

We're engaging with the public more than ever

Here at FWP, we try to be as transparent as possible about our plans and operations. Montanans have an intense interest in everything this department does, and we take seriously our responsibility to tell the public what we do and why we do it.

Take this magazine, for example. Every eight weeks, we explain FWP activities and accomplishments and deliver that news to 50,000 subscribers. Plus, there's the department's extensive website—recently named the best state conservation agency website in the nation. Add to that our social media outreach (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram), news releases (sent to statewide news media and emailed directly to thousands of subscribers), billboards, public service announcements, regulations booklets, and dozens of education programs. Not to mention the old-fashioned conversations that FWP employees conduct with Montanans either over the phone or face-to-face across the state every single day.

All this public engagement fits in with FWP's core values of serving the public, embracing the public trust concept, and providing leadership and stewardship.

But we can do even more to let people know what's going on here at FWP and convey more of what this department does to enhance Montana's outdoor resources and recreation.

One big change we've made recently is to improve the public process for engaging with the Fish and Wildlife Commission. In the past, how FWP developed proposals (such as new hunting regulations) and the way they were presented to the commission was sometimes confusing to the public. Now there's a clear process for amending proposals and publicizing any amendments before a commission meeting. This way, the public knows what the proposals are and what changes are being discussed ahead of time.

We're also increasing opportunities for Montanans to meet with our staff, ask questions, and make their opinions heard. Over the past several months, we've held dozens of public meetings across Montana on establishing elk population objectives; Montana's draft elk management plan; proposed fishing regulations; and disease

and invasive species issues (such as chronic wasting disease).

Can't make these and other meetings in person? We provide options through Zoom so you can participate from home. For Fish and Wildlife Commission or Parks and Recreation Board meetings, you can visit regional offices and participate in the meetings live on-screen. If people prefer, they can call or write us. I read every single letter that crosses my desk.

We recently finished a series of open house forums at regional offices across the state where people met with me personally, asked me direct questions about management, and voiced their concerns.

I got an earful, which is exactly what I wanted.

In addition, FWP regional offices organize special public gatherings on local issues. For instance, our crew in Kalispell recently started a Coffee with the Commissioner series, where people can have donuts and coffee and talk with Fish and Wildlife commissioner Pat Tabor. "We're trying our darndest to give people the chance to come talk to us face to face and get answers," Dillon Tabish, our Region 1 Communication and Education Program manager tells me.

Bear in mind that just because a person states their opinion doesn't necessarily mean that FWP or the Fish and Wildlife Commission will do exactly what that individual wants. We consider all viewpoints that come to this department. But opinions are widely varied and we need to find reasonable compromises. Opposing comments like "Kill all wolves" and "Save all wolves" inevitably mean not

everyone gets their way. But everyone does get the chance to be heard and have their opinion considered.

Montana's public resources are *your* public resources. You deserve the chance to weigh in on how they are managed. Some people may disagree with our final decisions. That's been the case since the founding of this agency. But as Dillon says, we're doing "our darndest" to be as transparent as we can about how those decisions are made.

—**Hank Warsech**, Director, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks



Hunters line up to speak at a Fish and Wildlife Commission meeting in early 2022.

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