

LEAVITT MAY CHOOSE TO MERGE BIG GAME, WILDLIFE BOARDS TO PREVENT CONFLICTS

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Utah's unique system for setting hunting and fishing seasons could be in jeopardy.

At a press conference Thursday morning, Governor-elect Mike Leavitt said he would create a task force to consider merging the Board of Big Game Control and the Wildlife Board.

Under the current system, the Board of Big Game Control sets hunting seasons for deer, elk, moose, antelope, bighorn sheep, Rocky Mountain goats and buffalo.

The Wildlife Board establishes seasons for all other birds, mammals and fish. It also approves Division of Wildlife Resources' policies and all wildlife transplants.

Recent conflicts between the two boards have showed how the decisions of one affect the actions of the other.

For example, livestock interests on the big game board have complained that the wildlife board is being too conservative with the number of cougars it allows hunters to kill. They maintain that cougars were having a negative impact on both deer and domestic livestock populations.

Hunters have complained for years that the big game board -- with two members representing ranchers and another representing the U.S. Forest Service -- was too heavily influenced by agriculture.

Elk transplants approved by the wildlife board have also come under fire. But such transplants reflect the reason the board of big game control was created in the first place.

The board of big game control dates to the early 1900s when ranchers became angry when elk were being reintroduced into the state. After several changes, it was established in its present configuration in 1951. It consists of a representative of hunters, the U.S. Forest Service, the Utah Woolgrowers Association and the Utah Cattlemen's Association.

The five members of the Wildlife Board, on the other hand, are appointed on a regional basis.

Utah is the only state with two boards which set hunting seasons. In most states, a Fish and Game Commission or Wildlife Commission establishes seasons and oversees professional game managers.

"The present board system has many problems," said Mr. Leavitt. "A difference of opinion is difficult. But a conflict of values is even more difficult to deal with. We want to minimize the conflict of values and look to balance all wildlife needs."

The governor-elect stressed that no decision on merging the two boards had been made.

A task force made up of current members of both boards plus agricultural, hunting and environmental interests recently issued a report on merging the two boards.

It concluded that the charters of the boards should be revised to formalize better cooperation between the two or that a single board responsible for all wildlife be established.

The task force said the current board system has some advantages. These include managing wildlife for multiple-use values, spreading the work among more people and allowing ranchers input on the harvest of big game which can do damage to their land.

The report listed the major disadvantage of two boards as preventing the Division of Wildlife Resources to manage total environmental systems due to an inability to coordinate the activities of two boards with often conflicting interests.

The present system was also criticized for not representing nonconsumptive wildlife interests.

It also allows the Division of Wildlife Resources director to set policy as a voting member of the big game board, which he will then implement as director.