



MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS

CAC R2 Hunting Season Workgroup Meeting Minutes

August 6, 2019

FWP Region 2 Office, 6:00 P.M.

(Notes from a special meeting of the Region 2 Citizens Advisory Committee and other interested groups & individuals)

Attendees: 29, including R2 biologists (4), Randy Arnold, Vivaca Crowser, Joe Jaquith and Mike Thompson and Fish and Wildlife Commissioner Aldrich and Byorth.

Guest representation: Anaconda Sportsmen's Club, Backcountry Hunters and Anglers, Hellgate Hunters and Anglers, MT Bowhunters Association, Blackfoot/Helmville Valley ranches, Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife and individuals in the community (unaffiliated)

Introductions: Went around the room and each person quickly introduced themselves and their affiliation (if any).

Elk Project Updates Since Last Meeting—Mike Thompson
Mike reviewed all the elk related work that Region 2 wildlife staff had done since the July workgroup meeting. The following is the list that Mike went through:

1. Reviewing BLM's Draft Resource Management Plans, which are out for public review, affecting 163,00 acres in Region 2 and "millions" more across Montana.
2. Commenting and collaborating with the Lolo National Forest on the proposed:
 - Soldier-Butler Timber Sale
 - Cruzane Mountain Timber Sale
 - Summer Trails Project in Mineral County
 - Red Bull Timber Sale
 - Sawmill-Petty Timber Sale
 - Burdette EMB

WORKGROUP PURPOSE & APPROACH

- Collaboratively develop input that will be used in developing recommendations for Region 2 elk hunting seasons, as per the biennial season-setting process for 2020-2021.
- Bring landowners, hunters, other stakeholders to the table to interact with each other.
- Be open; participants should feel free to share what's on their minds at the meeting, rather than leave the meeting with questions unasked and unresolved.

- Petty Creek EMB (ongoing)
 - CFLRP forest management opportunity
3. Commenting and collaborating with the Helena National Forest on the proposed:
 - Stonewall project
 4. Developing WHIP Grants for landscape scale weed control in the Fish Creek watershed and part of the Blackfoot Watershed
 5. Developing a project to acquire the Stumptown Addition to Garry Mountain WMA
 6. Exploring a large conservation easement on winter range in HD 292
 7. Developing conservation easement projects in the Bitterroot:
 - Sweathouse Creek HD240 conservation easement (540 acres)
 - Potential Calf Creek WMA addition (600 acres)
 - W.W. White FAS/CE which includes elk habitat
 8. Collaborating in multiple watersheds in R2 on TNC's Clearwater-Blackfoot and Montana Legacy Projects
 9. Monitoring multiple conservation easements on elk winter range across Region 2.
 10. Developing forest management project on Threemile WMA
 11. Developing forest management projects on Blackfoot-Clearwater WMA
 12. Monitoring and touring interested parties on Spotted Dog grazing project
 13. Enhancing FWP's climate understanding and response in relation to wildlife habitat
 14. FWP's hunting regulations committee
 15. Elk research project, with GPS-collared elk: Blackfoot-Clearwater landscape
 16. Elk research project, with GPS-collared elk: North Sapphire Mountains
 17. CWD coordination and response in Region 2 and serving hunters with appropriate CWD information who hunt elsewhere in the state.
 18. Finalizing 180 hunting access contracts across 530,000 acres with private landowners for this year, preparing and printing regulations and maps.
 19. Finalized and implementing the biennial rule for 163,000 acres of TNC public access.
 20. Developing public use infrastructure for hunters to access over 8,000 acres under newly acquired conservation easements.
 21. Working on the NRD Ranch project in HD 215, near Deer Lodge: hunting access and river recreation.
 22. Working with MDT on the elk highway fence/crossing along I-90 near Drummond.
 23. Working with MDT on wildlife crossing improvements for upcoming highway project on I-90 between Lookout Pass and Taft.
 24. Developing an update of Montana's comprehensive literature review on recreation impacts/effects on wildlife.
 25. Serve on the hiring committee for the new Deer/Elk Chief
 26. Secretarial Order on big game migration funding—exploring possible Antelope Hills conservation easement project (4,500 acres)
 27. Work with constituents and answer questions/receive input
 28. Responding to elk damage complaints and taking preventative actions on ranchlands all around the region.
 29. Working when possible with elk data and outlining opportunities and needs to address in the biennial season-setting cycle, based also on longstanding and refreshed experience with elk and local publics.

August Fish & Wildlife Commission Meeting: The Fish and Wildlife Commission will meet here (R2 Office) on August 15 and will hear an FWP information item on elk shoulder season performance (partial assessment) and on concerns raised regarding Region 2 elk hunting regulations for 2019 (this season). FWP is putting together a presentation for that meeting.

Review long-term Region 2 elk direction in *Common Ground*—Mike Thompson

Mike passed around a 2013 Region 2 Wildlife handout called *Common Ground*. The handout was prepared ahead of the 2014-15 season-setting process and outlined the region's elk management direction at that time. The region has been using that direction to inform elk management approaches. Mike suggested that this workgroup's conversation might be able to help inform the next edition of a similar document for the region.

Announcements/comments from others:

- Chris Marchion: Requested a mule deer season closure in HD 214 because he is just not seeing deer there.
- Brent Mannix: Commented that the shoulder seasons have been great for them and have made a big difference.
- Jack Hunt: Shoulder seasons have provided an opportunity for him to continue hunting at an older age; he would not have been able to do this before. He appreciates the opportunity to continue this lifestyle and put meat in the freezer. Please keep the shoulder season opportunity.
- Denley Loge: Shoulder seasons are a tool and have a place to help landowners but how and why they are used will require continued emphasis on information and education.
- Denny Iverson: Game damage hunts were not very effective because landowners couldn't choose the hunters they wanted on their property. In contrast, shoulder seasons have made made a huge difference for landowners and have even distributed elk back to public lands in some cases.
- Tom Puchlerz: Asked about public perspectives on the late shoulder seasons and whether they are very well tolerated. He offered that he likes seeing shoulder seasons as a tool but that there are places and times where they are or might not be needed. They are not a "one size fits all" type of tool.
- Marlon Clapham: He conducted an informal survey with people he knew (those that hunt and those that don't) to try to understand more about their perspective on shoulder seasons. In general, he found:
 - o There seemed to be general opposition to the early (August) and late (Feb) timeframes. The extra-long season seemed to make an overall bad impression with those he talked to, especially those that do not hunt.
 - o Maybe January 15 would be more of an appropriate end-date for all hunts.
 - o Hunts should only be on private lands.
- Greg Munther: Feels that fair chase and hunter ethics are on the line with the shoulder season hunts, which is consistent with a comment he made at the Fish & Wildlife Commission meeting where these hunts were initially proposed. He feels they really should not be called hunts and that the longer they are used, the more of a constituency they build and the harder to phase out—they should not be seen as a long-term management tool.

- Louie Bouma: Asked if this early season-setting conversation was also happening outside of R2 in a similar way—appreciates the effort and approaching being used here.
- Denny Iverson: Don't throw out shoulder seasons as a tool—they have a place and are a good option to have in the toolbox.
- Jim Olson: We need good harvest data as part of the assessment of shoulder seasons.
- Pat Byorth: Shared his perspective that he is learning and reading as much as he can to get up to speed on the shoulder seasons and their history and purpose. He sees them as a tool and that they must be used according to the rules/parameters under which they were established. Local adjustments might need to be made and should be based on science.
- Jack Hunt: We need shoulder seasons as a tool to help manage elk populations; does not want to see the “Gardner firing line” that he saw in the 1960s again and see this as a proactive tool to avoid that.
- Adam Shaw: Shoulder seasons are a tool that were designed for a purpose and are supposed to expire. We need to look at the data, assess the impacts to populations and then adjust/change as needed. He hears from a lot of hunters that have access issues related to shoulder seasons.
- Chris Marchion: Concerns with shoulder seasons in HD 211, 214 & 216—why does it continue in districts where the population is now under objective? He also shared concerns that the Anaconda Sportsmen's Club did not hear about the shoulder seasons until late in the planning and proposal process.
- Louie: Asked if the seasons have been successful in redistributing elk; Rebecca Mowry (FWP Bitterroot Biologist) said that the Sapphire elk study is looking at that (in addition to other things) in a portion of the Bitterroot Valley.
- Marlon Clapham: Commented that the Montana Elk Management Plan needs to be updated; Mike Thompson replied that work on the new/updated elk plan is beginning with the hiring process for a statewide Deer/Elk coordinator, which is currently underway.
- Bill Mitchell: Knows a lot of landowners because of his many years as a beekeeper and so asked some of his contacts how they felt about shoulder seasons. Here is what he heard:
 - o Landowners like being able to choose who hunts on their property, and shoulder seasons allow them to do this.
 - o Still, landowners were inundated with hunter requests during the past season.
 - o Some thought shoulder seasons started too early and/or ran too late.
 - o Communications about shoulder seasons should reemphasize that they are on private lands and that hunters must secure access and do so early.
 - o There seemed to be an interest amongst hunters and landowners in requiring harvest reporting in shoulder seasons to help improve the data.
- Everett Headley: Asked if the FWP should season assessment would also include a public opinion survey. Mike said that there is an internal (FWP staff) opinion survey that will be part of the assessment and a landowner survey but was not sure about sportsmen.
- Brent Mannix: Said that even when regulations allow, landowners can turn down hunters if the elk are not on their property—that happened to them last season at a point.
- Louie: Asked about changing HD boundaries in the Lincoln area because of differences in the regulations for 293. He and Scott Eggeman will discuss this more. Also asked about the potential of beginning the wolf trapping season on Dec. 1 instead of 15.

- Brent Mannix: Mentioned that the Blackfoot -area hunt coordinator (John Englert) really helps with shoulder seasons and hunter management.
- Adam Shaw: Asked about shoulder season harvest data and whether it would be available before the 8/15 Commission meeting; Tom Puchlerz answered that it was just posted online.

Next Steps: Mike explained that this group's work will provide guidance that FWP will use in creating recommendations for 2020-21 hunting seasons. Over the next month, FWP will meet with wardens and biologists in all the R2 watersheds to discuss and begin to develop season recommendations. After they develop some draft ideas, it would be great to bring those back to this workgroup for input and reaction. Finalized draft recommendations are due from the region on October 20. Considering this timeline, the workgroup decided to get back together in mid-September.

Next meeting: September 18, 5:30 P.M (beginning with dinner); meeting at 6:00 P.M. at the R2 Fish, Wildlife & Parks office in Missoula (3201 Spurgin Road).