

It's Your Call

As you read this in late winter or early spring, FWP employees across the state are working to manage your fish and wildlife. Crews are wrapping up prairie and forest aerial counts of pronghorn, deer, elk, and moose. Wildlife biologists and game wardens are working with landowners to fence deer and elk from haystacks. Wolf specialists are stringing flagging along electric fences to keep wolves from going after newborn calves. Maintenance staff are cleaning up fishing access sites and repairing broken signs and boat ramps. Fisheries technicians are finishing creel surveys of ice anglers and fixing nets in preparation for spring fish surveys. Biologists are planning summer habitat improvement projects. FWP front office staff are selling new hunting and angling licenses, while back office crews are managing computer systems in preparation for the first big game lottery drawings.

This work, along with everything else we do throughout the year, takes money. Unfortunately, FWP will soon be running short. The last time the Montana Legislature approved a resident license fee increase was in 2005, a decade ago. Since then our revenue has remained flat even as costs—everything from fencing to fuel—have inched up with inflation. Yes, gas for game wardens' and biologists' trucks, essential equipment for covering this huge state, dipped below \$2 a gallon this winter. That was welcome news, but not long ago gas cost nearly \$4 a gallon, and prices could be back in that neighborhood before we know it.

Meanwhile, in recent years FWP has been required to do more tasks, like timber planning and harvest on state wildlife management areas, managing wolves and bison, and trying to prevent the endangered species listing of the arctic grayling, wolverine, fisher, and sage-grouse (which we recently succeeded in doing with the first two species and are hopeful about accomplishing with the latter two.). Throw in having to monitor for brucellosis and aquatic invasive species, help cities manage urban wildlife situations, and predict potential problems to habitat and wildlife populations from various types of new development, and it's clear that our flat revenue stream isn't providing enough money to make ends meet.

As a result, right now we're facing a \$5.75 million annual shortfall. The deficit is no surprise. Ten years ago legislators and FWP predicted the fee increase at the time would last only until 2015, and that has come true.

So what's to be done? We've already cut \$1.4 million annually from our operational costs in anticipation of the deficit. The next step will be for the current legislature to address the remaining

funding gap. Solutions will come down to one, or some combination, of three choices:

- ▶ Further cut existing fish and wildlife management and conservation programs.
- ▶ Shift some "earmarked" funds to other programs.
- ▶ Raise resident fishing and hunting license fees.

If the legislature decides to further cut existing programs, we'll have to decrease game population surveys, reduce hunting opportunities, let some fishing access sites fall into disrepair, reduce assistance to landowners who have game damage problems, decrease enforcement of game laws, consider closing fish hatcheries, and more.

If lawmakers favor shifting earmarked funds from programs like Upland Game Bird Enhancement, Block Management, Habitat Montana, and wolf monitoring, those and other earmarked programs would have to be cut substantially.

Last year a governor-appointed citizen advisory council, coordi-



Without action to solve FWP's current budget shortfall, the department may have to cut back on the Block Management Program, lake and reservoir stocking, game law enforcement, game damage assistance, hunting opportunities, and more.

nating with a legislative interim committee, recommended increasing fishing licenses by \$6 and hunting licenses by \$8 (upon adopting the recommendation, the Environmental Quality Council reduced the fishing license increase to \$3). In addition, the advisory council recommended discounting licenses for seniors at age 67 instead of the current 62, and standardizing the price of most other free or discounted licenses at 50 percent of what other residents pay.

Those fee adjustments would solve most of the funding problem while also—unlike the other options—maintaining fish and wildlife opportunities at today's levels for four more years.

It's not up to FWP to decide how to solve the budget shortfall. Our responsibility is to explain what will likely happen to fish and wildlife management and conservation under the various proposed scenarios. As to which option is best for Montana, that will be decided by you and your representatives at the capitol sometime in the next two months.

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