Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Region 2 Wildlife Quarterly
September 2017

How Hunting Seasons Are Set

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Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Region 2 Wildlife Quarterly

September 2017

Region 2, 3201 Spurgin Road, Missoula MT 59804, 406-542-5500

Find the Quarterly online at fwp.mt.gov/regions/r2/WildlifeQuarterly

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The Region 2 Wildlife Quarterly is a product of Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks; 3201 Spurgin Road; Missoula 59804. Its intent is to provide an outlet for a depth of technical information that normally cannot be accommodated by commercial media, yet we hope to retain a readable product for a wide audience. While we strive for accuracy and integrity, this is not a peer-refereed outlet for original scientific research, and results are preliminary. October 2015 was the inaugural issue.

How Hunting Seasons Are Set

If you're like most Montanans, hunting seasons happen to you. You've been minding your own business. You haven't been looking for trouble.

And then you innocently open the latest hunting regulations booklet.

Alright, let's not flatter ourselves. You don't actually open the latest regulations booklet until someone suggests that something affecting you has changed. And like the buck that wakes up suddenly to hunting season, you struggle to adapt to a recent change in the way you're allowed to hunt.

We get it. We hunt, too. And, we know that every citizen makes choices about where they can afford to spend their limited time outside of hunting season. More often than not, we have to trust that decisions made and influenced by other citizens in the off-season will work well enough for the rest of us when we head outdoors.

Just be advised that a lot of dedicated people—outside of Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) as well as within—are intensively involved in setting hunting seasons on your behalf. Fortunately so. Hunting seasons are the good and evolving products of a tremendous amount of volunteerism, alongside professionalism, involving a lot of time and effort.

This issue of the Quarterly is intended to provide you access to the process of setting hunting seasons in Montana. Because maybe you'd like to become more involved if only you knew where to begin, or where your inputs could be most efficiently made.

Here's hoping to give you voice, if you'd like.

And here's hoping to give you the tools to make Montana's hunting seasons happen *for* you, rather than having hunting seasons happen to you.

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How Hunting Seasons Are Set

Biennial Season-setting Process

Calendar of Events for Setting the 2018-2019 Hunting Seasons

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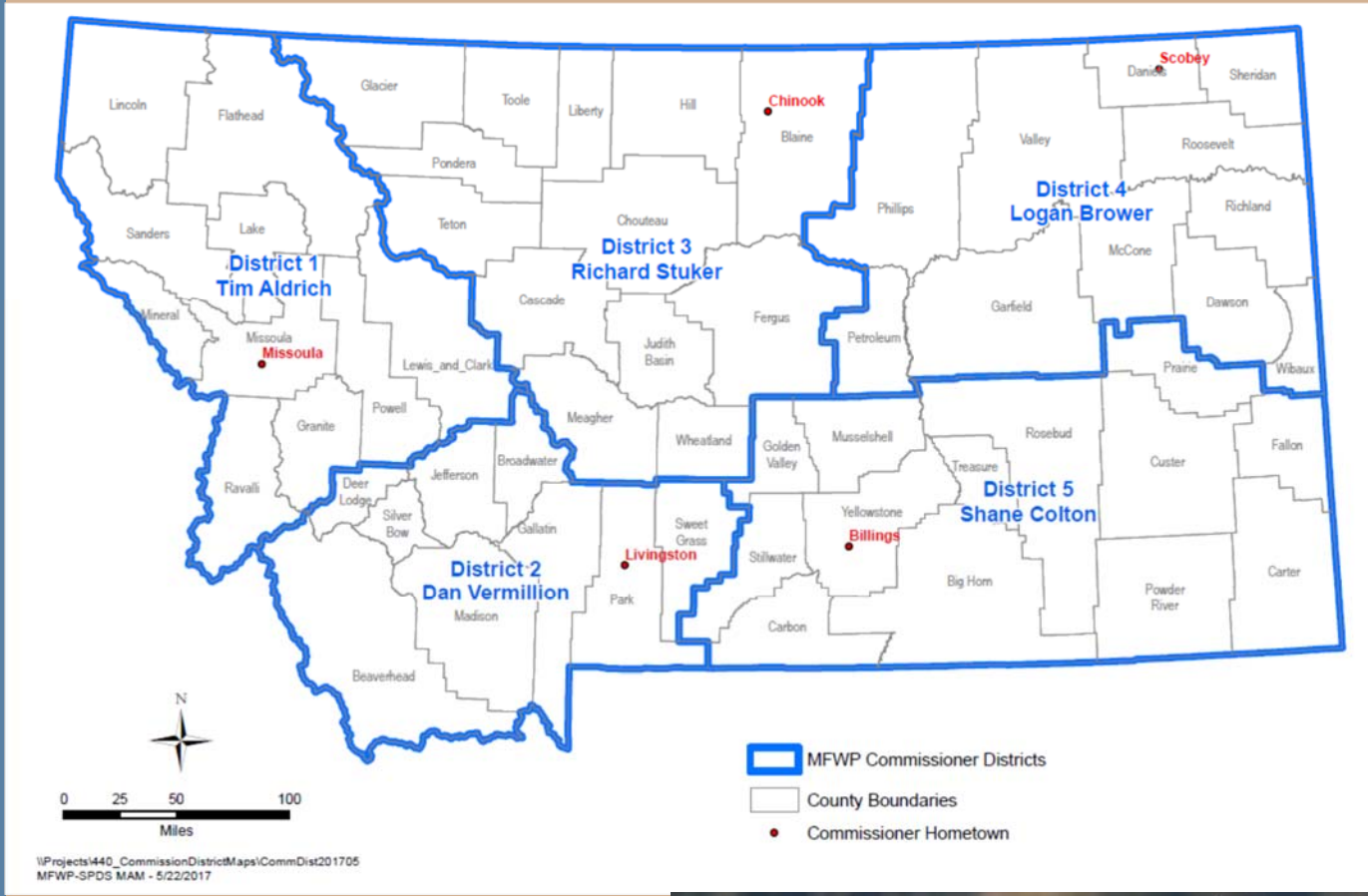
Voluntary Service

The Commission

The Montana Fish & Wildlife Commission is not unlike your local school board, weed board , planning board or other citizen bodies in that its members are volunteers who possess a dedication and passion not only for the subject matter of their particular commission, but also for the practice of citizenship and self government. Members of the Fish & Wildlife Commission are not paid for their time. We owe a debt of gratitude to those individuals who are willing and have prepared themselves to serve.

The Governor appoints the five members of the Fish & Wildlife Commission, each serving a four-year term. Contact information for the Commission may be found online at fwp.mt.gov/doingBusiness/insideFwp/commission/members. Members of the 2017 Commission are named and located as shown below:



Among its myriad other responsibilities, the Commission sets Montana's hunting seasons in accordance with Montana law. Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) makes recommendations to the Commission. In addition, citizens may offer recommendations to the Commission and the Commission may develop recommendations of its own. All are entertained by the Commission in an open forum where public review and comment are actively solicited and discussed. The Commission's decisions weigh the biologically based recommendations and social considerations provided by FWP, as well as inputs made by an informed public to make the best decisions they can. The public can readily obtain a sense of the Commission's business by listening-in online at fwp.mt.gov and navigating to Commission.

Commissioners Stuker and Aldrich with the Region 2 Citizens Advisory Committee in 2017.

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Below: FWP biologists capturing bighorn sheep in Petty Creek in 2016. Photo credit: Steve Woodruff.

Above: FWP Biologist Bob Henderson supplementing the mountain goat population north of Lincoln on January 10, 2005.

Below: FWP Biologists Rebecca Mowry and Liz Bradley radio-collaring a mule deer doe in the Bitterroot in 2015. Photo credit: Laura Lundquist.

Below: FWP Research Biologist Kelly Proffitt releasing a radioed elk calf in the Upper Bitterroot to investigate calf mortality.

Professional Service

The Department

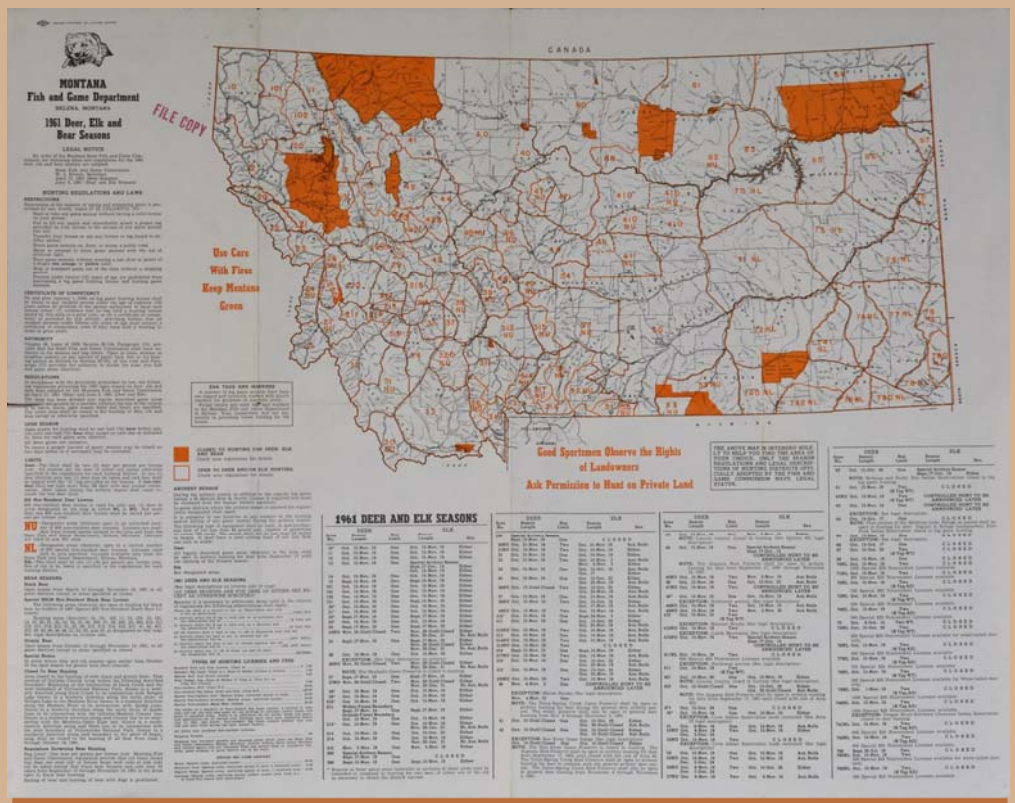
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) is the state wildlife agency, supplying biological expertise and science-based recommendations for hunting seasons. As managers of a public trust resource, FWP charges its staff with developing a sense for the public's interests and desires as well as for the needs of wildlife. In this way, FWP strives to develop hunting season proposals that provide for the public's enjoyment of wildlife and minimize human-wildlife conflicts while also conserving the resource for future generations.

Conserving the wildlife resource is FWP's bottom line. Toward that end, FWP welcomes the accountability that public review provides. Simply put, the more eyes and minds the better. To a large extent the public involvement process by which Montana sets its hunting seasons is a series of stakeholders meetings and interactions, allowing the public an opportunity to contribute its breadth of insights and experiences to the challenge of conserving and managing our wildlife. We hope to leave no stone unturned as we try to do this well.

Resource conservation is challenging enough, but beyond that FWP is challenged with providing hunting opportunities that satisfy its hunting public. The hunting regulations booklet is perhaps the best possible representation of Montanans' values toward hunting and of the kinds of hunting experiences that make up the Montana hunting legacy. The regulations themselves are an evolution across decades of proposals, debates, decisions, issues and adaptations. To some of us who do this for a living, the regulations represent a living, evolving body of work. To check the pulse of what Montanans want from their hunting seasons, a person is well served to begin with the current hunting regulations. They are a long-evolved product.

And yet, there are always changes because the resource and the environment are ever-changing.

Species plans are another repository that capture Montanans' preferences and guidance pertaining to conservation and hunting. Species plans such as the Elk Management Plan, Bighorn Sheep Conservation Strategy, Adaptive Harvest Management for Mule Deer and other foundational documents provide guidance and a depth of biological and social information, which form the underpinnings of hunting season proposals for years or decades thereafter. Plans like these contain a depth and breadth of information that might otherwise need to be repeated in hunting season justifications, year after year. Plans form a foundation that need not be rebuilt during every biennial season-setting process, which helps streamline the process and direct it toward new and emerging issues.



Early evolution: The 1961 Deer, Elk and Bear Seasons for Montana.

Your FWP wildlife biologists, enforcement officers and other FWP staff are a resource for you throughout the year, and you'll find contact information for Region 2 Wildlife staff on the inside front cover of the Quarterly.

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Scoping is Open Online Until September 24, 2017

Scoping is not a word that most of us use in normal conversation and it's a relatively new addition to the biennial season-setting process. Scoping is simply an opportunity for citizens to inform FWP and the Commission before FWP has formally submitted its hunting season proposals. The opportunity for scoping is offered partly in response to the perception that it's onerous for the public to effect big changes in hunting season proposals after FWP has presented them to the Commission and after the Commission has adopted them as tentative proposals for public review. And, it's difficult as a practical matter for the public to offer new proposals at that time, if for no other reason than the tight timeframe for approving and printing the final regulations.

Scoping is the public's window into the biennial season setting process before any real or implied decisions have been made. It addresses a desire expressed by organized groups in particular to obtain access to the process as early in the process as possible.

Scoping is an opportunity for the public to shape FWP's priorities at the start of the season-setting process. Left to its own devices, FWP might make a priority of simplifying regulations, for example, while some groups might rather see FWP take on issues that would add regulations complexity. Scoping allows the public a formally solicited voice in framing the process and quite likely the outcomes ahead.

Scoping is a formal process, which asks the public to submit input online. The online option provides FWP with an efficient tool for compiling and distributing scoping comments among its managers and biologists across the state, as well as to Commissioners. Comments submitted in letters, by phone or in person during the scoping period are always welcome.

To participate in the 2017 scoping period, complete a short survey and provide your ideas now through September 24 at 5p.m. online at fwp.mt.gov by following the link to "2018-19 Hunting Seasons-Public Scoping."

Organizations

Sporting Groups

Montana's Grassroots Hunting Groups boast a long history of advocacy and service for wildlife and hunters. Their role, along with other citizen groups, has been an indispensable part of Montana's history of wildlife restoration and its legacy for the future.

Organizations such as these play an important role in the season-setting process. Positions brought forward to FWP and the Commission by well respected, organized groups carry the weight of large memberships. Membership and participation in an organization is one way for an individual to gain influence in the season-setting process, especially for a person who is not inclined to participate in the process as an individual.

While numbers of people in support or opposition are considered, the season-setting process is not a matter of polling or voting. Rather, it is the merit of the idea and the reasoned argument that carries the day in the eyes of FWP and the Commission. As a result, many individuals are effective contributors to the season-setting process, often by way of their clear vision and personal experiences in the outdoors. Organizations have the advantage of many minds to draw from when crafting position statements on issues pertaining to hunting seasons, as well as a long history and background in the issues at hand.

FWP partners with the Ravalli County Fish and Wildlife Association, Montana Wild Sheep Foundation, Montana Bowhunters Association, houndsmen and others on projects ranging from an information kiosk dedicated to the memory of Duncan Gilchrist (above) to a field response to a pneumonia outbreak in bighorn sheep (below).

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FWP Justification Form for Hunting Season Proposals

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS

HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Species:

Region:

Hunting District:

Year:

Describe the proposed season / quotas changes and provide a summary of prior history (i.e., prior history of permits, season types, etc.).

What is the objective of this proposed change? This could be a specific harvest amount or resulting population level or number of game damage complaints, etc.

How will the success of this proposal be measured? This could be annual game or harvest surveys, game damage complaints, etc.

What is the current population's status in relation to the management objectives? (i.e., state management objectives from management plan if applicable; provide current and prior years of population survey, harvest, or other pertinent information).

Provide information related to any weather/habitat factors, public or private land use or resident and nonresident hunting opportunity that have relevance to this change (i.e., habitat security, hunter access, vegetation surveys, weather index, snow conditions, and temperature / precipitation information).

Briefly describe the contacts you have made with individual sportsmen or landowners, public groups or organizations regarding this proposal and indicate their comments (both pro and con).

Submitted by:

Date:

Approved: _____

Regional Supervisor / Date

Disapproved / Modified by: _____

Name / Date

Reason for Modification:

Stewards of the Land

Landowners

Landowners are the focus of much of FWP's efforts year-round. Landowners support the wildlife, often on private properties—often on agricultural lands—that the public enjoys and accepts as its rightful inheritance. And, let's not perpetuate the distinction that we sometimes hear made between landowners and the public, as if somehow landowners don't share in the public's wildlife inheritance. It is in the public's best interest that FWP work to help landowners make room for wildlife on their properties, and to help landowners reduce the economic losses caused by wildlife damage to crops, fences and other improvements.

Hunting seasons have a material effect on landowners, and the greatest effect may be felt by the most successful land stewards—those who provide diverse and productive habitats. Access for hunting on private lands is a privilege earned, not a right for the taking. When FWP talks with landowners, we're hearing increasing concerns about hunters who don't follow the rules and who don't behave respectfully. They find trash left behind, gates left open and other evidence of disrespect that cause longtime cooperating landowners to think twice about sharing their land in the hunting season.

FWP works diligently to broker access agreements of all kinds with landowners on behalf of hunters. FWP's Block Management Program is perhaps the best known product of those efforts, though many other forms of access agreements exist. However, FWP and landowners need hunters' help. There is no substitute for hunters earning their way with landowners and for landowners giving hunters a chance. Some landowners around the state are volunteering their time and collaborating now to develop and administer an educational program for hunters who want to learn more about what landowners ask of them when hunting private land.

Sportsmen and women working with landowners on a fencing project in the Deer Lodge Valley.

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Dec. 7-8, 2017: Commission meets in Helena

Pictured: FWP and citizens participating in a Commission meeting by way of video conferencing at the FWP Region 2 office in Missoula. Video conferencing will be available to the public at all FWP regional offices on Dec. 7-8, which will allow the public to participate and provide oral comments to the Commission.

Providing Testimony

Citizen Participation

Testifying before the Montana Fish & Wildlife Commission is an honor felt by citizens and FWP professionals alike. The Commissioners are people just like you and me, but many of us at FWP would confess that testifying before the Commission is the one public speaking experience most likely to produce a lump in the throat and a quiver in the voice. For us, it's the institution that is the Commission. It's the place, the honor and the privilege of standing and representing before that body. With the benefit of that sometimes difficult experience, we can offer some advice for citizens who would like to participate.

First, it's important to prepare your remarks. Speaking extemporaneously should be left to those few individuals who possess that gift. Write your testimony down or at least make detailed notes for your reference while speaking. This will ensure that you make the points that you came to the Commission to make, and it will allow you to speak immediately to the point, rather than rambling at first to get your legs under you. Believe me, we've all learned these things the hard way.

FWP Bureau Chief, John Vore, testifying before the Commission at the Montana Wild Center in Helena.

Second, be brief and to the point. Distill your testimony to the one or two main points that you want to convey. By being brief you will spare yourself the feeling of being rushed, and you will become more effective. Never begin by saying, "I'll be brief," because that always seems to be a promise that no one can keep, once those words have been spoken.

Third, be true. Speak from your own set of values and your own experiences; you are absolutely expert on the things you have thought and seen for yourself. Avoid calling out others who have testified before you; they are entitled to their opinions as are we all.

You will be asked to give your name as you begin your testimony, and speak into the microphone so that your testimony can be recorded and heard across the video conferencing system around the state.

Finally, consider approaching the matter of testifying before the Commission as an investment in a long-term relationship. The right and privilege of testimony can become an efficient and effective means of participating and influencing the season-setting process as you earn credibility with the Commission over a period of months and years. The Commission will come to recognize your values and your expertise over time, and will anticipate these, as will FWP as it makes its recommendations.

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December-January: Public Comment Period

Local Public Meetings

January is meeting month for FWP wildlife biologists around the state. In the first 3 weeks of January, FWP biologists and staff in Region 2 visit a different community each evening, four evenings per week. Typically public meetings are held in Hamilton, Darby, Superior, Potomac, Helmville, Lincoln, Seeley Lake, Drummond, Deer Lodge, Anaconda, Philipsburg and Missoula. The format is relaxed and as conversational as the size of the crowd allows.

The meetings begin with the local FWP wildlife biologist presenting his or her tentative proposals, as adopted by the Commission for the purposes of public review. Following this introduction FWP asks for responses from the people in attendance and staff members take careful notes for the record. Depending on the issue and the insights offered by the people in attendance, FWP and interested parties will negotiate possible adjustments to the tentative proposals on the spot to better match local needs. Adjustments in the tentative proposals will be reviewed by FWP and ultimately by the Commission at its February meeting for possible approval as a final hunting season.

FWP wildlife biologist Scott Eggeman leads a public meeting in Seeley Lake in January 2016.

In other instances, public comments will be contemplated and saved for future reference when considering hunting seasons in a following biennium. It is a fact that no comments are ignored or lost; although they might not be reflected in the next hunting seasons, many FWP proposals are prompted by comments received in previous season-setting processes over several years' time. When FWP completes its community meetings in January, each region will submit a summary of public comments for the Commission to consider in its decision making process.

The public review period between the December and February Commission meetings is also a time for reacting to hunting season proposals in writing online on FWP's website. Online comments have the advantage of being submitted in the exact words of the commenter, and are readily shared verbatim within FWP and among Commission members across the state. Online comments are a great way to ensure that your remarks are not accidentally misrepresented in translation.

Formal letters to FWP and the Commission are also welcomed and can be impactful. People who take the time and make the effort to write from the heart and from personal experience are a tremendous help as we all grapple with the challenge of making the best sense of situations pertaining to hunting seasons and the wildlife resource. Letters that rang true over the years stick with us throughout long careers of working for wildlife and for the public.

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Decisions

The Finals

The February Commission Meeting brings all of the process inputs to bear on decisions that will define hunting seasons for the next two years. It is a time for parties invested in particular proposals and desired outcomes to attend and participate. Adjustments coming out of the local public meetings, as well as the full body of oral and written comments will be considered by the Commission for the first time, and transparently so. While most season proposals are well supported and emerge from the season-setting process with every expectation of approval, there are always a few circumstances in a few hunting districts where the details of the final hunting regulations are hammered out on the floor between the Commission, FWP staff, and the public in attendance. The process, in total, is at once measured, systematic, informed and somewhat fluid, as one would hope for a responsive and adaptive process to be. When the gavel falls in February, the hunting seasons for the coming biennium are set.

FWP Region 2 Access Coordinator Kendra McKlosky posting a Block Management Area with the Montana Bowhunters Association Youth Camp in August 2017.

How can I be most effective would be a fair question from someone new to the season-setting process, and the answer depends mostly on you—your individual interests and traits, your strengths and weaknesses. The process can seem overwhelming, but it is overwhelming only in the breadth of opportunities for you to enter and engage.
It is not necessary for you to follow its every step. You are most welcome to do so, as some citizens and organizations do. But, the process allows you to influence the outcome if you would like to participate selectively.

The key, it seems to us, is for everyone to become informed of FWP's proposals, either while on the agenda preceding the December Commission meeting or as adopted as tentative proposals for public review after the December Commission meeting. Then provide comment—online if you prefer, at local public meetings of your choice, or in letters written to the Commission.

Some people develop effective working relationships with their local FWP wildlife biologists over the course of the year, and sometimes across many years. These extra eyes and ears in the field and in communities are invaluable to biologists as they try to develop the best possible understanding of the wildlife and people in their areas. People who develop such relationships with their local FWP staff will find that hunting season recommendations from their biologist will reflect their inputs, at least in part.

Montana is a growing state, but Montana remains small. It's still a place where one person speaking one time to another person, thoughtfully, can make a lasting difference. We encourage you to reach out, if only once or twice, and give us the chance to understand.

It might turn into more.