



The Big Day

Behind the scenes at FWP's annual lottery drawing for moose, bighorn sheep, and mountain goat hunting licenses

By Tom Dickson
Photos by Nicole Keintz



SYMPATHETIC EAR The day after the lottery drawings, Neal Whitney fields phone calls from hunters frustrated that they weren't drawn for a license. "We feel their pain. We're hunters ourselves," he says.



READY, SET, WAIT Caley Chadwick, Coleen Carroll, and Neal Whitney of the FWP Licensing Bureau watch as colleague Marsha Ogle starts the 2016 moose license lottery. Seconds later, a "Please Wait" notification appears on her screen as the computer begins to process the enormous amount of data derived from tens of thousands of hunter applicants.

Just before 7 a.m., on June 13, in the basement of the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks headquarters in Helena, Marsha Ogle is waiting to begin the lottery drawings for Montana's 2016 moose, bighorn sheep, and mountain goat hunting licenses.

"Go ahead," says Neal Whitney, her supervisor.

She presses a key on her keyboard, starting the much-anticipated process of awarding some of the most coveted hunting licenses in North America, and... "Please Wait" appears on her screen.

It's not the marching band moment I'd been expecting.

"There's such a huge volume of numbers and data to process that it takes a while," explains Ogle, a 15-year veteran of FWP's License Bureau.

Just then a phone starts ringing down the hall. Then another. Hunters across Montana and the United States are calling to see if they've been drawn. Ogle looks at the "Please Wait" notification on her screen and sighs.

It's going to be a long morning.

Months of phone calls

The nine people working in FWP's License Bureau issue roughly 1.3 million resident and nonresident hunting and fishing licenses each year and collect the revenue from those sales. A huge part of that job, says Whitney, is monitoring about 300 license providers at gas stations, sporting goods stores, and FWP offices across Montana.

Most deer and elk licenses are readily available at those outlets to hunters. But demand for some licenses far exceeds supply, requiring FWP to conduct lotteries. A few weeks after today's drawing, the department will hold two additional lotteries for special deer, elk, and pronghorn licenses, then another for paddlefish tags.

The main work on lotteries comes before



“We want everyone who enters to get put in the drawing. We hate having to reject applications.”



PAPER TRAIL Ensuring accuracy and fairness is essential in maintaining the lottery system's credibility. Top left: Checking paper applications and entering information into the computer. Top right: Paper license applications, partially processed, are sorted by species. Above left: Nonresident applications stored for future review. Above right: The saddest container in the License Bureau is a box of licenses returned by the U.S. Postal Service because of incorrect addresses. Too often, say licensing officials, hunters don't notify FWP of their change of address. Facing page: Hank Worsech, previously a U.S. Marine Corps administrator, has for the past 15 years been chief of the Licensing Bureau. “Hunters need to have faith that [the FWP lottery system] is fair,” he says.

the drawings, as crews process roughly 250,000 applications. During the busiest weeks, up to 15 temporary workers fill rows of cubicles, sorting through laundry basket-size bins stuffed with applications. They squint at sometimes illegible handwriting, trying to figure out if that's an “8” or a “5.”

For decades, all hunters used paper applications, and all license data was entered by hand. Some of that still takes place. But since FWP instituted its Automated Licensing System (ALS) in 2002, growing numbers of hunters apply online, either from home (65 percent) or at FWP offices (10 percent). Whitney says that many of the remaining 25 percent still using paper forms don't trust the online option,

Tom Dickson is editor of Montana Outdoors. Nicole Keintz is a photographer in Helena.

fearing they'll make a mistake with the computer. They ought to reconsider.

“Applying online greatly reduces errors, because it forces you to completely fill out the form before you can enter it,” Whitney says. Many hunters err on their paper applications. To emphasize the point, Whitney grabs a random mountain lion license application from a nearby pile and, sure enough, the hunter forgot to fill in the full five-digit hunting district number and must be rejected. “If he'd done this online, the computer wouldn't have accepted it until he filled in all five digits,” Whitney says.

Can't someone just call the hunters, explain their errors, and invite them to reapply? “Unfortunately, with so many applications to process, we don't have anywhere near the staff to do that,” Whitney explains.

Eventually, hunters will likely stop using

paper applications altogether. “There are too many errors, and it's not a benefit for the hunter,” Whitney says. “We want everyone who enters to get put in the drawing. We hate having to reject applications.”

As phones throughout the basement continue to ring, Whitney tells me the call volume is actually down from earlier in the spring, when hunters were applying for special deer, elk, and pronghorn licenses and moose, bighorn sheep, and mountain goat licenses. “Some days there were just four of us answering 500 to 800 calls from hunters asking for application advice and other information,” he says.

The process

The most important part of the lottery system is its trustworthiness, according to Hank Worsech, Licensing Bureau chief.



“A lot of times they say they want me to ‘fix’ it, but what they're really saying is ‘Fix it for me.’ But that's not happening. We have to ensure that the process is fair for everyone.”



“The odds are that I’ll never get drawn. But you never know. One of these years I might get lucky.”

“Hunters need to have faith that it’s fair,” he says. Before working for FWP, Worsech was an administrator in the U.S. Marine Corps. He likes order and rules and is a stickler for detail. He explains that once someone applies for a lottery license, the application is assigned a random number used in the drawing. That ensures no one receives preferential or unfair treatment. “Some hunters accuse us of ‘blacklisting’ them if they’ve broken game laws or publicly disagreed with department policy. That can’t happen,” Worsech says. “The computer doesn’t know the names of who’s getting drawn and not drawn. It’s all randomized numbers.” He

adds that the Legislative Auditor’s Office audits all FWP lotteries and has found them to be fully random.

From Worsech’s office, I stroll down the row of cubicles and eavesdrop on phone conversations between licensing technicians and hunters. One technician explains how to apply for an antelope license. Another tells a parent about youth licensing options. Lorrie Harris, who coordinates the licensing drawings, helps an eastern Montana rancher apply for a landowner preference permit. Everyone is informative, cheerful, and patient. “Most hunters appreciate the time we take to help them get their

computer program that needs fixing,” Harris says.

Back at his desk, Whitney reviews printouts of drawing results, looking for statistical anomalies. “We do this periodically during the drawing to see if there’s a logic problem in the computer program that needs fixing,” he says. By this time, Ogle’s computer shows the moose drawing results. The information is loaded into the ALS system so hunters can check results on the FWP website. As he does most years, Whitney applied for moose, mountain goat, and bighorn sheep licenses. He checks the website to see how he did on moose. “Nope,” he says. “Same as always.”

Worsech walks by and tells us he forgot to apply for any lottery licenses this year. “I completely spaced it out,” he says, shaking his head. “And I’m the *bureau chief*.”

ONE MORE REVIEW Left: Neal Whitney checks bighorn sheep license lottery printouts for statistical errors. Ensuring credibility of the system is essential, he says. Above: Blank bighorn sheep tags awaiting printout with lucky lottery winners’ names.



Supply and demand

FWP licensing staff say the hardest part of their job is talking to disappointed hunters who aren’t drawn even after repeated attempts. “We feel their pain,” Whitney says. “We’re hunters ourselves. Year

after year, we put in for these same licenses and don’t get drawn.”

Unfortunately, far more hunters want licenses than are available. “There’s simply no way around it. Believe me, we’d like to issue more licenses. But we can only issue as many as the game populations can support.”

On a state map, Whitney points to a popular mountain goat hunting district northwest of Ennis. Last year 483 hunters applied for the three available licenses. Chances were even worse for a bighorn sheep hunting district north of Thompson Falls, where 390 hunters applied for just one license. “The odds for some of these districts are astronomical,” he says.

Ogle continues to bring lottery results for Whitney’s final review and approval. At 8:50 a.m., the mountain goat drawing is finished

and the results are being posted online. Whitney looks up his own ALS number on the FWP website and sees the all-too-familiar “NOT SUCCESSFUL” notification. “The odds are that I’ll never get drawn,” he says, taking another stack of printouts from Ogle. “But you never know. One of these years I might get lucky.”

By 9:30 a.m., the bighorn sheep license drawing is done. Soon, says Worsech, even more phones will start ringing with calls from hunters unhappy with the results. “The only people we hear from are the unsuccessful hunters,” he says. “Hunters who get drawn never call.”

Worsech hears from hunters dissatisfied with answers from his staff. “A lot of times they say they want me to ‘fix’ it, but what they’re really saying is ‘Fix it for me.’ But that’s not happening. We have to ensure that the process is fair for everyone.”

I check in with Whitney one last time. He looks up from his screen. “I didn’t draw a sheep license, either,” he says. Then, as I head up the stairs, he shouts out to me what tens of thousands of other hunters are thinking at that very moment: “Next year!” 🐏



Bonus points still no guarantee

A consistent complaint received by the Licensing Bureau comes from hunters who apply for years without ever receiving a lottery license. “It’s common to get a call from a guy whose friend has, say, drawn a bighorn sheep and a mountain goat tag, but he’s never drawn either one,” says Hank Worsech, bureau chief.

Many hunters want Montana to use a “preference system,” in which they would “move up in the line” each year.

Worsech understands the frustration, but a preference system wouldn’t work: The only hunters to draw permits would be in their 70s and 80s, he explains. Younger hunters—even those in their 40s and 50s—would have no incentive to apply because they’d never get drawn in their lifetime. “And there’d still be thousands of old hunters who’d never get a tag because there are just so few licenses compared with the number of applicants,” he adds.

Instead, Montana uses a system in which hunters can buy and accumulate bonus points. Bonus points, which build up each year that a hunter is unsuccessful, act like extra tickets in a lottery. The more points that hunters accumulate over time, the greater their chances in the drawings. Preference points are squared so that, for instance, three years of points equals nine chances in the lottery. “Our system gives some weight to multiple-year applicants, but because there’s still a lot of randomness, it doesn’t discourage younger hunters,” says Worsech.

Worsech points out that accumulating bonus points over time doesn’t necessarily guarantee a license. “Thousands of other hunters are accumulating points, too, so they also get all those extra ‘tickets’ put in the lottery,” he says. “Everyone is competing with each other.”

For instance, each year approximately 28,000 hunters apply for Montana’s roughly 120 bighorn sheep permits. “So even if you applied for 30 years and built up bonus points all that time, it would still take some luck to get drawn,” Worsech says. ■

Preventing application rejection

Online applications

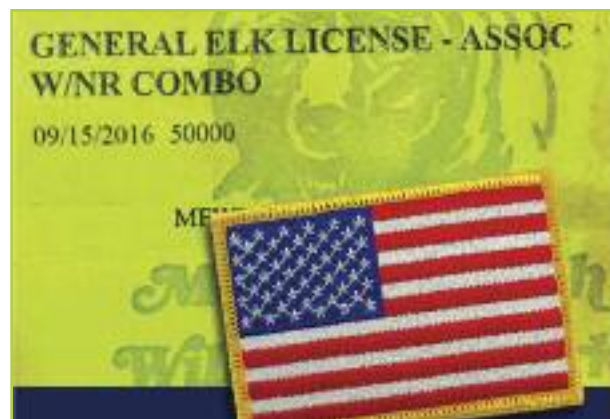
Double-check the hunting districts you apply for.

Paper applications

Double-check to be sure the application is completely filled out. “The number one reason we have to reject applications is because someone didn’t fill in a blank,” Neal Whitney, License Bureau business analyst, says. Be especially sure to fill out all five digits of the hunting districts. Make sure your application check is filled out correctly. Sign the check and the application.

Party hunts

For hunters who want to hunt together and ensure all members are either drawn or not drawn together, the system is set up so that the first person in the party who applies is given a “party number.” That person then needs to contact other party members and tell them to use the same number in their applications. “A common mistake is that members don’t communicate to each other, so we end up with more than one party number and the applications have to be rejected,” says Whitney.



Donating to disabled vets

The 2013 Montana Legislature passed a law allowing hunters to donate licenses to disabled veterans. FWP works with the Montana Outfitters & Guides Association’s Big Hearts Under the Big Sky Program to distribute donated licenses to disabled vets. The department needs additional organizations to help out. “We actually have more donated licenses than we have recipients,” says Hank Worsech, FWP License Bureau chief. “Two weeks ago, a husband and wife came in and donated the Elkhorn bull tags they’d drawn. It’d be a shame if we couldn’t get those to some wounded vets out there.” If your group would like to help, contact Worsech at hworsech@mt.gov.