



**Region 5 CAC Meeting
June 11, 2018**

CAC Members: Lee Brunckhorst, Lee Deming, Jim Ballard, Bill Milton, Steve Regele, JW Westman, Chris Fleck
FWP Staff: Barb Beck, Dianne Stiff, Bob Gibson, Ken Frazer, Harold Guse, Ray Mulé, Ashley Taylor, Doug Habermann

Absent CAC Members: Kayan Ostavar, Lanie White, David Russell, Josh McQuillan, Susan Gilbertz

Welcome/Introductions/Review Agenda – Bob Gibson

Elk Management – Ashley Taylor & Ray Mulé

2005 Elk Plan:

- elk history in Montana
- hunter harvest and hunter distribution
- regulation types and how it affects harvest
- hunting access
- estimating elk population parameters
- disease – brucellosis and CWD
- elk habitat
- predators
- human dimensions, economics and commerce
- statewide objectives
- elk management unit (EMU) objectives

Establishing EMU Objectives:

- Based on elk herds that have a history of long term trend data (about 2004)
- Discussions with landowners about when elk game damage became excessive and elk population numbers
- Input from sports persons, public land managers like BLM and FS, community working groups and the general public
- In 2004 objectives were put together and posed to the public at 54 season setting meetings across the state; shown to 18 sports persons groups; 7 working groups
- Received comments from 45 individual sports persons; 23 outfitters; 4 landowners who were also outfitters; 288 landowners who had land in elk habitat

Six Statewide Objectives in Elk Plan:

- Related to population management, habitat, recreation, access, game damage, and population monitoring

Statewide Objectives:

- Elk population management objective
 - R5 most of our elk numbers are over objective – liberalized hunting regulations to include shoulder seasons (implemented to try to reduce elk population numbers)
- Elk habitat objective
 - Promote conservation and improvement of habitats that support the state's elk population
 - R5 has Haymaker WMA north of Two Dot and Silver Run WMA by Red Lodge – purchased to provide elk winter range with less conflict to private land
 - Conservation easements with grazing systems
 - Other FWP access programs

Game Damage Objectives:

- Manage elk populations at levels commensurate with other land uses and to the extent possible to prevent game damage from occurring

- Where damage does occur on standing or stored agricultural crops, we try to implement timely and effective actions to provide relief to landowners that meet the qualifications outlined in the game damage policy (those who allow public hunting)
- Region 5 – liberalized elk hunting season with shoulder seasons to try to decrease the elk populations which should decrease our elk game damage complaints
- New game damage database streamlined the internal process for getting game damage assistance approved for the landowner

Access Objective:

- Maintain or improve public hunting access so hunting is an effective management tool that will maintain elk populations below levels causing damage to their habitat or excessive economic harm to landowners that allow public hunting
- Enhancing existing access programs and developing community working groups is a priority for FWP
- For areas where elk security problems exist, promote access management that will reduce excessive harvest or movement of elk from public to private lands
- Region 5 field staff (game wardens and biologists) are working to improve access for public hunters to elk wherever possible through landowner contacts and developing relationships
- Region 5 field staff share the easement option like a conservation easement on a ranch or easement program for roadway easements through private land to public land
- Region 5 field staff give presentations to community groups and working groups

Elk Recreation Objective:

- Provide for a diverse elk hunting opportunity within as much as possible a five-week general season and a six-week archery season
- Provide for quality viewing experiences and general enjoyment of elk by the public
- Region 5 elk hunting regulations that range from districts that provide limited permits for bulls to districts with either sex elk on the general elk license
- Region 5 antlerless harvest is fairly liberal with elk B licenses valid throughout the entire region and the ability to take two elk using a B license and general license

Population Monitoring Objective:

- Enhance elk population monitoring to provide more accuracy and reliability in detecting population changes that require an adaptive regulation change to maintain population objectives
- Current Region 5 improvement monitoring techniques
 - Winter Surveys – occur late December until mid-April when elk are concentrated on winter ranges
 - Annual and biennial surveys
 - When biologists fly elk surveys, they are counting the total number of elk and then classify those to cow, calf, spike, or adult bull
 - Large groups can be difficult to classify, so try to pick out the spikes and bulls and then use the cow:calf ratio from the rest of the trend area to estimate what's in that group
- Calf Recruitment
 - When classifying biologists look at calves per 100 cows
 - Estimations through some of Kelly Proffitt's work, FWP's elk research biologist, show calf survival after February is fairly high (90-95%)
 - Taking calves per 100 cows, 40% of those calves are bulls and 60% are cows
- Bull Classification
 - Number of bulls per 100 cows
 - Use this to monitor bull survival after the hunting season and project expected number of bulls for the next hunting season
 - Look at trends in those ratios to evaluate the harvest rates
 - Management Goals - most liberal would be maximum sustained harvest (either sex elk on your general license); other areas where we have diverse older bull structure (limited permits); anywhere in between is the other management style
- Region 5 Check Stations
 - Billings, Laurel, Columbus, Big Timber and Lavina – run every weekend in the general season
 - Collect animal sex, age and antler characteristics
 - Collect general hunting location information
 - Determine relative change among years
 - Age structure check of populations

- Harvest Surveys
 - Phone surveys for elk start after February 15
 - Results are received the end of May
 - Harvest information is used to compare among years: by hunting district, license/permit type, cow/calf/spike/adult bull, resident/nonresident and total harvest, and by time periods (early shoulder season, archery, general or late shoulder season)
- Hunting Districts
 - Based on deer/elk herd movements with regional boundaries
 - Boundaries easily recognized on the ground – use roads, highways, rivers, creeks, significant landmarks that do not change often
 - Region 5 districts are kept large enough for hunters to find the animals if they move, but also small enough to be responsive to population fluctuations
- Region 5 Elk Populations Trends
 - Region 5 elk harvest from 1984-2017 – Last couple of years we've had a significant increase in elk harvest; we harvested just under 3,000 elk this last year; 58% of Region 5's harvest was antlerless
 - Region 5 elk B license harvest 2012-2017- Same kind of trends with increase of elk harvest on the B license; we harvested just under 600 elk on the B license this last year

Questions/Answer Session with CAC Members and Staff included:

- Total elk overall in Region 5; hunter access; tolerance; harbored elk; elk hunters decreasing; block management; landowners who like elk; biologists and landowners have a conversation; private property rights; season structure; political; no solution; landowner forums; education; disease; absentee landowners; changing demographics.

CAC Members Observations and Input On All Topics – CAC Members

Lee Deming – The shoulder seasons are very popular amongst people he talks to; also popular is the aggressive stance FWP takes with the wolf harvest; AIS is terrifying to some people he knows.

Steve Regele – FWP is conducting bird surveys with Jim Hansen, Megan O'Reilly and others. Anyone who may be interested in volunteering with great grey and boreal owl surveys, greater shorthorn lizard surveys, harlequin duck surveys, chimney swift surveys, contact Megan. These carefully written surveys are located on the FWP website. Steve encouraged increasing environmental and education efforts; archery and hunter safety – people say how valuable and important these programs are and how much they get out of those things; keep enhancing access for nongame and game or just for hiking; people are really concerned about what's happening to habitat; climate change is a big deal; shifts in habitat and wildlife populations; keep the nongame emphasis in of itself not for itself, focus on a nongame emphasis for a game emphasis; I186 is a big deal; and the mussel presentations and information is are paying off with public awareness.

Bill Milton – Biologists having good communication skills with landowners is critical. June 26 in Winnett, the CMR working group is meeting to go over a major update on sage grouse.

Chris Fleck – Concerns about the \$15 AIS fee as its related to nonresidents. EQC is reviewing AIS funding and will bring some solutions to the next legislature for the next biennium.

Jim Ballard – In his neighborhood out of Lavina, they are going from one weather related disaster to another. Hasn't seen much for upland or migratory birds on his place. This winter took its toll on the wildlife. Unofficially they recorded 135 inches of snow on his place.

JW Westman – Continue to maintain pressure on FWP to keep the shoulder season information current and make sure that information is published and not just put on the shelf to collect dust because it was based on criteria. Some of those elk management units are successful and some are not. Folks are talking about I186 which is about reclamation and mining.

Lee Brunkhorst – Most of his constituents really like the shoulder seasons.

Current Hot Topics – R-5 Managers

Ken Frazer:

- Natural Resource Damage Program (NRDP) – Ken reviewed the background to this program. FWP is working with the Yellowstone River Parks Association (YRPA) on planning for a new fishing access site (Blue Creek FAS) right across from Riverfront Park on the Yellowstone River. YRPA purchased the property and FWP will put in a boat ramp, parking and latrine. NRDP is running the contract and hope to have a fishing access site in place by fall. Buffalo Mirage FAS will have some road work done with an old bridge to be replaced. Other potential sites are either being worked on or looked at also.
- Bighorn River - High water with fisheries crew marking fish two weeks ago and now conducting their recapture at 13,000 cfs. Finding plenty of trout with fish that are skinny and those in great condition.

Ray Mulé:

- Chronic Wasting Disease (what we learned, looking ahead): In Carbon County last fall the final was out of 400 MD 8 were positive; out of 215 WT 2 were positive; 2% for MD and 1% for WT. Just looking only at HD 510, the positive percentage ramps up to 10% which impacts management actions and changes in season. We will lower deer densities to keep the disease prevalence rates down. We'll propose to the Commission to increase B licenses and eliminate the buck only permit going to an either sex season for deer. This fall testing will continue in the CWD positive zone. Any deer harvested in that zone will be sampled at the Laurel check station and/or our FWP headquarters in Billings. CWD tests on deer taken outside of that positive zone in Region 5 will be the responsibility of the sportsman to take their own sample and submit to the Colorado lab. The surveillance effort is moving to Region 4 and 6 this fall with 2020 in Region 7, southeastern Montana and then back to Region 5 in 2021.

Doug Haberman:

- Parks in Focus – Governor appointed group of twelve folks across the state. This is a one-year commission to look at three items: developing diversified revenue streams, growing strategic partnerships, and building an engaged constituency. Hope to invite our local representative, Scott Brown, to one of our CAC meetings.
- Hell Creek – The road improvement is just about complete with \$2 million of Parks money going to Garfield County for the project. In terms of our involvement with Hell Creek, there's a meeting with the Corps later this summer. Our Parks Board recommended that we consider not renewing our lease with the Corps, but it is looking like we will be there in the foreseeable future. Currently we have an acting manager and will fill the permanent manager position next April. The ranger is temporary this year.

Harold Guse:

- AIS – Funding will be addressed at the upcoming 2019 legislature. The AIS bureau within fisheries is a stand-alone centralized bureau that hires seasonal employees to work the FWP boat inspection stations. They work with conservation districts and a couple different tribes who are involved in running different check stations around the state. Enforcement's role at check stations is to make sure people stop, plus for boats on the water to make sure boaters have their AIS boat inspection.
- PR funding – Harold hasn't seen the overall number comparisons from past years yet, but pretty sure the public contact numbers with Enforcement is down quite a bit. Fisheries has been hit hard because that is the season where the PR has taken wardens away from their standard fisheries duties which include checking people for their fishing license and fishing access site usage. Last year in Region 5 wardens took on the CWD work for the region.

Bob Gibson:

- Regulation simplification – Bob is participating in a working group who is looking at FWP hunting regulation simplification. Bob shared the first draft of ideas. One proposal is to group up some of the really similar hunting districts instead of printing the same thing several times. Region 1 or 2 are much more complex, but those can still be pared down to one or two pages as well. There's discussion of running the season setting meetings earlier (November and December) in order to complete the regulations earlier, plus print just one book. The legal division is currently going through the definitions in the front of the book. Anyone with specific ideas on simplification of the regulations formatting, let Bob know. This working group is a quarter of the way into the process with their report to be completed by the end of this year.

Wrap-up – Bob Gibson will send an e-mail out regarding a September meeting time frame for the next CAC meeting that will include potential topics.