

# Summary of Research



## Selected Statewide Results From A 2007 Survey of Private Landowners Concerning Montana's Elk Populations

Joe Weigand

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Montana's elk population has grown from approximately 55,000 animals in the late 1970's to nearly 150,000 animals today. As a result, many of Montana's hunting districts now exceed population objectives as described in Montana's 2005 Elk Management Plan. Being over objective means that intolerable levels of game damage may occur on privately owned lands and/or there may be more elk than what the habitat can sustain long-term.

While Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) has done a number of things to address over objective populations, including liberalizing hunting seasons, the 2003 Montana legislature passed legislation that directed FWP to manage elk in a sustainable manner that does not adversely affect Montana lands. The legislature directed FWP to consider the concerns of private landowners when determining sustainable numbers.

In 2007, to better understand private landowner perspectives regarding current elk populations and management strategies, FWP conducted a survey of private landowners who owned 640 acres or greater within 43 Montana hunting districts of most concern in terms of exceeding elk population objectives (Figure 1). Mailback surveys were successfully delivered to a total of 3,237 landowners. Overall, there were 1,737 respondents resulting in a fifty-four percent response rate.

Primary areas of questioning included:

- *Did they typically have elk on their property during the hunting season? Did they allow elk hunter access and if yes, what types of access were allowed and who managed the access?*
- *Do they think there are too many elk in the state right now? Are there too many elk in the specific hunting district where they own property? What is hunter access like in the district where they own land? And, is there a need for FWP to take measures to decrease elk populations?*
- *How acceptable are each of three potential new liberal management actions<sup>1</sup> that could readily be used by FWP to help reduce elk numbers in hunting districts that exceed elk population objectives?*
- *Did they feel that any of these potential management actions would effectively reduce elk numbers in hunting districts that exceed elk population objectives?*

<sup>1</sup> Potential management actions that could be used by FWP to help reduce elk numbers in hunting districts that exceed elk population objectives:

- (1) Implement antlerless only elk hunting in these districts (e.g. antlerless only on general license – no bull hunting allowed).
- (2) Offer unlimited antlerless elk B licenses to non-residents wherever unlimited antlerless elk B licenses are offered to residents in these hunting districts.
- (3) "Earn a bull"...require hunters to harvest an antlerless elk in these hunting districts before they can legally harvest a bull in these hunting districts.

## RESULTS

### OPINIONS CONCERNING MONTANA'S CURRENT ELK POPULATION

Are there too many elk in Montana? Only forty-three percent of the landowners agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: "*There are too many elk in Montana right now*" (Table 1). Similarly, only thirty-eight percent agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: "*There are too many elk in the hunting district in which they own land.*"

Fifty percent of landowners agreed or strongly agreed with the following statement: "*FWP needs to take measures to decrease Montana's elk population.*" Forty-one percent said that they agreed or strongly agreed that FWP needs to take measures to reduce elk numbers in the hunting district where they own land.

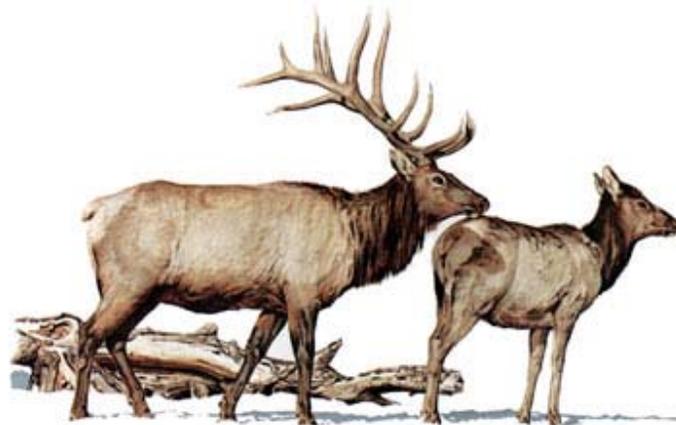
Whereas many landowners recognized that there might be a need to decrease elk numbers in some parts of the state, many (forty-two percent) also agreed or strongly agreed that Montana's elk population is a good thing. This is a testament to the value of elk to the economy and the heritage of elk viewing and elk hunting in Montana.

#### Private Land Access

Many of the landowners surveyed (forty-two percent) indicated that there is not good access for elk hunters on private lands in many of the hunting districts that are over population objective (Table 2).

#### Public Land and Motorized Access

Hunter access to public lands was considered good by fifty percent of the landowners and fifty-four percent of the landowners agreed or strongly agreed that there was sufficient motorized access in the hunting district where they own land.



**Table 1.** Private landowner response to statements that were directed at Montana’s statewide elk population.

Statewide Perspectives Statement:	Landowner Response		
	Disagree or Strongly Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree or Strongly Agree
Montana’s elk population is a good thing.	37%	21%	42%
There are too many elk in Montana right now.	32%	25%	43%
FWP needs to take measures to decrease Montana’s elk populations.	26%	24%	50%
FWP needs to take measures to maintain Montana’s elk populations.	33%	24%	43%

**Table 2.** Private landowner response to statements that were directed at the specific elk hunting district in which they own land.

Hunting District Specific Perspectives Statement:	Landowner Response		
	Disagree or Strongly Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree or Strongly Agree
There are too many elk in the hunting district where they own land.	33%	29%	38%
There is good access for elk hunting on publicly owned lands in the hunting district.	24%	26%	50%
There is good access for elk hunting on privately owned lands in the hunting district.	42%	30%	28%
There is sufficient motorized access in the hunting district.	19%	26%	55%
There are good opportunities to harvest an elk in the hunting district.	29%	26%	45%
There is good public access to where elk are typically located in the hunting district.	40%	30%	30%
FWP needs to take measures to decrease elk numbers in the hunting district.	32%	27%	41%

## ACCEPTABILITY OF POTENTIAL ELK MANAGEMENT ACTIONS

Private landowners varied little in their ratings of acceptability for each of three potential management actions that could be used by FWP to help reduce elk numbers in hunting districts that exceed elk population objectives (Table 3).

- None of the three options offered were overwhelmingly acceptable to private landowners.

- Private landowners were most accepting of “Earn a bull”. This potential management action was rated as acceptable or very acceptable by forty-five percent of the landowners.
- Unlimited nonresident antlerless elk B licenses and antlerless only elk hunting were only slightly less favorable and were rated as acceptable or very acceptable by thirty-nine percent and thirty-six percent, respectively.

**Table 3.** Private landowner acceptability ratings for three potential management actions that could be used by FWP to help reduce elk numbers in hunting districts that exceed elk population objectives.

POTENTIAL MANAGEMENT ACTION:	PERCENT responding that the action is very unacceptable or unacceptable	PERCENT responding that the action is neither acceptable nor unacceptable	PERCENT responding that the action is acceptable or very acceptable
Implement antlerless only elk hunting in these districts (e.g., antlerless only on general license—no bull hunting allowed)	44%	20%	36%
Offer unlimited antlerless elk B licenses to non-residents wherever unlimited antlerless elk B licenses are offered to residents in these hunting districts	41%	20%	39%
“Earn a bull” ...require hunters to harvest an antlerless elk in these hunting districts before they can legally harvest a bull in these districts	32%	23%	45%



## PERCEIVED EFFECTIVENESS OF POTENTIAL ELK MANAGEMENT ACTIONS

Landowners were also asked whether or not they believed if any of these three potential management actions would effectively reduce elk numbers (Table 4). No one of the three management actions was thought to be considerably more likely to reduce elk numbers than any other.

Many landowners did not have a good feel for the potential effectiveness of the management action choices as indicated by thirty percent or more of the respondents indicating they were unsure of the likely effectiveness of all three choices.

### HUNTER ACCESS AND OPINIONS ABOUT ELK NUMBERS

A statistical comparison of landowners that allowed some form of hunting access and those that did not allow hunting access revealed that:

- Landowners that allow hunter access are more likely to feel that there are too many elk in their hunting district.
- Conversely, landowners that do not allow hunter access are more likely to feel that there are not too many elk in their hunting district.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS

### Private Landowners:

- Eighty-nine percent reported they are current residents of Montana.
- Sixty percent reported they typically had elk on their property during the general hunting season (late October through November).
- Of those landowners who have elk on their property during the general hunting season, eighty percent reported they provided some type of access for elk hunting on their property in 2006. The remaining

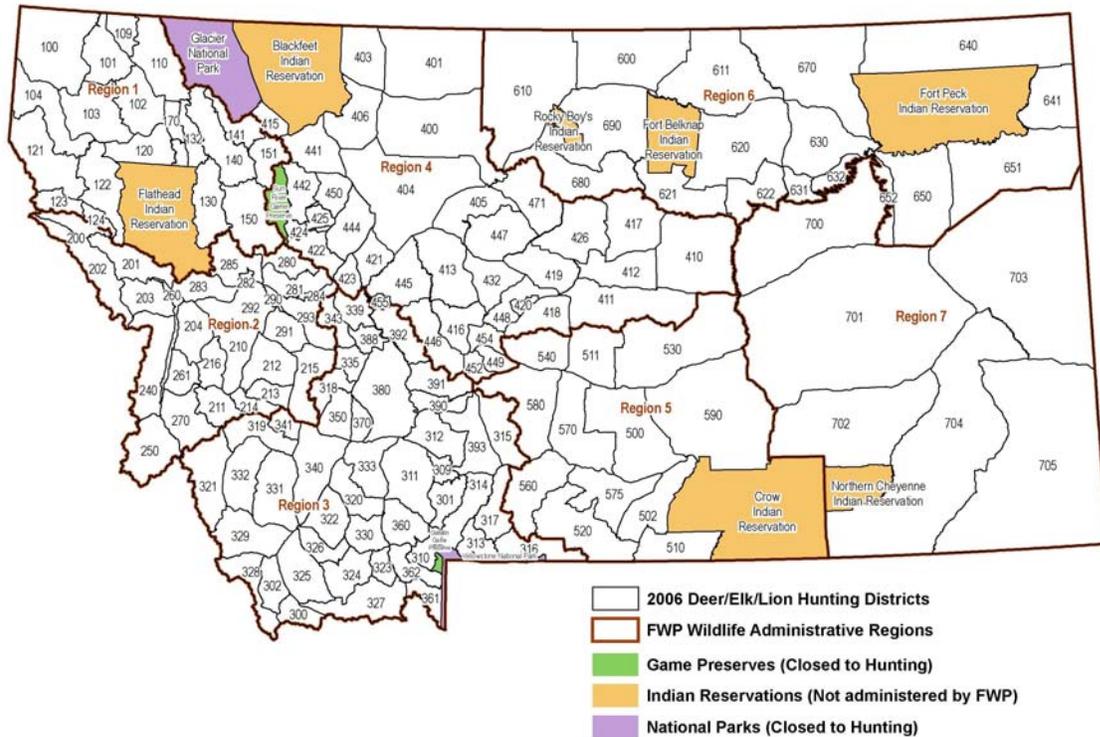
information refers to these landowners who provide some type of elk hunting access:

- Eighteen percent provided outfitted/guided hunting access for antlered elk. Thirteen percent provided outfitted/guided hunting access for antlerless elk.
- Six percent leased property for antlered elk hunting access. Four percent leased property for antlerless elk hunting access.
- Four percent charged an access fee for hunting antlered elk on non-leased property. Two percent charged an access fee for hunting antlerless elk on non-leased property.
- Sixteen percent had property enrolled in the Block Management Program for antlered elk hunting and fifteen percent for antlerless elk hunting.
- Sixty-four percent provided free access for hunting antlered or antlerless elk.
- Nearly eighty-four percent of landowners managed hunter access themselves, while three percent had an outfitter manage access, six percent used a hired hand to manage access, and seven percent used some other form of access management (to include Block Management technicians).
  - These figures were found to significantly differ between resident and nonresident landowners. Resident landowners were similar to the statewide percentages and nonresident landowners relied more heavily on hired hands. Forty-eight percent of nonresident landowners managed access themselves and hired hands accounted for twenty-seven percent of hunter access management.

**Table 4.** Private landowner *effectiveness* ratings for three potential management actions that could be used by FWP to help reduce elk numbers in hunting districts that exceed elk population objectives.

POTENTIAL MANAGEMENT ACTION:	PERCENT responding the action is likely to <u>not</u> be successful at reducing elk numbers	PERCENT responding the action is likely to <u>be</u> successful at reducing elk numbers	PERCENT responding that they are <u>unsure</u> whether the action will be successful / unsuccessful
Implement antlerless only elk hunting in these districts (e.g., antlerless only on general license—no bull hunting allowed)	34%	36%	30%
Offer unlimited antlerless elk B licenses to non-residents wherever unlimited antlerless elk B licenses are offered to residents in these hunting districts	30%	40%	31%
“Earn a bull” ...require hunters to harvest an antlerless elk in these hunting districts before they can legally harvest a bull in these districts	28%	41%	31%

**Figure 1.** Montana's hunting districts. Districts of most concern in terms of exceeding elk population objectives include: 121, 213, 283, 292, 311, 312, 314, 315, 317, 322, 323, 324, 325, 326, 327, 330, 360, 362, 390, 393, 411, 412, 416, 417, 421, 422, 423, 446, 511, 530, 560, 575, 580, 590, 621, 622, 631, 632, 680, 690, 700, 702, 704.



## DISCUSSION

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) currently faces challenges in managing the state's elk population in a way that adequately meets the needs of a broad array of constituents, including private landowners. Among other things, mild winters and increasingly limited hunting access on privately owned lands have contributed to a rise in the elk population in many areas of the state. Even with liberalized hunting seasons and elk harvest statistics showing a slight upward trend, elk numbers in more than half of Montana's hunting districts are over objective according to the state's elk management plan.

Faced with these challenges, FWP surveyed private landowners to better understand their opinions concerning Montana's current elk population. While there were some expected perspectives regarding elk populations and the acceptability of potential elk management actions, it was surprising to find that a slight majority of landowners did not feel there are too many elk in the state right now and fewer felt that there were too many in the specific hunting district where they own land.

The survey effort confirms the value of collaborative development of elk population objectives and subsequent management efforts. Such collaboration can be effective only if all concerned parties, especially landowners, are present in the discussion.

The survey also confirms that although challenges do exist with growing elk populations, landowners value the presence of elk and most are willing to tolerate a certain amount of elk and elk

hunter access. As in the past, FWP must continue to take into account these landowner tolerances when determining regulatory hunting packages, especially where elk populations are above objective levels.

Survey results will be provided to the FWP Commission and public as part of the 2008 and 2009 elk season setting process.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joe Weigand, Landowner/Wildlife Resource Specialist, FWP Field Services Division, Helena, Montana.

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