

Mostly (but not all) good news

The outcome of the 2015 Montana legislative session was generally positive for Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, with a few serious exceptions.

The most important bill slightly raised resident hunting and fishing license fees, which was needed because inflation has steadily increased the cost of fish and wildlife management since the last fee increase a decade ago. The legislation will allow FWP to maintain existing fish and wildlife management and conservation programs for four more years by, starting in 2016, raising the cost of a resident fishing license by \$3, requiring a new base hunting license that costs \$8, and standardizing the price of currently free or discounted licenses at 50 percent of what other residents pay.

Our thanks go to Representative Jeff Welborn of Dillon, who carried the bill, and to the Citizen Fish & Wildlife Licensing and Funding Advisory Council, which represented hunters, anglers, businesses, legislators, and major conservation groups. The fact that the bill passed by 80 votes in the House is testament to the council members' effectiveness—as well as the strong relationships that FWP game wardens, biologists, and others have built with landowners and sportsmen and sportswomen in communities across the state.

Other important bills that the legislature passed and were signed by Governor Steve Bullock:

- ▶ One bill denies hunting privileges to anyone convicted of shooting from roads or driving in a manner that scares wildlife off roads back onto lands where the animals can be shot.
- ▶ Another bill clarifies language for legally tagging a big game animal by replacing “immediately upon kill” with “before the carcass is removed from or the person leaves the site of the kill.”
- ▶ In order to conserve sage-grouse habitat and demonstrate Montana’s commitment to sage-grouse conservation to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, the legislature established a Montana Sage-Grouse Oversight Team, allocated \$10 million from the state general fund for grants to private landowners for sagebrush conservation, and included funding for staff to implement the Governor’s Executive Order and the Sage-Grouse Stewardship Act.
- ▶ A new provision allows a youth age 10 to 17 to hunt, for two years, small and big game when accompanied by a mentor.
- ▶ A provision in the main spending bill made official a directive by

the 2013 legislature that all state agencies eliminate 4 percent of their positions. For FWP, this means cutting 20.5 positions, effective July 1. These cuts will no doubt make it much harder for us to carry out the conservation and management work we are entrusted to do.

▶ Another disappointing piece of legislation was a provision that ends fee title land acquisitions by FWP under the Habitat Montana, Upland Bird, Migratory Bird, Bighorn Sheep Habitat, and Fishing Access Site Programs. Funding for these programs continues to flow into their accounts, though our authority to purchase land from the accounts has been removed. Fortunately, FWP can finish acquisitions already under negotiation and continue leasing land and acquiring conservation easements. Despite the fact that FWP pays

END OF AN ERA? The biggest disappointment of the recent Montana legislative session is a new provision that forbids FWP from purchasing new wildlife management areas or fishing access sites.



property taxes and assessments (\$675,000 in 2014) on acquired fishing access sites and wildlife management areas, and that these parcels are essential for fish and wildlife habitat and public access, some legislators believe that FWP owns enough land and does not need more.

Montana’s conservation community needs to be aware of this sentiment and prepare for future legislation that may seek to reduce or eliminate programs that acquire land for habitat and public access. The big question hunters, anglers, and other conservationists need to answer over the next two years is whether they value these programs and want them to continue.

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