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‘Herd of special interest’ status possible



A wapiti deer in Fiordland National Park. PHOTO: SUPPLIED

Wapiti deer, an introduced breed, may become a "herd of special interest" (HOSI) in Fiordland National Park

Hunting and Fishing Minister James Meager said the wapiti HOSI represented an opportunity for economic growth in regional New Zealand. He also confirmed it would allow an introduced animal to be left to live in a national park.

"Better, healthier deer herds provide opportunities for domestic and international visitors to hunt the only free-range wapiti herd outside of North America," Mr Meager said.

"The wapiti HOSI builds on existing community efforts of the hunter-led Fiordland Wapiti Foundation to manage the deer population for hunting and conservation purposes. The

foundation has been successfully managing populations in the Fiordland National Park for years, and this HOSI will give certainty and support to continue their work for years to come.

"A successful HOSI will improve herd and trophy health, better manage the impact of valued and other introduced species and continue to improve conservation outcomes such as improved biodiversity and protection for native flora and fauna."

The next step in the process is to consult with interested parties.

The Department of Conservation will publicly notify a draft herd management plan after engagement with key parties is complete. This is expected to take place in the fourth quarter of 2025.

To support the wapiti HOSI, the government will also introduce a Bill to Parliament to clarify the designation of HOSI in national parks, through a small amendment to the Game Animal Council Act 2013. The Bill will clarify that HOSI can be established in national parks as was originally intended and clarify the existing legislation.

"The National Parks Act's requirement to 'exterminate' introduced animals as far as possible is clearly at odds with the purpose of designating a HOSI, which is to manage game animals for hunting and conservation outcomes," Mr Meager said.

"The GAC Act always intended for HOSI to be allowed in national parks, and by introducing this Bill, we aim to provide clarity for all involved. The legislation will retain the requirements for HOSI to be consistent with New Zealand's wider conservation framework, including the preservation of indigenous habitats and natural features."

The public will have the opportunity to submit on the Bill at the select committee stage.

The Fiordland wapiti herd was established after United States President Theodore Roosevelt gave 18 wapiti deer to New Zealand in 1905.

A HOSI designation is a tool to maintain a quality population of animals hunters value as well as reducing the environmental impacts of these animals. It can also help raise New Zealand's profile as an international hunting destination.

The GAC Amendment Bill does not change the National Parks Act. It also does not establish a HOSI. The process to do so will remain unchanged, including the requirement to go through public consultation.

— *APL*