

Will the sun set on Block Management?

Set to expire soon, this popular program will require legislative action to continue helping hunters, landowners, and wildlife managers **BY TOM DICKSON**

WHEN CLARK WARD joined several out-of-state relatives to hunt a Block Management Area (BMA) south of Miles City last fall, the group had “a hunt we’ll never forget,” says the Philipsburg hunter. Ward shot the “biggest mule deer of my life,” he says, while his nephew shot a five-by-five buck that scored 180 Boone and Crockett Club points. “And then one of my nephew’s friends shot an eight-by-eight muley that scored 211,” says Ward, who manages his father-in-law’s ranch a few miles west of Anaconda. “All in all, we had some pretty incredible hunting.”

If Montana’s Block Management Program were a candidate running for office, it would win in a landslide. Hunters both local and nonresident love it, and landowners across the state give it high marks. In a 2003 survey, 85 percent of hunters said

they were satisfied with the hunting opportunities provided by Block Management, and an overwhelming 94 percent of participating landowners said they want to continue enrolling their land in the Block Management Program.

“Those results, which are similar to or even better than what we found in a 1997 survey, tell us this program is on the right track, that it’s fulfilling its main goals, and that our work to improve it is paying off,” says Alan Charles, who coordinates relations between hunters and landowners for Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP).

The Block Management Program, established in 1985, grew out of concerns that public hunting access to private land was diminishing. Landowners were increasingly leasing their land to outfitters or closing their gates to all public hunting. Not only

did that create fewer hunting opportunities, but it also increased public hunting pressure on other private farms and ranches.

It also put wildlife managers in a bind. “We manage deer, antelope, and elk mainly with public hunting,” says John Ensign, FWP wildlife biologist in Miles City. “If we can’t get public hunters onto private land, it’s next to impossible for us to fulfill our responsibility of managing wildlife, to keep wildlife populations at levels where they aren’t causing depredation problems for farmers and ranchers.”

To meet the needs of hunters, landowners, and wildlife managers, Montana created a program in which interested landowners are provided with various benefits for enrolling land. These include compensation (up to \$12,000 per year), limited liability protection, and livestock loss reimbursement. FWP also provides hunter management tools such as signs, maps, permission books, and sometimes the assistance of seasonal FWP staff to help manage BMAs.

The payments and other benefits help compensate landowners for impacts of allowing public hunting, such as late-night phone calls, the risk of errant shots, spraying for noxious weeds brought in by hunter vehicles, grading roads rutted from increased truck traffic, and erecting additional fences and gates.

FWP doesn’t lease the lands for Block Management but rather contracts with individual landowners to determine how they will manage public hunting on their property. (Incidentally, the program’s name refers to its goal of “blocking” together large areas of land under one system of access requirements, management objectives, and hunter-use rules).

“When we made the decision to open the ranch to public hunting,” says Butch Gregory, director of the 20,000-acre St. Labre Ranch in Yellowstone County, “we knew we’d need help managing hunters, and we wanted at least some form of compensation for the extra work involved, so signing up with Block Management has

FROM GREEN TO RED? The bright Block Management Area signs across Montana are a green light to hunters that access to private land is available. That opportunity could wink out, however, in 2006.



CHUCK AND GALE ROBBINS

worked out well for us.”

It has also worked out for Doug Wilson of Ballantine, who hunts the St. Labre BMA with his son and grandson. “We get a lot out of hunting these Block Management Areas,” he says. “They are real convenient, and the way the state has it set up, you can head out on the weekend and know you and your family have a place to hunt that day.”

Ward, the Philipsburg hunter, is also a Block Management cooperator. “It works for us because the BMA is walk-in only, so we don’t have to worry about patrolling the roads,” he says. “People get some nice elk here, and we get some compensation from the state, so it’s a good deal for everybody.”

Not everyone is so enamored. Some hunters complain that the high-quality BMAs are overhunted and that many other BMAs lack game. And some cooperating landowners say they are inundated with hunters or that hunters only want to shoot bucks and thus aren’t helping them reduce an overabundance of deer.

Another landowner concern, even among some Block Management supporters, is the amount of compensation. “Our costs go up every year due to inflation,” says Gregory. “It would help a lot if Block Management payments could be reviewed every few years to keep pace with those increases.”

Despite some criticism, Block Management has received consistently strong support and use in Montana from hunters and ranchers since its inception. During the 2003 hunting season, 1,251 landowners enrolled a total of 8.8 million acres into the program and received payments totaling \$3.9 million. Roughly 80,000 hunters spent a total of 400,000 days pursuing game on BMAs.

Those hunters also spent money in local businesses. Many Montana merchants say that by attracting hunters to rural areas, Block Management has been good for their bottom line. “During the fall hunting season, we see customer traffic—resident and nonresident—increase by 25 percent or more,” says Dave Smith, co-owner of a Miles City sporting goods store.

Perhaps the program’s biggest benefit is that it maintains a traditional connection between hunters and landowners. Gregory

Tom Dickson is editor of Montana Outdoors.

Block Management Basics



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- To hunt BMAs, you need permission. Depending on the BMA, you can get permission from the landowner, from FWP, or at a sign-in box located at the BMA.
- Many BMAs are walk-in only. Hunters should check with the landowner or FWP for rules on game retrieval, and they should only park in designated areas.
- Be sure you know and understand all rules specific to the BMA where you plan to hunt, such as which game species may be hunted. New booklets showing locations, rules, and contact information for BMAs in each of Montana FWP’s seven regions are available from regional FWP offices. On-line information is available at: fwp.state.mt.us/hunting.



says that while growing up in eastern Montana during the 1960s, he never had trouble finding a place to hunt wildlife. “Our family knew several ranchers in the area,” he says. “We’d see them in the summer and ask to hunt that fall, and they’d say, ‘Sure, go ahead.’”

Though such relationships still exist, they are much less common. These days, says Gregory, “the closest thing to that traditional relationship between hunter and landowner is Block Management.”

The program’s popularity doesn’t necessarily mean it will continue. The legislation granting FWP authority to fund Block Management and other hunting access programs expires in early 2006. Lawmakers must decide in the 2005 session whether or not to keep the program afloat.

Recently, Montana’s Private Land/Public Wildlife Council adopted draft recommendations on the Block Management Program. The 15-member governor-appointed council, composed of hunters, landowners, and outfitters, has tentatively recommended that Block Management should be continued and improved.

Opportunities to provide public hunting access on private land may be narrowing. Many Montana landowners say they feel growing pressure to sell out to hunters or outfitters wanting to lease their land.

“We’ve been approached many times,” says Gregory, “and we’ve been offered some large sums of money. But the ranch manager and I are Montanans, born and raised here, and we believe that keeping the hunting tradition alive and accessible to everyone is what’s most important.” 🐾

TIMELINE

Mid-1970s

Montana wildlife biologists recognize the need to improve public hunting access to private land. FWP establishes walk-in areas, posting signs delineating public and private boundaries, and publishing hunting maps.

1985

Block Management Program established.

1995

Montana legislature grants FWP temporary authority to enhance existing hunting access programs and fund them through a new variable-priced outfitter-sponsored nonresident elk and deer license.

1999

The temporary authority, called a sunset provision, is extended, but only until 2006.

2005

Montana legislature to rule on the Block Management Program’s future.

2006

The year FWP could lose authority and funding sources for Block Management under current legislation.



JIM HERRLY