

# Meeting face-to-face is essential for improving hunter-landowner relations

Sportsmen need to improve relations with landowners. Many hunters don't like to hear that, but I've been around long enough to know it's necessary—and that if it doesn't happen, public hunting access to private land across Montana will continue to decline.

Yes, landowners bear their share of responsibility for deteriorating relations between them and the sporting community. Growing numbers of landowners have made previously accessible land off-limits to public hunting. And some have pushed for free elk and deer tags they can sell, something done in a few other states. That's something Montanans reject as completely at odds with the state's tradition of keeping wildlife from becoming commercialized.

In an ideal world, landowners would open their gates more often. But no law says they have to. With respect to public access on private land, property owners hold most of the cards. And their hand is getting stronger by the day.

Montana's landscape is changing far faster than most people realize. I don't mean subdivisions and ranchettes that continue to spring up in the state's western river

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valleys, and growing demand for private hunting recreation property. Real estate specialists predict the trend will continue.

What can be done to convince landowners large and small that it would be okay to let a Bozeman schoolteacher, or a Billings husband and wife, or a Lewistown family onto their land to hunt elk or deer or pheasants? Criticizing landowners in the press or trying to "force" them to open their gates with legislation doesn't work. Just the opposite. In many cases, landowners respond to political pressure by shutting down even more access.

What does seem to work is FWP staff and sportsmen meeting with landowners to learn about their concerns. It turns out that the incentive for opening access often isn't money. For many landowners, it can be something as simple as hunters and FWP acknowledging that private land provides habitat for 70 percent of Montana's deer and pronghorn and one-third of its elk. Some—especially nonresident landowners—want licenses, permits, and tags to be more accessible. Others would appreciate hunters volunteering to fix fences or help with branding during the off-season. Many want assistance managing hunting traffic and access, which is what Block Management provides and is one reason for its success.

Montana is working toward increasing public access on private land. In recent months, others in the department and I have met with several owners of large properties to listen to their concerns and also explain why opening their land to at least some public access may be in their best interest. We are also identifying critical parcels—some of just a few hundred acres—that FWP or conservation groups might purchase from willing sellers that would provide access to large tracts of federal land. Governor Steve Bullock has charged the Private Land/Public Wildlife Council—composed of landowners, hunters, outfitters, and other citizens—with carrying out a complete review of all public access programs. The review includes everything from funding to landowner incentives and is intended to make the programs more

responsive to both hunters' and property owners' needs. Meanwhile, sportsmen in some areas are meeting with landowners, initiating volunteer sportsmen "work days" on ranches, and even acting as hunting coordinators so that landowners have a responsible point person to keep watch over who is hunting and when.

All this is a great start, but it's not nearly enough. If we want to keep Montana's hunting heritage alive and continue to be a state that leads the nation in wildlife conservation, we have to find new, innovative ways to bridge the growing gap between the public hunter and the private landowner.

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



The most effective way for hunters to gain access to this buck on private land is to talk, not shout.

valleys and mountain foothills, though they, too, are a concern. I'm talking about massive tracts of land—sometimes hundreds of thousands of acres at a time—being bought up in Montana. Many were previously accessible to public hunting thanks to traditions honored by longtime ranching families or through our Block Management Program. Now many of those ranches, purchased by people unfamiliar with Montana's culture of wildlife conservation, are sprouting "No Hunting" signs.

These enormous land transfers are no secret. Newspapers have covered several recent sales of large ranches containing valuable wildlife habitat on which future access is uncertain. The sales are fueled by Montana's relatively low land prices, increasing real estate