

ELK MANAGEMENT CITIZEN ADVISORY GROUP RECOMMENDATIONS PUBLIC COMMENT SUMMARY

#1 Access Plus Program

A total of 106 public comments were received on this recommendation, the majority from Montana stakeholders, but also received input from Colorado, South Dakota, Texas, and Washington residents.

Notable themes:

- Inaccessible Land
- Quality of Hunt/Land
- Overcrowding
- Cost
- Hunter Behavior
- Landowner Incentives
- Type I and Type II Block Management
- Training
- Technology

Inaccessible Land

Commenters supported improving access to private land, but some thought this program would limit access and reduce public access to elk. Some thought it would open inaccessible land and the hunting pressure would push elk off private land onto public.

Quality of Hunt/Land

Some commenters thought the land that is opened up may be higher quality, leading to higher harvest rate and hunter satisfaction. Some thought it would reduce pressure on elk.

Overcrowding

Commenters thought this program could dilute the number of hunters on public land and relieve some overcrowding.

Cost to Hunters

Most commenters did not believe hunters should pay into this program. By asking them to, the program would be selling wildlife. Commenters also thought that landowners should not profit from this. Costs should be covered, but low enough for the average hunter to afford.

Other commenters spoke to the cost and time it takes to complete advanced training and thought most hunters did not have the money or time for the program. Some suggested that by providing online training, it would be more equitable, inclusive, and available to anyone.

Hunter Behavior

While comments favored programs that produced ethical hunters and improved relationships with landowners, many thought that no amount of training will make a person respect a landowner or be an ethical hunter. Comments also identified that “quality hunter” should be carefully defined, and that this program might create elite hunters rather than good hunters. Some also thought that advanced training would send a message that most hunters are “bad” and that’s why access is declining.

Others thought this program would create accountability and responsibility of hunters and incentivize landowner participation.

Landowner Incentives

Some comments opposed landowner incentives and some did not believe this program would incentivize landowners to participate. They thought this program was being developed just to appease landowners and it does not solve the hoarding issue. Others said landowner preference should not be included. Additionally, comments reflected that landowner performance should be evaluated by hunters, and if they perform poorly, they should not be allowed to participate the following year. There was a theme that landowners should not be allowed to profit from a public resource. Some thought that landowners having the ability to offer access to friends would be abused as would the cost they charge for access. Several commenters said there should be a cap on access fees. Still others believed hunters should not pay at all and FWP should treat this program like other types of block management by providing monetary incentives.

Others thought this program would incentivize landowners to allow access. They thought it gave landowners some control, and it would be better than landowners working with outfitters. They thought trust and relationships with hunters would improve because they are allowing advanced hunters onto their property. Some thought that landowners should be allowed to sell tags.

Type I and II Block Management

Some thought revamping the current block management program and paying those participants more would be better than creating another block management program. They thought that ultimately there would be less access because landowners would pull out of the current program and enroll in the new one.

Though some comments suggested that this new program would better address landowner concerns.

Overall Cost

Most comments said the cost is too high (for hunters and for FWP) and there was minimal benefit. There were some comments suggesting that block management funds are not spent on this program.

Training

Some commenters saw the overlap with the master hunter program and thought FWP could work with them. It also was not clear if training for nonresidents would be available.

Technology

Some thought that relying on an app for this would cause too many technical issues. Additionally, not everyone has a smartphone.

Program Overall

Many commenters thought this program was overly complicated and complex, and that implementation would be challenging. Some thought a pilot program should be attempted first.

Some commenters suggested ideas to consider that other states employ, such as transferable tags.

Some suggested mandatory reporting needs to happen.

There was a theme that this was privatizing a public resource.

Some suggested there should be greater public engagement on this.

#2 Choose Your Weapon/Season

A total of 517 public comments were received on this recommendation, mostly from Montana stakeholders, but also from residents of Arizona, Colorado, Minnesota, North Dakota, Nebraska, New Hampshire, Oregon, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, and Washington.

Notable themes:

- Driving pressure onto rifle season as it yields better success rates
- Seeking clarification on how or if hunters would declare the weapon between species, or general and B licenses
- “Choose district” before “choose weapon”
- Overcrowding being a perception rather than a documented issue
- Moving to a limited draw instead
- Make areas cow only; no bulls until population is within objective
- Improve access to private land and landlocked public lands
- Landowners that lease to outfitters and guides
- October cow hunt
- Limiting opportunity is counter to over objective population goals
- Analyze recent changes (e.g., restricted to HD with antlered permit) before other changes are made
- Further restrict nonresidents and using nonresidents as a test case
- Income loss for the agency if implemented and loss of archery hunters
- Confusion about the six-week certification program
- Potential to decrease hunter recruitment
- Archery start date of September 1
- Outfitters, guides, landowners that lease to outfitters
- Discontinuing shoulder seasons
- Traditions, heritage, family/generational hunting
- Financial losses to the local archery and sporting goods industry
- Enforcement and increases in hunting violations and poaching
- Will not reduce overall pressure
- Additional B license for successful permit holders: reduce boots on the ground, increase harvest, modeled after antelope

Driving pressure onto rifle season as it yields better success rates

Whether in support or opposition of the proposal, most acknowledged that if forced to choose a season, most hunters would opt for rifle season as it yields better success rates, and the goal of hunting for the majority is to provide for their families by putting food on the table. This would have a benefit of reducing

crowding and pressure during the archery season, but would adversely concentrate additional hunters during the general season.

Seeking clarification on how or if hunters would declare the weapon between species, or general and B licenses

Many respondents sought clarification on whether hunters would be electing a weapon only on elk, if it included Elk B licenses, or if they would be choosing a weapon per license or species, and how would the heritage muzzleloader season be accounted for. Many suggested that for this recommendation to bring down hunters in the field, it would have to be implemented simultaneously for elk and deer, or hunters will opt for archery elk and rifle deer. It was also noted that there will still be hunter pressure in the field for other concurrent seasons such as bear, mountain lion, wolf, and upland game bird, as well as other non-consumptive recreationalists utilizing public lands for activities that may alter elk presence.

“Choose district” before “choose weapon”

An alternative to choosing a weapon was the suggestion to choose a district, whether in the form of declaring a hunting district or region at the time of application, closing districts after an objective quota was met, or requiring residents to hunt within their own county. Some went further to say that choosing a district should apply to bull harvest, but cow hunting should generally be unrestricted.

The change in the 2022 regulations that restricted hunters who drew an antlered elk permit for an HD for the duration of the season dates in which it was valid, drew a nod as effectively being a step towards the “choose your district” approach. Some countered that the permit restriction limited a hunter’s ability to self-disperse, and that the current permit restriction and choosing a weapon should not be implemented together. Some thought the permit restriction be removed and choose your weapon implemented in its place.

Some thought FWP could not effectively manage populations and assess hunter overcrowding without data on where hunting is occurring.

Overcrowding being a perception rather than a documented issue

Comments identified that overcrowding is subjective and a perceived problem with no data. FWP should look at scientific methods to investigate this.

Observations that the majority of people can be avoided by hiking a few miles, as crowding is limited to public lands or areas easily accessible by vehicle travel, in certain parts of the state, during rifle season, or on weekends. Some note that pressure during rifle season is due to mule deer hunting.

Choosing a weapon will force more people into one season thereby exacerbating or creating a problem where one currently doesn’t exist.

If overcrowding is really an issue, FWP should not support hunter recruitment and engagement of new and youth hunters. If elk populations are the main objective of this working group, how is lessening hunter presence and duration over the season(s) going to aide in accomplishing the needed harvest?

Moving to a limited draw instead

Some respondents felt the current use of special permits and limited entry districts is causing an overcrowding issue as it forces a concentration of hunters into the remaining general districts. Suggestions varied from opening up the entire state to a general license for a duration; observing the effects; and

responding accordingly by reimplementing applications where needed to maintaining permits in destination locations only; or completely abolishing the permit system.

Comments supporting the implementation of a draw system in lieu of choosing a weapon/season, suggest that areas experiencing overcrowding should be managed as special permit districts rather than general units. The pressure caused by allowing an unlimited number of resident licenses all but ensures that the elk will be driven to private lands. This may be curbed by restricting the total number of licenses.

If a choose your weapon/season was implemented, a suggestion to incentivize hunters to opt for the archery season was to make archery permits easier to draw than rifle in limited entry areas. Otherwise it may be a deterrent to choosing archery.

Other suggestions included dividing the existing season into weeks where hunters would apply for a specific week duration. This could alleviate overcrowding by reducing the number of hunters at any given time.

Make areas cow only, no bulls until population is within objective

Rather than choosing a weapon to reduce hunter crowding, make districts or regions cow only until the unit is within objective. For landowners within over objective districts that frequently experience elk damage issues, providing them with only antlerless licenses should be the solution. If landowners are offered bull permits or have the potential to allow outfitted hunting for bulls on their property, this functions as a disincentive to allow cow hunting, such as through the proposed mid-season break cow hunt, when it will have the likely effect of moving the elk off the property prior to the general season.

Improve access to private land and landlocked public lands

Comment suggested the greatest contributor to overcrowding public lands is the amount of inaccessible land where populations of elk reside. The department should strive to obtain more access for hunters to private lands, or landlocked public lands to reach these elk.

Rather than implementing choose your weapon/season, funding and time would be better spent on expanding the Block Management program, obtaining conservation easements, and building relationships with landowners to establish hunting access. Suggestions were made to discontinue the shoulder seasons and instead require landowners to allow hunters access. Sentiments about the unfairness of landowners being provided with bull tags in exchange for providing limited access were expressed.

Comments suggested a need to establish relationships and trust with landowners, including places under new ownership that historically allowed access which has now ceased.

There were requests for legal changes to unlock public lands utilizing corner crossings, incentive programs to access inaccessible public lands, and working with the USFS to reopen closed areas.

Landowners that least to outfitters and guides

Some comments were regarding private landowners allowing guides and those willing to pay opportunities to hunt. This was seen as privatizing a public resource by selling that opportunity to outfitters and nonresident hunters. Others felt that wealthy people were buying large tracts solely for the purpose of having a private hunting ground. These were all seen as factors in the harboring of elk for monetary gain.

October cow hunt

Some commentors were apprehensive about the effectiveness of an October break for a private land cow hunt, expressing that it would not achieve the desired outcome of pushing them back to public land; it may drive them farther onto private land. Others concluded that there wasn't a scientific basis for hunting cows on private land only, and some felt this was another benefit to landowners for an additional harvest opportunity without a public access component.

Some comments felt that landowners would not be willing to participate in a cow hunt prior to the general season, due to the probability of causing elk movement and risk an opportunity to take a bull when general season opens, whether a personal hunt or due to outfitter obligations. Conversely, the only landowners that would be assumed to participate in an October cow hunt are already participating in Block Management, damage, or shoulder hunts, so there isn't an incentive to recruit anyone new.

Comments opposing this recommendation felt it could cause overharvesting of cows, but could be more palatable than late hunts when cows are pregnant.

There was support for an October cow hunt if it provided an opportunity exclusive to youth or disabled hunters.

Limiting opportunity is counter to over objective population goals

Many comments echoed sentiments that limiting opportunity by forcing one weapon choice and effectively reducing a hunter's season by half, was counterproductive to the citizens advisory group's main objective of managing elk. Comments were made regarding how harvest goals, especially in over-objective areas, would be affected if opportunities were limited.

This was often perceived as managing hunters rather than managing elk and was outside of what the group was tasked to do.

Observations about how additional opportunities are continually added - shoulder season, damage hunts, heritage muzzleloader - outside of the standard archery and general seasons, but then an attempt is sought to reduce the opportunity during these main seasons. By reducing opportunity, this could also lead to more damage hunts being needed.

Analyze recent changes (e.g., restricted to HD with antlered permit) before other changes are made

Some comments mentioned the recent changes with the elk permits this year and called for an analysis of those effects before pursuing additional changes aimed to relieve overcrowding. There were thoughts that this may be helping with hunter distribution, crowding, and pressure, but no data is available yet to support it. Additionally, comments were made for FWP to wisely use resources to collect and analyze data for hunter pressure and population impacts based on these changes.

Further restrict nonresidents and using nonresidents as a test case

Comments opposed implementing "choose your weapon" for residents, but encouraged this action for nonresidents (NR). Some suggested that NR should be limited to 10% of tags per district, while others recommended some districts be completely unavailable for NR.

Some proposed that a nonresident must first draw a general license before being eligible to purchase a B license to reduce the hunters in the field, primarily on public land, while maintaining harvest levels. Others supported a reduction or removal of nonresident B license opportunities altogether, with some opposed to any over-the-counter options for NR.

Some comments attributed pressure in some districts to too many guides/outfitters and proposed a cap on how many can operate per area, while others suggested NR should only be allowed to hunt with outfitters.

Others acknowledged that NR typically only plan one trip for a set duration, so imposing “choose your weapon” would effectively change nothing as they are already planning dates around their weapon of choice. Some suggested NR apply for specific date ranges, have a limited number of licenses valid on public lands, and other license quotas specifically for wilderness and private lands.

Comments proposed to increase the NR license price by double or triple to further reduce applicants. Some suggested raising the price and reducing the availability. Pricing increases were recommended for both general licenses and OTC B licenses.

Some cited the number of NR licenses sold through the various programs for NRN, CHTH, college student, NR youth, and OTC B license options were significantly more impactful to pressure than the quota of the general NR licenses and called for more transparency.

There was opposition to restricting NR due to the amount they’ve already invested in a license and they should be allowed an opportunity until they’ve filled it. There was also reference to NR contributions made to the local economy during their time in the state.

Income loss for the agency if implemented and loss of archery hunters

Coupled with the assumption that if forced to choose a weapon, the majority would select rifle, comments addressed a concern for income loss to the department in the form of the \$10 bow & arrow license that must be purchased. Comments valued the funding for the protection and conservation of wildlife resources. The proposal also recommends shortening the archery season, and archery permits are difficult to draw, leaving archery hunters feeling like they are getting the short end of the stick.

Confusion about the 6-week certification program

Many respondents expressed confusion about this program given its brief mention and lack of detail, with many inferring that it was targeted to only bowhunters. Clarification was sought on what would be its purpose, what would it cover that wasn’t already included in hunter/bow education, who would be found to teach these courses, and how can hunters be expected to commit that much time to a certification program annually. Others stated that it seemed redundant given the existing requirement for hunter education. Some perceived it as a government control to ultimately prohibit people from exercising their freedom. Comments indicated that additional training was penalizing the majority of hunters due to a few bad apples.

There was some support that an intensive course should be required.

Potential to decrease hunter recruitment

Comments about the six-week certification course, in addition to required hunter education and potentially bowhunter education, said this could be detrimental to hunter recruitment.

Regarding the choose a weapon portion of the proposal also has the potential to be detrimental to hunter recruitment, retention, and development. Examples were made that families who rely on game meat may have to elect rifle season for better odds and forgo the opportunity to pass along traditions of archery hunting to younger generations. For younger bowhunters in the early stages of skill development, it may be a difficult decision to commit to a weapon with a likelihood of eating a tag.

Comments were made about the differences between seasons, the unique appeals of each, and how each season may offer unique opportunities with various friends, family, or hunters of a different skill level. Most commenters see the opportunity to hunt both seasons as a valued tradition, passed down through generations. Others expressed the importance having a mentor competent with the weapon to teach new hunters. Parents commented that if they elect to archery hunt, their child might miss out on the season if they aren't proficient enough yet with a bow, and if the child wants to rifle hunt, the parent would be unable to mentor them.

Archery start date of September 1

Comments received in support of an annual archery elk start date of September 1 suggest that it would be helpful to have a set calendar date for planning purposes, similar to archery antelope. This would also provide for a longer break between the archery and general seasons. Some comments said the September 1 archery start date should include deer. Others suggested it would lead to more consistent animal behavior if the season date occurred at the same time annually.

There were a variety of suggestions for dates, some suggesting a September 1 start date and keeping the end date as currently set to provide a longer season, some suggesting September 1-30, and others proposed a three-week season beginning on September 15.

Comments opposed to a September 1 start date cited it will typically fall on a weekday, depriving those without flexibility in their job of the season opener.

Discontinuing shoulder seasons

Comments suggested discontinuing shoulder seasons, due to pressure on wildlife during a critical survival period and while cows are with calves. Some observations were made about the optics of killing pregnant cows to non-hunters. Others see shoulder seasons as causing too much of a reduction in elk populations.

Six months of hunting is what drives elk to shelter on private lands.

Support for winter shoulder seasons cite changing weather patterns with shorter and later winters.

Financial losses to the local archery and sporting goods industry

Commenters observed that if a single weapon had to be chosen, it could have a significant economic impact to the archery industry as a whole, including local shops and sporting goods retailers.

Supporters of the choose a weapon acknowledge that it may have economic repercussions but could be best for the resource and would drive hunters to increase proficiency.

Enforcement and increases in hunting violations and poaching

There were concerns about the enforcement aspect of implementing a "choose your weapon" and that it may increase poaching or other violations and add unnecessary complexity to regulations the department has aimed to simplify. How would this be enforceable on private lands? How would this be enforceable without the addition of more game wardens?

Comments were received about the additional workload to FWP for communications and other implementation.

Observations were made about causing increased hunter frustration, how reducing opportunity may result in poaching simply to provide food or fill a tag, and straining relationships between hunters and the department.

Will not reduce overall pressure

Comments suggested that declaring a weapon will not reduce the overall pressure, even if implemented concurrently for elk and deer seasons. Hunters may still be present for antelope, black bear, wolf, upland game bird, and other species. People will still be accompanying other hunters to assist with scouting, calling, or retrieval. Hunters that previously split time between seasons will spend just as much time in the field focused during one season.

Additional B license for successful permit holders

Modeled after the additional antelope opportunity, offer elk B licenses to successful permit holders first, reducing hunter presence while still providing an opportunity for desired harvest.

Division/divisiveness between hunter groups- bow/rifle

Concerns that having to declare a weapon will cause division between user groups, with the result being less opportunities for family and friends to hunt together, impacts to hunter recruitment, and special interests lobbying for more time for their preferred season.

Social media

Concerns that social media has driven the influx of DIY hunters on public lands. Comments that this is exploiting a public resource for personal gain without restitution to the state in the form of permitting.

#3 Collaboration with other local, State, and Federal Land Management Agencies

A total of 68 public comments were received on this recommendation, the majority from Montana stakeholders, but also received input from residents of Colorado, Washington, and Texas.

Notable themes

- Fire, forest management, and thinning
- Opening motorized roads
- Habitat improvement
- 2018 Interagency Access Council/other working groups
- Predators
- Funding/cost

Fire, forest management, and thinning

Comments called for collaborative efforts for FWP to work with USFS to encourage active forest management, including prescribed burns and thinning to avoid fuel loads for catastrophic burns, while simultaneously increasing nutrition in the resulting undergrowth and providing better habitat. Observations were made about the volume of deadfall in the forest affecting all big game, not limited to elk alone, and that the cost of active forest management would be offset by what is currently being spent on fighting forest fires.

Opening motorized roads

While the EMCAG recommendation focused on opening roads for wolf trapping purposes, public comment supported general opening of roads for increased access. There was an impression that federal agencies are attempting to convert all lands to wilderness areas.

Those opposed to opening motorized roads cite that more roads are currently open than historically, or roads that are officially closed are being used when they shouldn't and USFS and FWP should be patrolling forest roads for these violations.

Habitat improvement

Many comments focused on the need for improved wildlife habitat. The majority observed a need for improvement in habitat and forage on public lands and supported interagency cooperation between FWP and USFS to implement active forest management plans with a wildlife habitat focus.

2018 Interagency Access Council/other working groups

Some comments focused on other working groups, including the 2018 Interagency Access Council that ceased after one meeting, and a suggestion to reform this council. The Elkhorns Working Group was cited as a positive model for their structure, collaboration, and communication between agencies and landowners, as well as results over a long period of time. Conversely, the Ashland District-Custer Forest Management Plan was used as an example of poor interagency cooperation, where recommendations for big game were not incorporated in the management plan.

Predators

Some comments expressed the desire to open roads to allow for more wolf hunting, not limited to trapping as the recommendation proposed. Others made the opposite argument that the assumption of opening roads into elk wintering ground for wolf management was not scientifically backed.

Funding/cost

Some cited financial reasons for opposition of interagency collaboration. One expressed a belief that agencies are not actually concerned about wildlife or habitat, only politically motivated, so money should be spent anywhere else but internal government spending.

#4 Creating an A9 tag bundle

A total of 101 public comments were received on this recommendation, the majority from Montana stakeholders, but also received input from residents of South Dakota, Washington, and Texas.

Notable themes are:

- Private land access
- Available to residents only
- Hunters able to hold three elk licenses
- Definition of population objectives

Private land access

Many comments related to access being the biggest obstacle, not the availability of licenses.

Available to residents only

Coupled with the opposition to bundling, some commenters suggested that additional licenses should be limited to resident hunters only.

Hunters able to hold three elk licenses

Some took issue with hunters being able to harvest three elk in a season. Concerns raised were the potential for wasted game, taking opportunity away from other hunters, and fair chase ethics. There might be a disconnect that statute already provides the opportunity for a hunter to possess three elk licenses, only one of which may be a general elk license, or an interpretation that if the bundle provides three elk licenses that the hunter would be required to fill them all.

Definition of population objectives

Comments focused on the definition of population objectives and its complicated nature. Many suggested to not cater to landowner tolerance, especially if the landowner does not allow hunter access to mitigate the elk concentration. Others requested an assessment of the way that elk populations are calculated and to consider if these private land issues are artificial or seasonal concentrations of elk.

General support or opposition to A9 tag bundle

Some were generally opposed, citing license options that are already available to hunters, how this would needlessly complicate the regulations, would require legislative action, and concerns about wasted game and unethical methods if hunters are trying to fill all the tags in the bundle at one time.

Some commenters generally supported this recommendation with no additional context or suggestions.

#5 Develop User Friendly and Effective Methods to Collect Data

A total of 61 public comments were received on this recommendation, the majority from Montana stakeholders, but also received input from residents of Colorado, Washington, and Texas.

Notable themes:

- Establishing mandatory harvest reporting
- References to the mobile app/online
- Current hunter harvest surveys/phone calls
- Hunter data being actively shared during the season
- Cost

Establishing mandatory harvest reporting

Many comments expressed support that FWP implement a mandatory reporting system on all big game. Included were examples of other states currently employing this, and how failure to report makes one ineligible for licenses in a following year. They said mandatory reporting is the simplest, most thorough method for data collection, and is a step toward improved data sharing and transparency.

The only reluctance expressed with mandatory reporting referenced the sharing of location information that occurred with wolf trapping reports last season.

References to the mobile app/online

Some respondents promoted the use of modern technology, including self-reporting functions online (FWP website) and through the FWP mobile app. The majority supported using these existing platforms and improving them to provide additional functionality for self-reporting.

A few third-party applications were referenced, OnX and iNaturalist, as examples for collaboration or as framework to develop proprietary programs.

Other commenters responded with apprehension towards online data collection.

Current hunter harvest surveys/phone calls

Commenters expressed the concern that this method is ineffective, time consuming, outdated, only captures a random sampling, and unless the caller ID shows as "FWP" most people do not answer phone calls from unknown numbers.

Hunter data being actively shared during the season

Some voiced consideration of fair-chase principles when sharing data. Specific requests included not sharing the data during a hunting season, and limiting the data released to omit exact drainage and location descriptions for harvests.

Cost

Some responses were submitted regarding costs, without additional context if it was the development of modern data collection methods they took issue with, if it was ongoing costs to support these platforms, or if considerations were given for the reduction in cost after transitioning from the labor-intensive methods currently employed.

#6 Establish (where possible) Localized Elk Working Groups

A total of 49 public comments were received on this recommendation, the majority from Montana stakeholders, but also received input from residents of Washington and Texas.

Notable themes:

- Staffing concerns
- Outfitter concerns
- Other successful localized working groups
- Transparency in communications, agendas, and meeting minutes

Staffing concerns

Concern that it would be critical to have FWP staff present at these working groups, which will be a commitment of resources. Other comments encourage biologists, game wardens, and block management coordinators to be in attendance. Additionally, the suggestion was made for FWP to provide a facilitator to keep an organized agenda, at least in the early stages of group development.

Outfitter concerns

Some respondents spoke against having outfitters as part of local working groups in any capacity. Sentiments included outfitters being the reason hunters no longer have access with landowners, the department placating to large landowners and outfitters, and outfitters pushing their own agenda which is monetarily driven.

Other successful localized working groups

Many comments referenced other existing localized working groups, including numerous specific to elk, but including Trout Unlimited and Pheasants Forever.

Transparency in communications, agendas, and meeting minutes

Comments that more communication is a good idea, but should be well managed, open to the public, plenty of scheduling notice provided, and discussion documented. Concerns expressed about other FWP public meetings where there has been no documentation or meeting minutes to record participants' input. Support for working groups only providing advice and not having the authority to implement new rules.

#7 Expanded Hunter Education

A total of 57 public comments were received on this recommendation, the majority from Montana stakeholders, but also received input from residents of Colorado, Washington, and Texas.

Notable themes:

- Master Hunter program
- Digital option for course
- Current Hunter Education program
- Buy-in/coordination/interested landowner participants
- Cost/Expense

Master Hunter program

Many comments noted the existing Master Hunter program and recommended collaboration rather than reinventing the wheel.

Those that had been through the program were supportive of the knowledge provided through the Master Hunter program, but there were concerns about the requirements of the program to maintain certification and the lack of opportunities provided to do so.

Some comments expressed concern for the potential to create a classist/elitist system and suggested FWP should not be involved and expanded education should remain through a third party.

Conversely, others saw the Master Hunter program as a failure.

Digital option for course

Comments support a digital course option for accessibility and convenience. Others felt it would restrict those without computer skills from participating.

Comments opposed to a digital offering cited the existing hunter and bowhunter online courses and felt the digital option was no substitute for in person learning. Many felt the tests could be passed without learning anything from the course, especially regarding hunter ethics or how to handle a firearm.

Current Hunter Education program

Comments were received about the current Hunter Education program lacking a landowner communication and ethics component. Efforts should be spent to update existing Hunter Education content and materials and broadening the topic base to include landowner relations and stewardship.

Buy-in/coordination/interested landowner participants

Some comments felt that this was asking hunters to do more in exchange for access without anything required from landowners. Others felt like it may be worth taking an advanced course if there was guaranteed private land access by doing so. Some were adamant that this should not be required for hunting public land.

Other comments offered alternatives such as work programs to connect hunters willing to exchange services with landowners willing to allow access.

Others felt that having a certification wasn't going to increase odds of access.

Cost/Expense

Comments acknowledged that the existing Master Hunter program is expensive and time-consuming, which would likely be a barrier to entry for many. Some supported a reduced-cost state-level comparable program or scholarships, while others felt the time commitment was unachievable with work schedules. Others felt that any funding that could be allocated towards an advanced level course should instead be directed into the existing hunter education program to modernize materials and fund instructors. Some comments felt money would be better spent on enforcement, or that an expanded education program was entirely a waste.

#8 Promote Focused Damage Hunts

A total of 77 public comments were received on this recommendation, the majority from Montana stakeholders, but also received input from residents of Colorado, Washington, and Texas.

Notable themes:

- Favoritism
- Eligible landowners
- Roster-radius, residency
- Improvements to current game damage system
- Mandatory reporting
- Fee to participate
- Two seasons with two application windows

Favoritism

There were concerns about giving the landowner and biologist the ability to select up to a designated percentage of hunters, and the remainder coming from the randomized list, to provide an equitable opportunity to the public. Some perceived this as giving ranchers/landowners the best tools to select people they know will show up.

Comments were in support of hunter selection exclusively from a random list. Others noted the suggested roster fee and how equal payment should provide equal opportunity, not getting picked just because of who you know.

Eligible landowners

Comments expressed frustration with landowners that request payment for access during the general season, then request damage assistance later, and an affidavit stating such should be required. Others expressed that landowners participating in the 454 program and allowing access for a limited number of public hunters should not qualify them for damage hunts. Some comments recommended eliminating shoulder hunts and requiring landowners to allow public access as the only option for relief from game damage, because some landowners sell access opportunities during the late season. Others felt that MCA 87-1-225 needed to be changed as it is a way for the department to strongarm landowners into unrestricted free public hunting, then focused damage hunts may be feasible.

Roster-radius, residency

Comments suggested that the hunt roster should be limited to residents only, to allow Montanans to fill their freezers and provide for their families. Others mentioned that residents in some border states may be closer to where assistance is needed than a resident from across Montana. Some mentioned a mileage radius, regardless of residency, so those called for a damage hunt could be timelier and more responsive.

Comments regarding a radius or zip code system being preferred over selecting a single district.

Some felt that the 150-mile radius was unreasonable given modern transportation, and that if hunters want the opportunity, putting the effort into commuting and what they are willing to do is up to them. This would also eliminate opportunity for residents in parts of the state that don't have the over objective

elk populations, thus no damage hunts. This would also impact participation of nonresident landowners, or nonresident students.

Comments also indicated that the objective is to remove and reduce game, so it isn't about who can get there the fastest, but who is the most effective hunter.

Improvements to current game damage system

Comments regarding some of the other opportunities like 454s, OTC B licenses, and shoulder seasons, as being reasons for declines seen in landowner participation, when they can selectively offer opportunities to friends and family and don't have to hassle with behavior of unknown hunters, or failure to show up.

Some comments focused on access within the current system, such as limitations on where on the property elk can be hunted. Others wanted allowances to be able to drive off roads.

Another comment suggested that before a situation escalates to requiring damage assistance, hunters that successfully draw in an area should be provided a list of willing landowners so they can arrange a hunt during the general season for prevention, or conversely provide landowners with the list of tag holders.

Some felt the current program is complicated, with signup and notification being difficult, and not well understood from the hunter or landowner perspective. Another felt that if a list in a district is exhausted, the lists from neighboring districts should also be called to provide more opportunity.

Mandatory reporting

Mandatory reporting of game within 24 hours to the area biologist was generally supported. Comments also recommended extending reporting requirements to shoulder hunts, otherwise there is insufficient data to determine the efficacy of either program.

Fee to participate

Comments felt that imposing a small application fee would encourage hunters to strongly consider where they applied for and to be more invested in showing up for an opportunity. Some felt that a fee should cover the cost of a license if called, and if not contacted, that fee should be returned at the end of the season. Others thought it should be treated as an application fee and retained by the department, whether automatically or voluntarily donated, with funds directed towards block management, Habitat Montana, or back into the game damage program to cover fencing and crop loss. Some comments felt this fee should be forfeited due to failure to appear for a hunt.

Comments that a fee to hunters was unreasonable when asking them to help mitigate a problem situation. Some also wanted information on potential or historic opportunity, rather than signing up for an area with a slim chance of selection and seeing that as a guaranteed donation of \$10.

Two seasons with two application windows

Some comments supported two damage hunts, an early and a late season, with application windows closer to the start date of each hunt period. This would allow hunters an opportunity to assess their freezers and availability so only those serious about an opportunity would register.

Some comments felt that similar to shoulder seasons, dates should not extend until February 15th.

Comments felt that there are already enough application deadlines, and we should not add more.

Hunter removal from damage participation

Some comments were supportive of hunters being ineligible to participate in the damage roster in future years for failure to show up, while others thought that was too harsh of a penalty as life happens and scheduling conflicts may exist, especially on short notice, and some judgement should be exercised rather than a unilateral ban. Some comments fully supported a ban in the case of bad behavior, failure to respect property or rules, while others felt that was also subjective.

Transferrable/Landowner tags

Some comments suggested providing landowners with transferrable tags that they could in turn sell for profit to incentive them to work with the department, allow hunters on their lands, and cover expenses for crop loss.

**#9 Improve Accessibility to the FWP Videos, Programs, PSA's, etc.
that Promote the Desired Behaviors between Landowners and Hunters**

A total of 23 public comments were received on this recommendation, the majority from Montana stakeholders, but also received input from residents of Washington and Texas.

Notable themes:

- Partnering with other organizations/NGOs
- Target audience
- Hunter education
- Website navigation
- Cost

Partnering with other organizations/NGOs

Comments stated that many of these materials already exist with NGOs, or could be developed in partnership with, or created entirely by outside groups.

Target audience

Comments suggested that education programs don't reach the correct people and there were concerns over engagement. Just because materials are publicized doesn't mean they are being consumed.

Hunter education

Comments that ethics and landowner relations should be a component of the existing hunter education program and there were calls for updates to hunter education. There was also caution not to invest solely in education, but rather incorporating seasonal outreach.

Website navigation

Comments said the FWP website is outdated and difficult to navigate, so simply adding content doesn't make it accessible. Others focused on other technical hurdles FWP has encountered with the Hunt Planner still showing "coming soon" during the season and glitches with the mobile app. Some indicated that the website doesn't change often enough to expose the audience to new videos and announcements.

Cost

Comments stated that FWP should support marketing expenses and grants to NGOs for these programs rather than implementing and delivering them entirely.

Program overall

There were comments submitted with general apprehension that this would not work.

Other comments expressed general support without additional substance or context.

#10 FWP Landowner Liaison

A total of 11 public comments were received on this recommendation, the majority from Montana stakeholders, but also received input from one Texas resident.

Notable themes:

- Game wardens
- Need
- Shoulder season
- Cost

Game wardens

Comments in support of game wardens functioning as the Landowner Liaison mention that landowners only work with friends and the wardens need to be friends and stewards to landowners, that wardens and biologists already serve in this role, and more should be hired to have smaller areas of responsibility in order to dedicate more time to relationships.

Opposition for wardens serving as a landowner liaison was from the stance that wardens are law enforcement and effectiveness in enforcement will be lost if they are perceived to owe favors to landowners.

Need

General support was received for having a landowner liaison in each region, with the concern expressed that if this was a Helena HQ position, they would never make it out to the regions where it is imperative they be seen.

Shoulder season

The suggestion was made that this position could determine landowners willing to provide access during shoulder seasons and bridge the gap to coordinate those opportunities for hunters.

Cost

The expense of creating a new liaison position(s) was cited by multiple commentors who opposed this recommendation.

General support

General support and comments that the best landowner liaison will also be involved in hunter education and disbelief that this position doesn't exist already.

#11 We Have to Manage Elk Where They Are Not

A total of 113 public comments were received on this recommendation, the majority from Montana stakeholders, but also received input from residents of California, Colorado, Washington, and Texas.

Notable themes:

- Habitat
- Forest management
- Nonresident licenses
- Opening roads
- Survey counts
- Changes to regulations/hunting districts
- Predators
- Transplantation

Habitat

Many comments focused on habitat, encouraging restoration and enhancement projects, a study of conditions, and collaboration with the USFS and other public land managers to incorporate goals supporting elk into forest management activities.

Comments observing the loss and fragmentation of habitat in the valley areas due to housing development and (human) population growth.

Forest management

Fire was commonly cited alongside habitat. Comments that management practices in regard to fire have changed the landscape where habitat used to exist, with fire suppression being a cause of dense forest vegetation and deadfall that is unable to support elk movement. Some comments called for prescribed burns and forest thinning, others promoted logging activities for a dual purpose of elk benefit and economic opportunity.

Nonresident licenses

Comments received suggested further restricting NR and noted a figure of 50,000 nonresident tags distributed last year (without specifics on species) and to limit OTC licenses to NR (of which there are none in Regions 1 or 2 that this recommendation targets).

Opening roads

While the proposal specified opening roads to motorized travel by trappers, no comments were submitted exclusive to the trapping consideration.

Comments opposed to opening roads included impacts to lynx, wolverine, and denning grizzly bears, and the analysis that would be required of the USFS before a change could be considered. Others felt that more access would exacerbate the problem of elk distribution, pushing them farther into inaccessible places. Comments also included support for increased enforcement of road closures.

Comments supporting additional road access noted that elk are indifferent to motorized vehicles as long as they aren't accompanied by shooting.

Survey counts

Comments indicated survey counts are over a decade out of date, and methods to collect accurate and recent data in the habitat conditions of the northwest are complex. Comments stated that populations should be managed to the carrying capacity of the land.

Changes to regulations/hunting districts

Comments supported changing districts in Region 1 from general to permit.

Comments suggested making changes in 2023 during season setting efforts to better reflect the available opportunity in a district to balance hunter success and elk management.

Predators

A substantial number of form letters were submitted with comments to reduce the take of predators, including hunting black bear and wolf hunting and trapping.

Comments did not support allowing aerial harvest of wolves as a legal means of take.

Acknowledgments that a reduction in elk populations may be linked to predators, but correlation does not equal causation.

Comments support additional wolf trapping opportunities in ungulate winter ranges including an earlier start to the trapping season, requests to classify wolves with coyotes where a tag would not be required, and allowing hunting for grizzlies.

Transplantation

Comments suggested transplanting elk from disease free, over-objective population areas, to the northwest portion of the state. Also suggested was relocating from a local herd on private land.

#12 Brucellosis in Elk

A total of 21 public comments were received on this recommendation, all from Montana stakeholders.

Notable themes:

- Education
- Responsibilities of livestock producers
- Cost
- Existing strategies

Education

Comments supported education on brucellosis into the existing hunter education program, or an expanded education program if that recommendation were to proceed.

Other comments indicated the need for knowledge extending to the general public and landowners, and is not exclusively a hunter responsibility.

Responsibilities of livestock producers

Comments were looking for data and statistics on the rate of transmission from elk to cattle. Concerns were expressed about grazing leases and public lands, leading to concentration of elk with cattle.

Cost

Commenters regarding the recommendation for FWP to haze elk as a co-mingling strategy were reluctant to spend hunter dollars on this activity, or generally add work and expenses for the department.

Existing strategies

Commenters noted the work already being done with the Elk Management in Areas with Brucellosis work plan and working group and included suggestions to update the plan and better communicate the efforts already being made.

#13 Use of Shoulder Seasons

A total of 75 public comments were received on this recommendation, the majority from Montana stakeholders, but also received input from residents of Colorado, South Dakota, and Washington.

Notable themes:

- Public and private land
- Damage hunts
- Discontinue/curtail shoulder seasons
- Season length
- Evaluation of effectiveness in units that have shoulder seasons
- Landowners allowing access
- Choose a weapon impacts

Public and private land

Comments stated that if a district is severely over objective, a shoulder season should be valid district wide, not limited to private lands. Elk move to inaccessible private lands during the general season, then will move back to public lands in the shoulder season where tags aren't valid. Concerns that there may be higher elk populations now than before shoulder seasons were implemented, yet there are fewer accessible elk.

Requests to gain access to landlocked public land and by doing so, could resolve the perceived problems.

Damage hunts

Comments supporting the use of damage hunts in lieu of shoulder seasons note that it targets specific problem areas, with a limited number of hunters in a restricted area, rather than unlimited heavy pressure, yielding better results.

Using damage hunts rather than unrestricted shoulder seasons allows FWP to target complaint-based incidents.

Discontinue/curtail shoulder seasons

Commenters said that shoulder seasons have not been successful and are only in place to cater to landowners rather than hunters or the security and survival of elk.

Comments supported a general reduction or elimination of shoulder seasons.

Elk populations should be based on the carrying capacity of the land rather than landowner tolerance.

Season length

Comments did not favor such late season dates as to overlap with elk calving.

Comments did not favor early shoulder seasons either, due to movement of elk before the archery opener, and alternatively suggesting that archery open on August 15th.

Evaluation of effectiveness in units that have shoulder seasons

Comments supporting shoulder season hunts said they were successful in areas that have allowed access.

Commenters mentioned that the original pitch for implementing shoulder seasons was to use them sparingly on private lands only and assess the outcomes; all those components completely have been abandoned. Evaluations should be completed to see if there is an actual reduction, if effective, the season can remain in place, otherwise it should be discontinued.

Shoulder seasons need to be a targeted strategy, not an open opportunity over six months, such as being implemented to mitigate disease.

Comments were supportive of mandatory reporting during the shoulder season to establish data on effectiveness.

Landowners allowing access

Comments did not support providing landowners with assistance, in the form of damage hunts or compensation, if they didn't allow public hunting during the general season or if they charged trespass fees. Others suggested using access programs already in place rather than continuing with shoulder seasons.

Suggestions to only provide antlerless licenses to landowners, including a component of access for public hunters for every landowner license issued.

Choose a weapon impacts

Comments that if the "choose a weapon" recommendation proceeded, wondered how that would lead to the exclusion of archery hunters from the shoulder season.

General feedback on this recommendation

Clarification was requested on the purpose of allowing a two-week break from the end of general season, during which time elk will move back to public lands.

#14 Stakeholder meetings

A total of 33 public comments were received on this recommendation, the majority from Montana stakeholders, but also received input from a Washington resident.

Notable themes:

- Provided list of organizations
- Transparency
- Other working groups and meetings on elk
- Legislative action

Provided list of organizations

Some comments viewed the initial list of organizations with a concern that conservation groups, agricultural interests, and landowners are being excluded.

Other comments disagreed with the inclusion of certain groups, claiming they will only look to push their agenda and won't collaborate with others. A suggestion was made to use these meetings to identify those not willing to work together.

Comments that wildlife is a resource managed in trust for the public, and the public should be fairly represented, not categorized to be align with one organization or another.

It was also noted that the organization of a group like this is outside FWP's jurisdiction so this recommendation would likely be irrelevant to a future Elk Management Plan.

Transparency

Comments support the continuation of streaming the meetings for transparency, accountability, and trust.

Other working groups and meetings on elk

Comments supported diverse interests in participants and stated existing regional citizens advisory committees and local working groups could incorporate some of these recommendations rather than holding new and separate meetings.

Legislative action

Comments opposed the legislature being involved in wildlife decisions and supported lawmakers listening to what stakeholders recommend. Some suggested that unfavorable action by the legislature and the commission could be averted based on having a foundational relationship built by these stakeholder meetings.

General response to recommendation

Comments generally supported more communication and collaboration. Some sought additional detail on this plan feeling it was too vague.

#15 Enforce Stricter Penalties for Trespassing and Other Bad Behaviors by Hunters and Landowners

A total of 85 public comments were received on this recommendation, the majority from Montana stakeholders, but also received input from residents of Colorado, Idaho, Kentucky, New Hampshire, South Dakota, Texas, and Washington.

Notable themes:

- Corner crossings, easements/access to landlocked public land
- Leased land
- Enforcement, current laws, and sentencing
- Hunter harassment, incorrectly marked private land
- Other violations- OHV, off-road driving

Corner crossings, easements/access to landlocked public land

Comments focused on the topic of corner crossings and proposing the state define the legality so there will be less uncertainty about potential violations.

Calls for greater efforts to open access to public lands and not to further penalize hunters without imposing equivalent penalties to landowners blocking access to these landlocked areas.

Suggestions that all properties be resurveyed with public roads and easements marked.

Leased land

Comments recommended penalties for lessee's that overgraze public lands or fail to remove cattle by the October 1 requirement of their lease. Suggestions included loss of ability to bid on any future grazing leases through Federal or State agencies, as monetary fines were often an insignificant deterrent.

Enforcement, current laws and sentencing

Comments supported a greater presence of enforcement and requested more funding to increase staffing and provide more compensation. Some suggested landowners hire security guards and let local authorities handle trespassing complaints rather than wardens. Many felt that stricter penalties weren't a deterrent if the likelihood of being caught remained low.

Some noted that established penalties were sufficient, but the shortcoming was in prosecution and local courts, with dissatisfaction in upholding these existing laws. A recommendation included legislative change for mandatory sentences and ensuring penalties don't exceed statutory limits.

Hunter harassment, incorrectly marked private land

Comments sought stricter penalties for landowners that block gates, restrict legal public access, fence public land, or improperly sign public lands as private. Some felt that the proposal was unfairly balanced against hunters and did not hold landowners and outfitters accountable for actions or impose a penalty they couldn't simply buy their way out of.

Other violations- OHV, off-road driving

Commenters felt that the most frequently observed offense was off-road vehicle use and using closed public roads. Others wanted to include ATV trails under the definition of roadway for purposes of road setbacks and shooting from a vehicle.

Comments were also supplied regarding landowners driving on roads on leased public land, where those roads were closed to the general public. This was expressed as unfair and that closures should apply to all after the date livestock were to be removed from the leased parcel. Other comments noted some landowners drive or fly borders to haze wildlife back to their lands, but then seek game damage assistance.