

The public's voice in FWP affairs

After spending nearly a decade as director of this department, I continue to be surprised that many Montanans don't know why the Fish and Wildlife Commission exists and what it does.

The five-member commission—previously the Fish, Wildlife & Parks Commission until, in 2013, a separate Parks Board was established to oversee state parks—is an *independent* citizen board. Appointed by the governor to provide public oversight of FWP activities, the commission is its own separate entity. FWP does the day-to-day work of managing Montana's fish and wildlife. The five commissioners, who represent the Montana public, make the final decisions on regulations, property acquisitions, and certain rules and projects recommended to them by FWP staff.

To be appointed, candidates for the Fish and Wildlife Commission must have a proven interest in fish and wildlife management and recreation. They are often dedicated hunters, or anglers, or both, and come from all walks of life. Past commissioners have worked as outfitters, attorneys, university professors, loggers, business owners, farmers, and advertising executives, to name just some of the professions. By state statute, at least one member of the commission

for a healthy mix of political affiliation and perspective.

Each member is selected from one of five geographical districts of Montana. Though commissioners are supposed to consider the entire state when making decisions, I've found that each member's background and residence influences his or her thought process to some extent. That's a good thing. It ensures that interests in all regions of the state are represented.

As FWP director, I have responsibilities to both the department and the commission. I serve at the pleasure of the governor and am in charge of managing this agency. At the same time, I must answer to the Fish and Wildlife Commission. I'm not a voting member of the commission, but I act as commission secretary at meetings. My role is to be the primary liaison between commission members and FWP, often clarifying for the commission points made by department staff.

The commission and FWP employees often see eye to eye, but certainly not always. For instance, biologists may propose a new hunting regulation based on sound biology, as they should. Yet the commission may not approve the change because members don't believe it would be in the public's best interests. Commissioners vote on recommendations made by FWP senior managers, and a majority rules.

Many states have fish and wildlife commissions similar to Montana's. But some don't. The conservation agencies in those states can make decisions and then, after public review and comment, decide for themselves what to do. That likely makes life easier for the agency and its staff, but it wouldn't be a good system here in Montana.

The citizens of this state feel passionately about fish and wildlife management and conservation. They want and deserve a strong voice in managing those resources. The Fish and Wildlife Commission exists to provide that input. What's



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Fish and Wildlife Commission members listen to public comment during a meeting on the 2012-13 Montana wolf hunting season.

“must be experienced in the breeding or management of livestock.”

Because commissioners represent the public, they are lobbied with e-mails, letters, and phone calls from Montanans across the state. At every monthly meeting, the commissioners are aware of public opinion on the issues before them that day.

Though commission appointments are to be made without regard to political affiliation, most—though not all—commissioners appointed by Republican governors are Republicans and most—though not all—commissioners appointed by Democrat governors are Democrats. To lessen political influence, state law requires that a new governor appoint only three members of the commission, allowing two to remain from the previous administration. After two years, the governor may replace those two with two new members of his or her choosing. The commissioners' staggered four-year terms provide

more, speaking out at monthly commission meetings is one of the most direct ways any Montanan can be part of the process of setting hunting and fishing seasons, acquiring conservation easements, and conducting other department activities—especially now that we offer video access to commission meetings at all our regional offices.

Despite strong differences of opinion among some Montanans over how the state's fish and wildlife should be managed, there continues to be statewide consensus for the conservation and stewardship of those resources. Credit for Montana's conservation ethic goes in large part to the Fish and Wildlife Commission and its essential role in giving Montanans an even greater say in how their fish and wildlife should be managed.

—M. Jeff Hagener, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Director