

Credibility was key to legislative successes

When the 66th Montana Legislature adjourned on April 25 of this year, the future of Montana’s state parks, fisheries, game law enforcement, and wildlife looked much brighter. Among the bills the legislature passed (and Governor Bullock later signed into law) were those that:

- ▶ created an additional \$2 million each year to support state parks, trails, and fishing access sites by raising the optional motor vehicle registration fee from \$6 to \$9;
- ▶ added \$1 million in angling license funds to the Fisheries Division’s budget (a nearly \$1 million reduction in federal funds in the previous session had forced drastic program cuts statewide);
- ▶ allowed FWP game wardens to do more enforcement work, by revising the allocation of federal funds and state license dollars;
- ▶ provided an additional \$1 million each year for public access; and
- ▶ provided permanent positions for four grizzly bear management specialists.

What accounts for these legislative gains? 1. We increased our fiscal credibility; 2. we built strong partnerships with citizen groups; and 3. we greatly improved our relationships with legislators.

Credibility: Two years ago, during the 2017 legislative session,



Providing clear information helped us build credibility at the capitol.

FWP’s credibility with lawmakers was low, primarily because the agency lacked essential financial controls and had made opaque and confusing decisions regarding the Parks Division budget.

Since then, we’ve taken steps to solve those problems. The biggest change was to consolidate all FWP budget functions in a centralized administrative unit. The department’s Administration Division was given enhanced fiscal oversight, and its staff regularly meet with all other FWP divisions to ensure they are making decisions based on accurate financial information. We also established a Financial Review Advisory Council composed of legislators,

citizens, and FWP staff. All these steps have improved the department’s fiscal transparency and consistency.

In addition, we’ve embraced recommendations from a 2018 legislative audit of the FWP Parks Division and from the citizen-led Parks in Focus Commission. The result has been greater credibility with Montanans who care about state parks.

Partnerships: For decades, FWP has been building partnerships with communities, conservation organizations, citizen groups, and others. The value of that commitment was apparent during the recent legislative session. For instance, 42 advocating individuals and groups, including the Montana Trails Coalition, Montana Wilderness Association, and Montana Trail Vehicle Riders Association, helped the parks and trails funding bill pass both houses of the legislature with strong bipartisan support.

We explained why, for instance, it makes sense for game wardens to spend less time fixing fences on WMAs and more time catching poachers and protecting public safety. One way we strengthened those partnerships was by regularly meeting with our regional FWP Citizens Advisory Committees throughout 2018 and providing them with clear financial information. Committee members were then able to explain to others the logic behind FWP’s budget requests during the 2019 session.

Legislative relationships: To strengthen our relationships with lawmakers, we assigned key staff to answer questions and provide clear information. We helped legislators understand how additional grizzly management specialists can help bears and people coexist. We explained why it makes sense for game wardens to spend less time fixing fences on wildlife management areas and more time catching poachers and protecting public safety. We showed how our budget works and what percentage comes from hunting and fishing license fees and federal excise taxes on shooting and fishing gear.

All this work stems from a new way we’re doing business at FWP. Throughout the state, our employees are committed to improving public service—both for traditional outdoor participants like hunters and anglers and the growing number of new ones like kayakers, cyclists, and hikers. A key part of that service is building trust and credibility. That includes asking people what they want from us, listening to what they have to say, and then finding ways to do what they want or explain why that might not be possible.

It also means keeping track of our promises, to legislators and others, and making sure we fulfill them.

At FWP, we want to be worthy of the public’s trust. We have plenty more work to do, but I think the results of the 2019 legislative session show we’re making headway.

—**Martha Williams**, Director, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks