



OFAH INSIGHTS

A SURVEY ON MOOSE MANAGEMENT IN CENTRAL ONTARIO

Ontario Federation of Anglers *and* Hunters

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About *OFAH Insights*

OFAH Insights was created to supplement the information that the OFAH currently receives through our Zone structure to inform OFAH policies and positions on important fishing, hunting, and fish and wildlife management topics in Ontario. The existing Zone structure provides members with a tremendous opportunity to be directly involved, but we recognize that there are many people, members and non-members alike, who do not engage with the OFAH in this way. *OFAH Insights* is an online survey tool to quickly and efficiently survey anglers and hunters on specific topics. It also allows us to harness the power of email distribution (OFAH E-news) and social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. If you are interested in voicing your opinion, be sure to sign up for www.ofah.org/enews.

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the 1,348 respondents who provided valuable input to this survey. In addition to the questions that we asked, over 600 people took the opportunity to voice their concerns about moose management in general. A summary of their additional comments is included at the end of this report. Thank you to everyone who participated in this survey, and we are committed to bringing these concerns to the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry (MNR).

Background

In 2015, the MNRF implemented a reduced moose calf season. This change has achieved the goal of reducing calf harvest in most Wildlife Management Units (WMUs), but has not effectively reduced calf harvest in WMUs 41, 42, and 47 (see map below). Currently, the average annual calf harvest exceeds the total allowable harvest in each of these units. This means that the MNRF cannot allocate any adult validation tags without jeopardizing sustainability, even though all three populations can still support a sustainable harvest. Populations are declining, but they are not in crisis - as moose hunters, we have an opportunity to make additional adjustments to contribute to population health and increase adult hunting opportunities in the future.

In March 2017, the MNRF proposed to eliminate all adult validation tags in these 3 units. The OFAH was able to convince the MNRF to maintain a few adult tags in each unit in order to consult with moose hunters about additional management options. The OFAH Big Game Advisory Committee (BGAC) discussed the issue at length, and evaluated several management options (see Tables). In the end, the BGAC determined if the MNRF was committed to making a change in these three units, a calf validation tag (CVT) allocation was the only realistic option without completely closing the moose season. However, we wanted to hear directly from moose hunters to gauge the level of support or opposition to a CVT allocation prior to recommending any option to the MNRF. This will help the MNRF understand the moose hunting community's perspective on this issue.

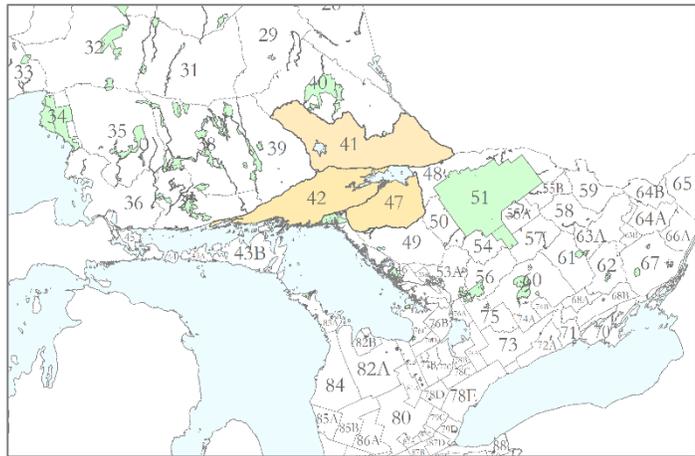


Figure 1

NOTE: the moose management changes outlined here are the bare minimum. We will continue to pressure the MNRF for better habitat and predator management, changes to the draw and surplus tag system, etc.

Guiding Principles

The OFAH Big Game Advisory Committee discussed various options, guided by the following principles:

Principle	Discussion Outcome
Conservation of the moose resource is our top priority	Populations are declining, but can still support a sustainable harvest by licensed hunters.
Status Quo is not acceptable in these 3 units.	At current calf harvest levels, no adult validation tags can be issued without jeopardizing population health. Moose hunters generally prefer adult hunting opportunities over calf hunting. Hunters favour bull hunting opportunities as a priority, followed by cow hunting opportunities. If additional measures are successful at reducing calf harvest, adult validation tag quotas can be increased in the future.
Consistency in Application	The committee prioritized management actions that could be applied to all 3 WMUs to avoid creating different seasons and management regimes in neighbouring units.
Maintain sustainable hunting opportunities	The committee wants to ensure that sustainable hunting opportunities aren't withheld unnecessarily or without clear justification.
Maintain an equitable distribution of hunting opportunities between bow and gun hunters	A bows-only season in all 3 WMUs was viewed unfavourably by many due to the disproportionate impact on gun hunters.

Options Discussed

Option	Discussion Outcome
Status Quo	Unacceptable to both the OFAH and the MNRF because it presents a risk to these populations and eliminates opportunities to hunt adult moose.
Calf Validation Tag (CVT) Allocation	Provides direct control over calf harvest while maintaining some hunting opportunities. Precedence – a CVT allocation is already used in 4 southern WMUs (48, 55A, 55B, and 57), with some evidence of success.
Close Calf Season	This option is possible with a calf tag allocation, simply by not allocating calf validation tags. Therefore, it is technically included in the CVT option above.
Bows-Only	Deemed to be an unfair impact on gun hunters.

Results

Age and Membership Status

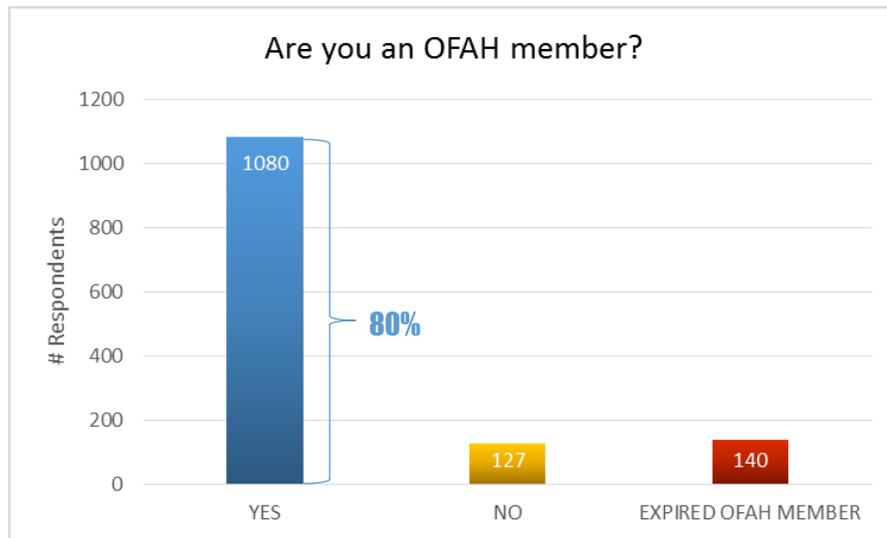


Figure 2

Eighty percent (80%) of respondents were OFAH members. This number is not surprising, because the greatest proportion of respondents were contacted via OFAH e-news (as opposed to social media).

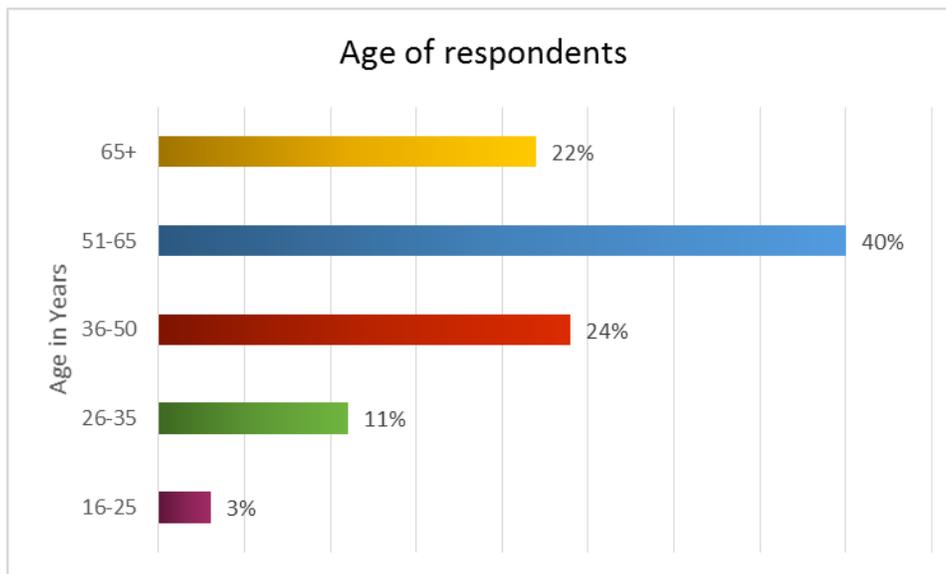


Figure 3

The vast majority of respondents (86%) were over 36 years of age. To our knowledge, this breakdown is very similar to the age distribution of the general hunting population.

Support for Calf Validation Tags

These survey results indicate that an overwhelming number of respondents would support the implementation of calf validation tags in these 3 units (Figure 4). We also compared the level of support among OFAH members versus expired/non-members – 80% of expired/non-members supported a calf validation tag system in these units (not shown).

Reasons for supporting or opposing a CVT system were quite varied. For instance, WMU 47 is home to an important hunt camp culture. Many respondents that belong to hunt camps in WMU 47 were very concerned that a calf validation tag system could eliminate their moose hunting opportunities completely:

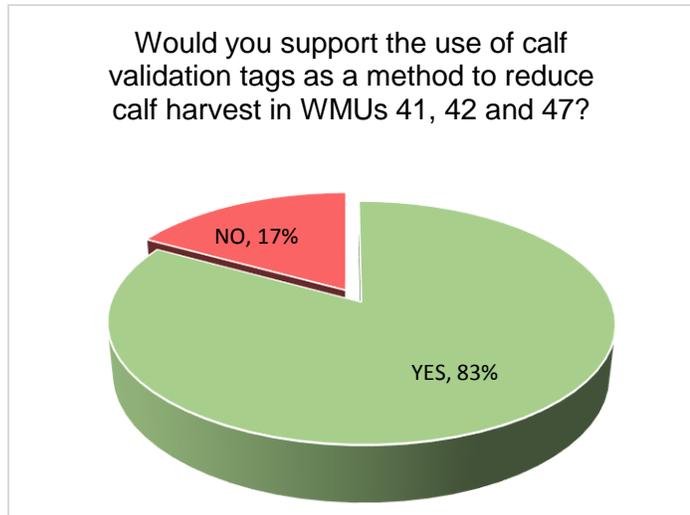


Figure 4

“This will be the final straw for our hunting camp as we have been virtually blocked out from tags since 2001. The only hunting we have had is in another WMU for calves only, as we can’t draw an adult tag.”

“I currently hunt 55A where there is a draw for calf seals. Many camps in the area sit empty during moose season because there are few seals available. Cutting back on adult tags is a better option. It keeps people in the bush, camps full, and the hunting heritage alive.”

It’s important to note that a calf validation tag system could have a disproportionately negative impact on camp-based hunters compared to others, as these hunters are generally less likely to move to another WMU that provides better access to moose tags.

Some respondents were concerned that implementing a calf tag system in these three units would simply shift calf hunting pressure to neighbouring units:

“Placing restrictions on these units will only move the hunting pressure to the next units a little further up the highway.”

Reasons for supporting a calf validation tag system also varied. Some respondents believe that a calf validation tag system should be implemented province-wide:

“Make calf validation tags mandatory for all WMU’s.”

“I believe we should have to apply for calf tags in any area.”

Others would only support a calf validation tag system under certain conditions. For instance:

“I would support calf validation tags if there was a reasonable guaranteed group size. This would ensure an opportunity to hunt moose every year and would eliminate groups (and individuals) from harvesting multiple calves.”

Several respondents stated that they would support a calf tag system only if they could be assured that the MNRF would increase adult tags in the future:

“Sustaining the moose population at a sustainable level is the most important issue. There has to be short term pain for the long term gain.”

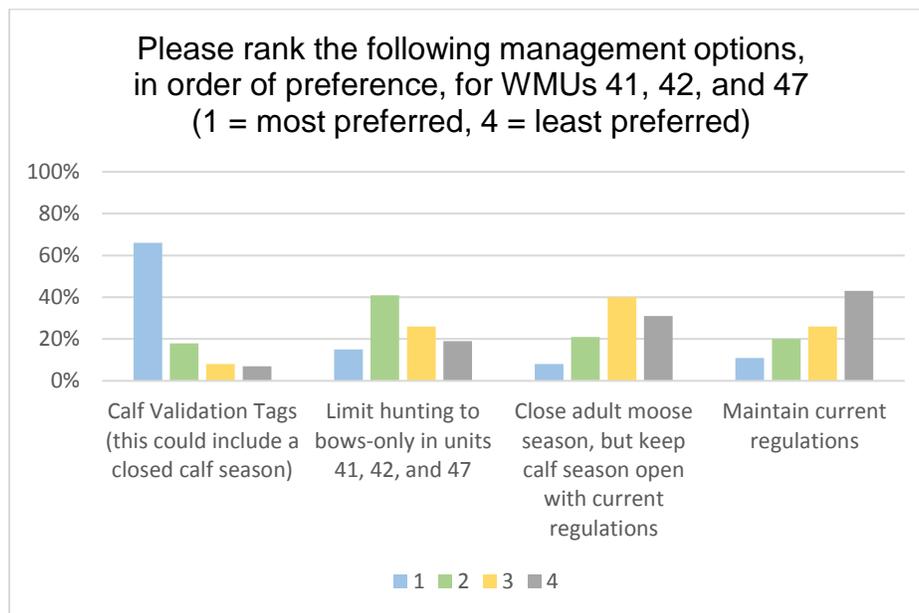


Figure 5

Figure 5 shows the relative ranking of the 4 options provided to respondents. As you can see, calf validation tags were clearly preferred over the other options. Sixty-six percent (66%) of respondents ranked CVTs as their preferred option, followed by bows-only (15% of respondents ranked this #1). Over 40% of respondents ranked the status quo as their least preferred option, indicating that inaction is not acceptable to many hunters.

Other Comments

Some respondents criticized the lack of management options available on the survey, which is a fair criticism. While developing the survey, we recognized that the limited set of options would not capture the full range of management options that are possible in these units, and therefore provided a comment box on the survey. Over 600 respondents took the opportunity to provide additional comments that were outside of the scope of our questions. We appreciate the additional insight that these comments provide.

By far the most common concern related to **Indigenous harvest of moose** – over 70% of additional comments raised concern about the unregulated nature of Indigenous moose harvest and/or the lack of harvest reporting by Indigenous harvesters. Many respondents called for the institution of harvest limits/licensing requirements for Indigenous harvesters, while some respondents simply wanted Indigenous hunters to be required to report on their harvest. Many people felt that any additional restrictions should apply equally to licensed and Indigenous hunters. Here is what some of you said about Indigenous moose harvest:

“The issue of unrestricted, unreported harvesting of moose by First Nations should be top priority for OFAH and the government.”

“As a retired Conservation Officer, I can tell you that without knowing the amount of First Nations [harvest], we will never be able to manage moose in Ontario.”

“It is very important to get our Indigenous communities on board, no matter what is decided.”

“There should be a joint conservation committee with all parties including First Nations to set hunting limits as there is in other provinces.”

With respect to the previous quote, it's important to note that in June 2014 the OFAH recommended that the MNRF create a provincial moose technical committee that would include representatives from the Indigenous community (our letter is available at www.ofah.org/moose). To date, the MNRF has not created this committee; any discussions between the MNRF and Indigenous communities occur as nation-to-nation discussions, without participation by non-Indigenous moose hunters.

The impact of **predation** was also a very common concern. Many respondents fear that the number of moose killed by wolves and black bears has increased over time and is contributing to moose population declines. Wolves are a competent predator of moose year-round, while black bears are generally only a significant predator of moose calves during the first few weeks of a calf's life. Increased bear numbers as a result of the cancellation of the spring bear hunt, and the resulting impact on moose calf survival, was frequently mentioned.

“Reduce wolf/bear populations which greatly reduce calf survival.”

“The bear population has changed dramatically. Many more larger and older bears that are much more successful at calf predation.”

“The bear population has to be decreased if the MNRF is serious about improving the moose population.”

“Manage predator populations to reduce mortality within the herd, i.e. put an end to this Algonquin wolf nonsense.”

There is a noticeable lack of faith in the **MNRF’s knowledge of moose population numbers**. This typically stemmed from a lack of faith in survey methods, timing, etc.

“...there is no shortage of moose. MNRF needs to do a better job of surveying.”

“I do not believe the accuracy of the moose numbers as provided by the MNRF at all for WMU 47.”

“I still do not trust the Ministry’s survey data.”

“The MNRF is a disaster. I have no confidence in anything that they suggest or say. Wild conjecture and junk science driven by Toronto.”

In the past, the moose aerial inventory (MAI) budget for a given year had to be used up in that fiscal year. This meant that if proper surveying conditions did not exist in a particular WMU, it wouldn’t be surveyed as scheduled and was often deferred to the following year. A recent change now allows the MNRF to carry forward unused portions of the MAI budget into the next fiscal year. This is a positive change that will ensure MAI funding is used for its intended purpose, rather than disappearing at the end of the fiscal year. Surveying conditions vary considerably across the province and between years, and this will likely worsen as winters get generally milder.

“...current logging practices do not support moose habitat...”

“Nowhere in Ontario should a tag be issued to a single hunter. Those days are long over. I’m amazed when I learn that single hunters get tags in WMU’s where groups do not.”

“I think that whatever solution is selected, priority should be given to hunt camps.”

“Aerial spraying of food sources must stop.”

“These units and [WMU] 49 should be managed for deer.”

“You should not be allowed to hunt calves in any WMU in Ontario, period.”

“Restrict motorized access to hunting areas (e.g. ATV’s should only be used for the retrieval of game).”

“...sick and tired of having to buy a moose licence every year and even though we were in the preferred pool each year, we never got an adult tag.”

“I suggest the draw should also be for calves but that you charge \$10 to enter the draw without a licence. Then the winner still has to pay \$100 for the tag and everyone he hunts with including him or her must buy a licence and must have been in the draw.”

Conclusions and Next Steps

There appears to be a significant level of support for the implementation of calf validation tags in WMUs 41, 42, and 47. As stated in the Background material, all 3 populations can still support sustainable hunting opportunities, but adult moose hunting opportunities can't be allocated due to current calf harvest levels. Despite the majority of survey respondents supporting calf validation tags in these WMUs, it is also clear that MNRF will need to seriously consider how they can ensure that any proposed changes will not severely impact the important hunt camp traditions and culture that exists. With a looming provincial election, it's unlikely that the MNRF will be willing to make a change of this magnitude before the 2018 moose season. The OFAH will make sure that all of the viewpoints expressed by Ontario's moose hunters are considered by the MNRF.

It is also clear that, in addition to any further restrictions on licensed hunters, the MNRF needs to increase efforts to improve moose habitat, manage predator populations, and involve Indigenous communities in moose management. The OFAH made all of these recommendations in our June 2014 letter to the MNRF (and in multiple subsequent discussions), but we haven't yet seen much tangible progress on these issues. Our report card on MNRF's moose management action is available at www.ofah.org/moose. We are committed to bringing these concerns to the MNRF's attention as often as needed, until we are satisfied that progress has been made.

Thank you for your contribution,



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