

# Understanding the Bonus Point System

**I**t doesn't seem fair. You've been putting in for a moose, mountain goat, or bighorn sheep license, or a special deer or elk permit, for 10, 20, even 30 years and still haven't drawn one. Then you hear that your neighbor's son was drawn his second year of trying.

Hard as it might be to believe, FWP's system of allocating permits and licenses is the fairest one around.

For years Montana had what's known as a true preference system. Licenses were awarded based on seniority. Every year that a hunter put in for a license and wasn't drawn, he or she would move up the preference "ladder." FWP drew license applications starting from the top of the ladder, ensuring that those who had applied the most years would be drawn before others. Seems equitable, right?

To some extent it was. But it had flaws.

For rare tags like some bighorn sheep licenses, where 1,000 or more hunters apply for each one, even the true preference system didn't guarantee a license within a hunter's lifetime.

Of even greater concern was that the true preference system was hard on young and new hunters. For many licenses, they had no

chance of getting drawn for years. Think about it: If you were 20 years old and wanted to hunt a moose but knew you'd have absolutely no chance until you were 55 or so, would you keep applying?

In the early 2000s FWP came up with a system that gives those with the most preference points the best odds of being drawn (though not a guarantee), while allowing those putting in for the first time or with a just a few preference points a chance (though a slim one) of being drawn. Here's how it works:

Each year you may buy one bonus point for each license or permit you apply for. The cost per permit or license is \$2 for residents and \$20 for nonresidents. Points accumulate each year you are unsuccessful in the drawing. The more points you accumulate, the more chances are entered for you into the drawing, like tickets into a hat.

Keep in mind that most other hunters also are accumulating points, so they have "extra tickets" added to each drawing too. As a

result, your odds for the most coveted licenses and permits are still not great even though they improve each year. Montana has relatively small numbers of some very popular big game species. To protect those populations from overharvest, FWP issues relatively few permits or licenses. Consequently, large numbers of hunters often end up competing for a very small number of tags. Demand far exceeds supply.

**Hard as it might be to believe, FWP's system of allocating permits and licenses is the fairest one around.**

Occasionally a first-timer beats the odds and wins. And it's true that hunters who have put in for 20 or more years for certain permits or licenses still haven't drawn one. But it's far more common—due to the laws of probability—that hunters with the most bonus points win the license and permit lotteries each year.

The 2011 legislature moved the system closer to the old pure preference system by requiring that FWP use what's known as a "squaring" of the bonus point system. Starting this year, everyone with bonus points will have their points squared. For instance, a person with 4 points will actually have 16 points (tickets in the hat). If that person isn't drawn the next year, he or she will then have 5 points squared, or 25 points. And so on. That will increase the odds for hunters who have been applying the longest. Young and new hunters will still have a chance, though less than what they had previously.

How fair you think that is probably depends on whether you are a hunter just starting out or one who has been applying for licenses or permits unsuccessfully for many years.

In any case, good luck and keep trying.

—**Joe Maurier**, Montana FWP Director



TONY BYNUM

Last year 13,140 hunters applied for Montana's 257 mountain goat licenses. As with moose, bighorn sheep, trophy mule deer and elk, and other coveted tags, demand far exceeds supply, requiring a lottery for allocating licenses and permits fairly.