

What are you seeing out there?

Here at FWP, we want to know what hunters, landowners, and others see and experience during their time outdoors. Along with our own scientific surveys, that information helps us manage the state’s fish and wildlife with the most complete and current data available.

For instance, in the past few years we’ve cut way back on mule deer B (antlerless) licenses in many hunting districts across the state. Our observations of reduced deer numbers had been confirmed by those of farmers, ranchers, hunters, and outfitters, who wanted to decrease the harvest even further. At its December 2023 meeting, the Montana Fish and Wildlife Commission—representing the public—responded by eliminating antlerless mule deer harvest on public land throughout Regions 6 and 7 in eastern Montana for the 2024 season.

Listening to what people observe outdoors can inform and reinforce our biologists’ own observations and population trend estimates. But what if what hunters, landowners, and others are seeing doesn’t align with our scientific surveys? That happens. Sometimes, for instance, we may not observe many deer or elk during spring aerial surveys, yet the public tells us they are seeing a lot. Or vice versa.

Either way, we’d want to understand the reason for the discrepancy. Were we flying during a week when weather caused deer or elk to behave abnormally, showing themselves less or more than usual? Were other factors at play?

Our biologists use state-of-the-art science to monitor wildlife, but Montana’s weather, especially, can confound even the best methodologies and technologies. Hearing from you lets us know that we may need to go back and do some fine tuning.

How do we know what mule deer hunters and others see and want? We ask with surveys, and we listen when people call, send emails, come into our offices, and show up at public meetings. During the process of creating the management plans that guide our work, we provide the public with opportunities to voice their concerns and comment on draft documents. For instance, as we’ve started the process to develop a new mule deer management plan this year, we’re asking the public to tell us their expectations for mule deer management. To better understand landowner concerns about wildlife and other matters, we’ve increased the number of staff attending agricultural conventions.

We are also listening and responding to other concerns, such as adjusting our upland game bird regulations to keep pace with growing numbers of hunters from outside Montana, figuring out how

How do we know what mule deer hunters and others see and want? We ask with surveys, and we listen when people come into our offices and show up at public meetings.

best to protect trout populations in southwestern Montana, and establishing new rules for grizzly bear management.

Though we try to be responsive, sometimes we’re asked to do things beyond our authority, such as limit seasons and raise license fees for nonresident hunters, increase fines for trespassing, or prevent private landowners from outfitting. In those cases, decisions would be up to the Montana Legislature, not FWP.

Balancing science with public perception is one of the great challenges of managing Montana’s fish and wildlife. FWP is a science-based organization that relies on solid data and thorough research. It would be irresponsible to ignore what the science tells us. But at the same time, we value the insights of the thousands of hunters, anglers, landowners, hikers, and others out there on the ground each day.

If we determine that a fish or wildlife population seems healthy based on the science we’re using, but you think otherwise based on your own observations and experience, we want to hear from you. That way we can ground-check what we’re doing and make sure that the decisions we make are backed by good science as well as what Montanans are seeing for themselves.

—**Dustin Temple**
Director, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks



DONALD M. JONES