

More access, more handshakes

I've long believed that one of the most important things people can do is build strong, trusting relationships. That's one reason I'm so pleased with the success of FWP's 2021 Elk Hunting Access Agreements and our recent changes to make the program more transparent.

The relationships in this case are between hunters and landowners. FWP has a long history of finding ways to strengthen bonds between those two. In the 1930s Montana created its first wildlife management areas, then called game refuges, when our department purchased, with hunter support and license dollars, key winter elk habitat to keep herds from migrating to lower elevations and eating hay on nearby ranches.

Hunter-landowner partnerships expanded throughout the 20th century, with hunters strongly supporting state programs that pay landowners for conservation work and public hunting access. FWP's Game Bird Enhancement Program, Block Management Program, conservation easements, and other programs now provide landowners with nearly \$30 million in direct cash payments each year. FWP's popular Block Management Program fosters strong relations between landowners and hunters, and Montana's Private Land/Public Wildlife Council, still going strong after 26 years, further strengthens those bonds.

Add to that the thousands of relationships and even close friendships developed independently between hunters and landowners who allow public hunting on their property.

In 2001, the Montana Legislature created what is now the Elk Hunting Access (EHA) Agreement Program to provide more incentives for landowners to allow public hunting access on their land. For 20 years, FWP issued almost none of these agreements (previously called 454 agreements for the legislation creating the program). Changes by the Montana Legislature and FWP have made the program more enticing to landowners, and as a result applications have grown. The number of EHA agreements authorized by the Fish and Wildlife Commission has grown from two in 2020 to 13 in 2021 and 37 for 2022.

Through the EHA Program, qualifying landowners receive either-sex (bull) permits, which they cannot sell and can transfer only to an immediate family member or full-time employee. In return, they must allow onto their property three public elk hunters—one they can pick themselves and two others that FWP selects at

random from the successful elk permit or elk B license lists.

EHA landowners often grant far more public hunting than required. Last year, the agreements required that a minimum total of 84 public hunters be given free access. But landowners offered antlerless hunting opportunities to 540 public hunters and either-sex opportunities to another 124. Almost all were resident Montana hunters. So far, 24 of the 37 landowners for 2022 have indicated they will provide access beyond the three-hunter minimum.

Of course, some of these landowners are in Block Management and would have provided those opportunities anyway, even if they hadn't been given the landowner permits. But the point is that when they got the tags, they didn't pull out of Block Management, as some EHA critics predicted.

For me, even more important than all the additional public hunting opportunities on private land are the relationships being built between hunters and participating landowners.

These hunters and landowners call or email each other. They often meet in person. Last year some EHA landowners provided guides to help hunters find elk, and then brought in ranch vehicles to help haul the harvested animals. "Those guys were really nice," answered one hunter in a survey we recently conducted to help improve the program. "They helped me with everything!" A hunter who was allowed to kill a 7x6 bull in HD 411 told us: "It was cool to hunt an area that hasn't been open to the public in the past and has some of the biggest bulls in the state."

FWP has recently improved the program further by making the process more transparent by setting an application period, documenting hunter use, and conducting post-season evaluations. Now all hunters, landowners, and others can see who applies for the EHA permits, who receives them, and

the parameters of each agreement.

It's all there out in the open, available for public review and discussion.

In our survey, one HD 411 hunter wrote: "I really encourage this program. I'm all for FWP talking and working with the landowners."

So am I. And I promise that through this program and others, we'll be doing even more relationship-building in the future.

—Hank Worsech, Director, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks



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