

Tribes to hold moose hunt again

Harvest could be up to 44 bulls

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St. Paul — For the second year in a row, three Chippewa bands will harvest bull moose in northeastern Minnesota, while the state lottery bull moose hunt remains suspended.

The Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa is allowing its members to kill up to 24 bull moose this season, fewer than 28 it had allowed last year, although ultimately band members harvested 27 bulls in 2016.

Separately, the Grand Portage and Bois Forte Chippewa bands each are planning on killing 10 bull moose, after negotiations with the Minnesota DNR.

Pat Rivers, the Minnesota DNR's deputy director of fish and wildlife, said the Grand Portage and Bois Forte bands approached the DNR about this fall's hunt a few months ago.

"When we look at the request from the bands, we think the potential to take up to 44 bull moose shouldn't harm the overall moose herd," Rivers said.

There was some backlash last year when the Fond du Lac Band announced its intentions for a hunt, and then the other two bands pushed for their own hunts.

Rivers said public comment against the hunts has not since been substantial.

"We haven't heard much," he said. "That isn't to say that everybody is on board with it. There hasn't been a large outcry. This ceremonial harvest seems like a reasonable accommodation to make."

The bands had all stopped their hunts after the Minnesota DNR ended its state hunt indefinitely in 2013.

In 1989, the Fond du Lac Band after one year withdrew from an agreement with the state that traded away some hunting and fishing rights for an annual payment. That agreement, however, remains in place between the state and the other two bands in the 1854 Treaty area (Bois Forte and Grand Portage), giving state managers more influence over tribal moose harvest.

"We are only connected by sharing the same treaty area and all being Chippewa bands," said Mike Schrage, Fond du Lac wildlife biologist. "They have a different relationship with the DNR and operate separately from Fond du Lac."

Schrage said FdL's harvest last year was for 25 bull moose to be taken by members and three bull moose to be taken by band conservation officers for the FdL community. Of the latter column, only two bull moose were ultimately taken. The band will not take any community moose this year, Schrage said.

This year's 24-bull quota was arrived at, Schrage said, by looking at the demonstrated needs of the tribal community, "moose numbers, trends in the population, and where we would like to see the population going," he said, the way any natural resources agency would.

Schrage said that while the moose population, currently estimated at about 3,700 animals, has not recovered to its 2006 estimate of more than 8,000, it has stabilized for the past five or six years.

"At that level, I am very comfortable from a biological standpoint issuing bull permits," he said. "We can issue some bull permits and not hurt the population and even expect the population to grow with a light, bulls only harvest like that."

Schrage likened such a hunt to the bucks-only hunts employed in areas following severe winters.

"You can expect the population to grow if the conditions are right," he said.

Rivers confirmed that reinstating a hunt for state sportsmen isn't anywhere near the table at the moment. He said when it was closed, there was pressure to end it, and that likely hasn't subsided.

"Right now, we are putting a lot of our focus on the status of the herd, and we just haven't considered it. It's not something we switch on or off like a light switch.

"The population estimate over the last four years seems to indicate that the moose population has stabilized at a lower number," Rivers said. "We haven't seen that big drop that we saw from 2010 to 2012. If that stays the same over time, we can revisit a hunt. But until we feel strongly about that as a state, we are not likely to open a harvest anytime soon."

Part of the reason biologists, both state and tribal, aren't overly concerned about a limited bull hunt is that the region's bull-to-cow ratio is up, and one bull moose can and will breed with multiple cows in a rutting season. Last year's estimate was at 0.91 bulls per cow; in 2011, it was a worrisome 0.64 bulls per cow, Rivers said.

"The number of cows a bull can breed is more than one," Rivers quipped.

Schrage noted that FdL's moose harvest will be limited to the 1854 ceded territory and will not include the 1837 ceded territory, where it does have some treaty rights.

The Grand Portage and Bois Forte bands are expected to begin their hunts Sept. 30, ending Oct. 29 or when its allocated number of bulls have been harvested, whichever comes first.

FdL opens its hunt Sept. 23, and it will continue through Dec. 31 or until members have killed 24 bulls.