9	9/11 - 9/16	9/18 - 9/23	9/25 - 9/30	10/2-10/7	10/9 - 10/14	10/16 -10/21	10/23 - 10/28	10/30 - 11/4	11/6 -11/11	11/13 - 11/18	11/20 - 11/25
Bear Season - Bait 8/29 -9/23												
Bear Season - Dogs Sept 11 to Oct 27												
Turkey Season WMD 6-8, 10-29 Sept 18 to Nov 7												
Deer Archery and Crossbow statewide Sept 30 to Oct 27									Deer Firearm Season Oct 30 - Nov 25			
Grouse Sept 30 - Dec 30												
Bull only WMDs 1-6, 10, 11, 18,19, 27, 28					Bull only WMDs 1-15, 17-19, 27, 28				Anterless WMDs 1-6, 8			

Appendix C: Map of Current Moose Hunting Season Framework by WMD.



Appendix D: Members of the Stakeholder Group

The resolve directed the Department to form a stakeholder group to discuss issues related to the timing and length of moose hunting seasons and strategies to reduce conflicts during moose hunting seasons.

Members of the stakeholder group had to represent the following entities: a Senate Member of the Joint Standing Committee on Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, a House Member of the Joint Standing Committee on Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, A member of the Inland Fisheries and Wildlife Advisory Council, a member of a statewide organization representing professional guides, a member of statewide organization representing sporting camp owners, a representative of a large private landowner, a representative of an entity managing recreational access in the North Maine Woods, a member of statewide organization representing trappers, a representative of the moose viewing industry, a representative of the tourism industry, a representative of municipal interests, a representative of a statewide organization representing hunters, a Maine game warden, and a Department wildlife biologist.

Stakeholder Membership	Name	Organization
Senate member of IFW Committee	Senator Russell Black	Joint Standing Committee on Inland Fisheries and Wildlife
House member of IFW Committee	Representative Steve Wood	Joint Standing Committee on Inland Fisheries and Wildlife
IFW Advisory Council Member	Eric Ward	IFW Advisory council
Statewide Organization representing Professional Guides	Brandon Lane	Maine Professional Guides Association
Statewide Organization representing Sporting Camp Owners	Nathan Theriault	Maine Sporting Camp Association
A Representative of a Large Private Landowner	Chris Fife	Maine Forest Products Council/Weyerhaeuser
Representative of an Entity Managing Recreational Access in the North Maine Woods	Michael McLellan	North Maine Woods, Inc.
Member of Statewide Organization Representing Trappers	James Cote	Maine Trappers Association and Maine Professional Guides Association
Representative of the Moose Viewing Industry	Jeremy Hargreaves	Northeast White Water
Representative of the Tourism Industry	Carolann Oullette	Office of Outdoor Recreation
Representative of Municipal Interests	Joe Roach	Town of Rangeley
Representative of a Statewide Organization Representing Hunters	Gerry Lavigne	Sportsman’s Alliance of Maine
Maine Game Warden	Adrian Marquis	Maine Inland Fisheries and Wildlife
Department Wildlife Biologist	Amanda Demusz	Maine Inland Fisheries and Wildlife

Meeting facilitation:

Name	Organization	Title
Lee Kantar	Maine Inland Fisheries and Wildlife	Moose Biologist
Jen Vashon	Maine Inland Fisheries and Wildlife	Game Section Supervisor
Bob Cordes	Maine Inland Fisheries and Wildlife	Special Projects Biologist
Nate Webb	Maine Inland Fisheries and Wildlife	Wildlife Division Director
Carole Martin	Carole Martin Consulting	Meeting Facilitator