

**MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS  
HUNTING SEASON SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

**Species: Elk**

**Regions: 2 & 4**

**Hunting Districts: 210, 211, 213, 214, 216, 217 & 451**

**Year: 2019**

**1. Describe the proposed season.**

Montana Code Annotated 87-1-323 directs the Fish and Wildlife Commission to: “determine the appropriate deer, elk and antelope numbers that can be viably sustained.” And further, to “evaluate the elk, deer, and antelope populations on an annual basis and provide that information to the public.” As part of providing information to the public FWP assembles elk counts for individual hunting districts (HDs) based on input from biologists as to the best data to use. This may not be the current year if the elk count was poor. These numbers in their final form are posted on FWP’s website as required by statute and are the numbers to which FWP is bound.

Shoulder seasons are primarily designed to address overpopulations of elk. But some are designed to address problematic distributions of elk, especially in scenarios where game damage hunts have been ineffective. The *Elk Season Guidelines: Flexible season structure with performance-based shoulder seasons* adopted by the commission in 2015 includes 11 Fundamental Objectives of the seasons as well as harvest criteria. Both the harvest criteria and the 11 Fundamental Objectives are important when evaluating shoulder season performance. Three of the Fundamental Objectives are “Address problematic distributions of elk and elk harvest,” “Enhance landowner flexibility to manage elk hunting on their property,” and “Reduce game damage.” Shoulder seasons in some HDs such as HDs 101, 109, W214, 291, 293 and 311 are meant to specifically address these three Fundamental Objectives.

Managing elk on an individual HD level has proven problematic for at least three reasons: 1) some districts are too small to encompass all of a herd’s year-round seasonal ranges, 2) elk move between hunting districts, and 3) elk counts in any given year may not be accurate. Counting elk is an inexact exercise subject to a multitude of weather and timing variables and elk movements between HDs. Although counts in some individual HDs in some years, such as 2019, may not appear to be at objective, when considered at a larger landscape it gives a better picture of how to effectively manage elk. FWP does not manage elk using data known to be poor or questionable. For example, elk regularly move back and forth between HDs 212 and 213, and when combined the two HDs are over objective. Elk in little HD 217 are connected with HDs 291 and 298. Likewise, the small western portion of HD 214 where there is a shoulder season is part of the private land complex in the Philipsburg and upper Rock Creek area in portions of HDs 210, 211, 214, and 216. When considered together this complex is over objective and experiences chronic game damage. Similarly, elk in HD 293 commonly move to HD 339 in winter. Elk that often winter in the small HD 451 sometimes move among adjacent HDs 315, 390, 393, 446, and 452. Continuing shoulder seasons in these HDs for the remainder of the 2019-2020 season poses no population risk and maintains an effective management tool.

There has been, however, expressed concern about continuing shoulder seasons in HDs where the 2019 counts, known to be poor counts that do not represent elk numbers, are at or below objective. The commission may choose to modify or discontinue the late shoulder seasons in these HDs.

**2. What is the objective of this proposal?**

FWP proposes no change to the existing season structure for the remainder of the 2019-2020 season. The objective is to continue effective elk management, avoid unnecessary confusion among hunters that would result from changing an ongoing season listed in the printed regulations, and either maintain populations at or manage them toward objective within the landscapes of elk use.

### 3. What is the current population's status in relation to the management objectives?

**Table 1.** Hunting Districts 210, 211, 213, 214, 216, 217 & 451 population status relative to the elk plan by individual district and to the larger "Elk Use" landscape, 2019.

Hunting District(s)	Elk Plan Objective & (Range)	Last Count	Status Relative to Objective	"Elk use" Complex HDs	"Elk Use" Complex Objective	"Elk Use" Complex Count	"Elk Use" Complex Status
210/211	1,450 (1,160-1,740)	1,901 in 2017	9% Over	Portions of 210, 211, 214 & 216	2,225 (1,780-2,670)	2,677	At
214	450 (360-540)	331 in 2017	8% Below				
216	325 (260-390)	445 in 2017	14% Over				
213	750 (600-900)	661 in 2019	At	212 & 213	1,150 (920-1,380)	1,861	41% Over
217	600 (480-720)	648 in 2019	At	217, 291 & 298	1,950 (1,560-2,340)	2,204	9% Over
451	275 (220-330)	210 in 2019	5% Below	315, 390, 393, 446, 449, 451 & 452	5,225 (4,845-6,270)	9,527	82% Over

#### A Discussion of Elk Populations Within Elk Use Complex Landscapes.

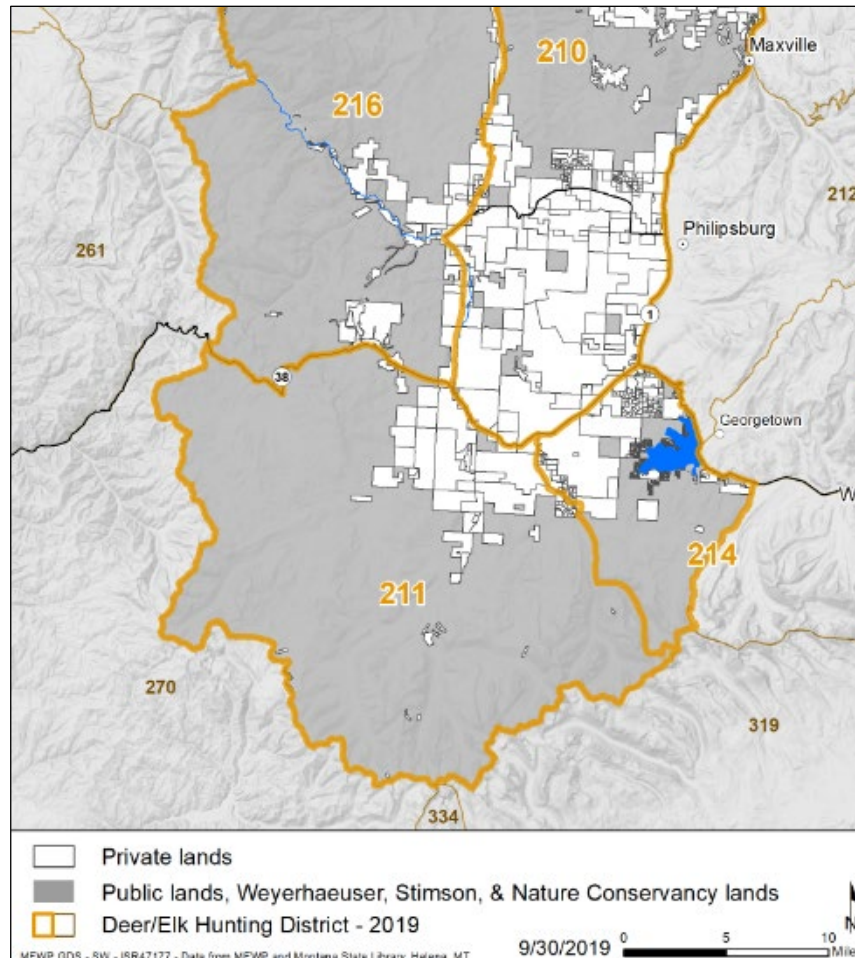
The Montana 2019 Elk Counts table posted online lists elk population objectives and counts by hunting district, or occasionally a combination of districts. It is understandable that people would naturally assume that elk are year-round residents in those districts, but such is not the case. In many instances elk move among HDs and counts in some years may not accurately reflect the elk population distribution or status in a larger landscape. It is therefore important that FWP manage elk within the larger landscape that elk use.

**HDs 210, 211, 214 and 216.** Portions of these HDs converge in the Phillipsburg and upper Rock Creek area (Figure 1). Elk management in this area of convergence has been an on-going challenge because of the patchwork of private lands and chronic game damage, and elk use needs to be considered as an "elk use complex". However, there has been expressed concern from some in the public about continuing shoulder seasons in this area when populations appear to be at or below objective. This concern arises in part because of reliance on elk counts done in the winter of 2019 that are known to be poor counts that do not reflect population status. Elk numbers presented in Table 1 are those posted on FWP's website as the official numbers relative to population objective and those to which FWP is bound.

The shoulder season in the west portion HD 214 is of particular concern. It should be remembered that three of the Fundamental Objectives are "Address problematic distributions of elk and elk harvest," "Enhance landowner flexibility to manage elk hunting on their property," and "Reduce game damage." The shoulder seasons in west 214 is meant to specifically address these three Fundamental Objectives.

When considered as an elk use complex these HDs are at the very upper range of population objective and shoulder seasons are effective and working well. There is not an overall population concern. If,

however, the weather conspired to inordinately concentrate elk such that they became excessively vulnerable to harvest, FWP is ready to respond as it has done in past such extraordinary circumstances. The issue is not a biological one, but a social one where the concerns of some sportsmen must be weighed against the game damage issues of landowners for whom the shoulder seasons are working.



**Figure 1.** Those portions of HDs 210, 211, west 214 and 216 in the Phillipsburg/Upper Rock Creek area showing the patchwork of private land in the combined elk use complex.

**HD 213.** Elk freely move between HDs 212 and 213 on the west side of the Deerlodge Valley and these two HDs must be considered together for management purposes. HDs 212 and 213 are 41% over objective when combined (Table 1).

**HD 217.** HD 217 is a very small district created in 2016 out of the north part of then HD 212. As stated in the 2015 proposal to create HD 217,

The objective in HD 217 is to significantly increase elk harvest and shift elk from private lands to adjoining public lands. In doing so we will reduce adverse impacts to land-owners, while recruiting and retaining elk populations, and hunting opportunities, on public lands.

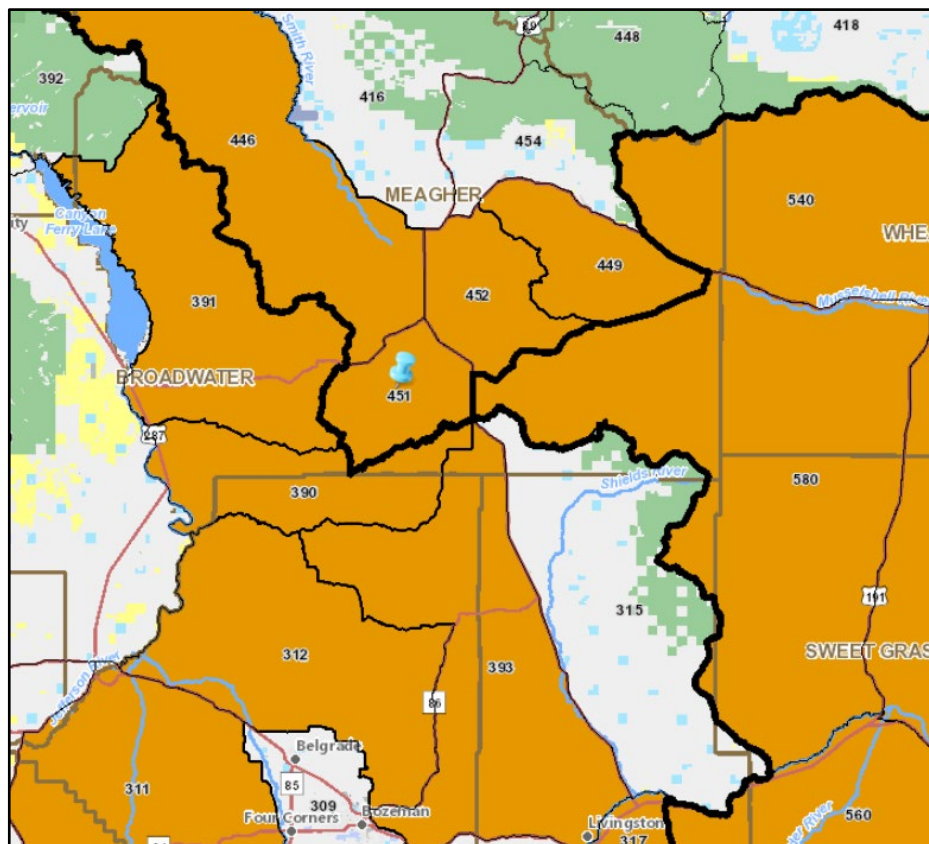
Our management approach is proposed to address significant concentrations of elk in the North Flints. Between Drummond and Gold Creek large herds of elk on a single ranch are depredate on crops, compromising the safety of motorists on Highway 90, frustrating hunters unable to access the population, and challenging FWP's ability to bring elk numbers

within their management objective. [Note: During a March 14, 2013 flight all but 21 of 1,353 elk were on a single private ranch.]

As proposed, HD 217 would include predominately private lands. By providing Unlimited OTC elk B licenses valid in shoulder, archery and general seasons, FWP will enable any hunter who can secure access to hunt antlerless elk. Allowing brow-tined bull harvest by permit only, assures that hunters will not encircle individual ranches which in the past has impaired the movement and harvest of elk and fostered unethical behavior. Brow-tined bull and antlerless elk hunters will enjoy a quality hunting experience and dispersing bulls will be available for harvest in HD 212.

As is common with small hunting districts elk do not confine themselves there. In the case of HD 217 elk commonly cross Interstate 90 into HD 291 and, to a lesser extent, HD 298, which is counted in conjunction with HD 290. This elk use complex remains over objective and the current shoulder season remains an effective elk management tool.

**HD 451.** HD 451 is a small HD created out of the west portion of HD 391 in 2016. It is part of a larger complex of elk use that includes the surrounding HDs 390, 391, 393, 446, 449 and 452 (Figure 2), which in combination are over objective by 82%. Most elk that use this HD are not year-round residents and freely move about the larger landscape. As stated in the proposal to create the HD, "A primary objective of this proposal is to improve elk management in the presented area and surrounding R4 hunting districts." The current shoulder season in HD 451 has served to both harvest elk and redistribute them, and it is important that this management ability be maintained.



**Figure 2.** Hunting district 451 (with blue stickpin) is small HD where elk do not winter every year. It is part of a larger landscape of districts with shoulder seasons (shown in brown) designed to address over-populations of elk at a landscape scale.

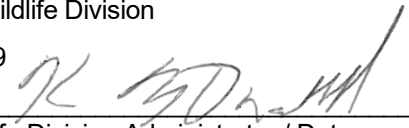
**4. Provide information related to any weather/habitat factors, public or private land use or resident and nonresident hunting opportunity that have relevance to this change.**

Winter weather and hunting pressure are both known to affect the distribution of elk on the landscape and often affects elk counts because elk may have moved to a different area or may using timber where they are not readily seen. Such was the situation in winter and early spring 2019.

Submitted by: FWP Wildlife Division

Date: October 8, 2019

Approved:

  
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Wildlife Division Administrator / Date