

## The choice will be yours

**M**anagement of Montana's fish and wildlife—and, as a result, your hunting and fishing—could soon be in trouble. Soon there won't be enough money to sustain this department's work. Over the next year hunters, anglers, and lawmakers will need to decide whether to increase FWP's revenue or have us do less fish and wildlife management.

Almost all of FWP's revenue comes from hunting and fishing license fees—of which nonresidents contribute about 70 percent—and federal taxes on hunting and fishing equipment. Less than one-half of 1 percent of our fish and wildlife budget comes from the state's general fund.

The Montana Legislature last approved a resident license fee increase in 2005. Since then, FWP's revenue has remained flat. It even dropped in recent years due to fewer nonresident licenses sold (from declines in eastern Montana deer and pronghorn numbers after tough winters in 2010 and 2011, from the misconception that wolves are eating all the state's elk, and due to the weak national economy).

Meanwhile, inflation has steadily increased the cost of everything we use to manage fish and wildlife—from the gas in a game warden's truck to the electricity required to run the state's eight fish

already begun that by reducing staff, travel, shooting range grants, and whirling disease research. Since 2013 we've cut our operating budget by \$1.2 million per year. To maintain a balanced budget, we'd need to cut another \$2 to \$3 million annually. Among other ramifications, that could mean more conservative hunting seasons, less fish stocking, reduced weed control on FWP lands, and a decrease in game law enforcement.

Another option is for the 2015 legislature to free up funds currently earmarked for programs such as Habitat Montana, Block Management, and Upland Game Bird Enhancement for use in other programs.

A third possibility to bridge the funding gap is for lawmakers to raise hunting and fishing license fees. Or there could be some combination of all three options: cut programs, redirect existing funding, and increase resident license fees.

Starting in July 2013 a citizen advisory council, coordinating with a legislative interim committee, evaluated Montana's fish and wildlife management funding and whether the existing system, which increases license fees every 10 years or so, could be improved. Among other tasks, the 13-member council also looked at the economic loss to FWP of Montana's many free and discounted licenses, tried to simplify Montana's increasingly complex hunting and fishing licensing system, and compared Montana's resident hunting and fishing license fees to those in surrounding states.

In April the council made its final recommendations. Over the next few months, the public may review and comment on the recommendations by way of statewide FWP-sponsored meetings, hunting and angling groups, service clubs, FWP's regional citizen's advisory committees, and the department's website.

Montana's fish and wildlife management is at a crossroads. At stake are the state's hunting and fishing opportunities, outdoors heritage, and reputation as a scenic and wildlife-rich tourism destination.

Whether and how to sustain the fish and wildlife that support these aspects of Montana's high quality of life is not FWP's decision to make. The people of Montana, through their comments and elected representatives in the legislature, will ultimately decide.

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

*Note:* I received many comments, both pro and con, on my director's message in the March-April 2014 issue regarding relations between hunters and landowners. There was no intent to assign blame to any particular group. My main point was that more cooperation is needed among everyone involved in the issue of public hunting access to private land. ■



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hatcheries. Plus, this department is shouldering additional responsibilities, many from federal and state mandates. These include timber planning and harvest on wildlife management areas, wolf and bison management, and trying to prevent endangered species listing of arctic grayling, wolverines, fisher, and sage-grouse. We've also had to spend more time and money monitoring for brucellosis, chronic wasting disease, and aquatic invasive species; reviewing potential disruption to fish and wildlife habitat from development; and helping more cities and towns deal with growing numbers of bears, deer, and other urban wildlife.

The bottom line: We have more work to do but less money with which to do it. As a result, the gap continues to grow between the revenue we receive and what we must spend to manage Montana's fish and wildlife. Something has to give.

One solution is to further cut programs and services. We have