

## Three essential points about the new shoulder seasons

**T**his year FWP has begun something unprecedented in the history of Montana elk management. We've added "shoulder seasons" to the general firearms rifle season in 43 of the state's 138 hunting districts.

Shoulder seasons are firearms seasons outside the regular five-week season, mostly restricted to private land. They will add as much as five months to the general season, starting as early as August 15 in many of the targeted hunting districts and ending as late as February 15.

Use of shoulder seasons is unprecedented because never before has Montana found itself with so many elk. Statewide, the population has grown from about 65,000 in the 1990s to roughly 165,000 today. In some hunting districts, elk numbers are five to even ten times greater than what landowners will tolerate. Overabundant elk herds knock down fences, eat haystacks, and graze

landowner tolerance, and hunter interests. Also, Governor Steve Bullock has mandated that FWP "step up its efforts to work with affected landowners to mitigate [elk] impacts and allow for greater elk harvest and public opportunity."

Over the past decade we've tried to accomplish this, mainly by issuing more B (cow elk) licenses during the general five-week season and holding game damage and management season hunts. But in most cases, those measures have not succeeded as hoped.

So in 2014, I established an internal working group of 25 FWP biologists, game wardens, and regional supervisors. I asked them to develop a management tool that would reduce elk numbers in problem areas while addressing concerns by some hunters that landowners who lease to private outfitters don't allow public hunting.

The shoulder season concept stood out as the option with the best chance of succeeding on all fronts. Key to its success, however, will be cooperation. More landowners will need to open their gates. Hunters will need to contact landowners and hunt hard. Our staff will need to closely monitor harvest and help landowners and hunters find elk.

The second main point I want to stress is that shoulder seasons are a great opportunity for hunters. In some hunting districts, hunters will now have up to six months to harvest a cow elk. And because shoulder seasons take place on private land only, that hunting pressure should move more elk onto public land during the archery and general firearms seasons.

Third, I want hunters to know that FWP had no feasible choice but to establish shoulder seasons. By law, we are required to manage elk populations within objectives. A few critics have denounced shoulder seasons, but they have not come up with other workable solutions. Making entire hunting districts antlerless-only during the general season is not something hunters or landowners would tolerate. It would take away the opportunity of harvesting

a bull, and it wouldn't address the fact that cow elk aren't in many huntable areas during the five-week season.

Montana would also reject issuing landowners kill permits to remove elk themselves. And department culling—as a few people have proposed—would treat elk like vermin.

Despite the complexities, Montana's elk situation is, in a way, very simple. Many landowners want overabundant elk removed, and many hunters want to harvest an elk. All we have to do is put the two together. That's what we aim to accomplish with shoulder seasons, by giving hunters enough time to find elk so they can reduce populations to legal, tolerable levels.

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

*For more information on shoulder seasons, see page 30 of this issue and visit the FWP website at [fwp.mt.gov](http://fwp.mt.gov).*



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pasture intended for livestock. It can be a real hardship.

Over the next few months you'll see and hear a lot about shoulder seasons on TV news, in newspapers, and on the FWP website. Amid all that information, I'd like you to remember three important points.

One is that shoulder seasons are a management tool, one we hope will address a problem that has been growing for more than a decade. Elk numbers in many areas have mushroomed, mainly because of mild winters and more private land becoming elk "refuges" as increasing numbers of landowners cease to allow public hunting. Hunting is the main way Montana keeps elk populations at healthy levels. Without access to private land, where a growing number of elk now reside, hunters can't help control populations.

In the early 2000s, citing landowner concerns, the Montana Legislature passed HB42, which requires FWP to bring overabundant elk populations down to "objectives"—previously established levels based on the biological carrying capacity of the land,