

Access Plus Program

Intent: The intent of the program would be to incentivize landowners to allow public hunting by addressing their major concerns that prevent them from allowing public access ([address quality access to harvest](#) and [improve stakeholder relationships](#)). This program would produce a pool of hunters that have an elevated skill set and intimate knowledge of landowner operations and concerns through required hunter training. This program would be intended to result in a net-zero impact to landowners and the program would diverge from the current impact-based payments based on hunter use days. (Landowners often allow free hunting when they connect with a hunter, get to know them and have confidence in their skills and abilities, replication of this confidence would be the goal of the program. The intent would be no payment for use days made to a landowner using block management funds.

Justification: Many landowners who do not allow public hunting are not opposed to people hunting their land. However, the current Type 1 and Type 2 Block Management programs that are currently available either do not properly address the concerns they may have when considering opening their land to the public or do not provide enough financial incentive to deal with the headache. Additionally, this program would have guardrails established through improved hunter skills and abilities in hopes to regain the trust of a landowner who used to allow hunting but has had a bad experience that made them decide to no longer allow public hunting. This program may also entice landowners who are harboring elk to allow some public hunting from a pool of individuals that have additional training and education.

Description:

FWP should submit this recommendation to the legislative sportsman caucus or an oversight committee made up of landowners, hunters and other stakeholders to oversee the creation of the program for feedback and consideration prior to implementation.

The program should initially be tested as a pilot project to decide if large scale implementation should be pursued. (MPG Ranch has volunteered to act as one pilot location this fall, Contact Craig Jourdonnais of One Montana). The program would be designed around accounting for the private landowners' interest/concerns first and foremost while ensuring access agreements are biologically sound. The program would be intended to keep the good of past Block Programs and get rid of the things that are not working well and implement new ideas to improve efficiency.

Funding:

- Costs associated with the development, implementation and hunter training for the program would be intended to be self-funded through the use of an elective license fee similar to the warm water fish stamp or bow hunter stamp.
- (If excess block management funds could be used for development, implementation and hunter training and this could be free to hunters that would be preferred)

Content and Course Development:

- It is recognized that it is not realistic to expect FWP produce the content required for this program.
- FWP would solicit a request for proposal (RFP) for a content development company to assist the department in reviewing and compiling prior content from Montana and other state departments of fish and game agencies as well as third party sources, modifying existing content and producing new content to be used for training and implementation of the program. (It is recognized that between Montana FWP, other state departments of fish and game, One Montana, Ravalli County Fish and Wildlife association and others that nearly all framework and content has been previously thought out and produced. That content just needs to be compiled and tailor fit to Montana)
- During the content development process, a group of landowners would be consulted, and proposed content would be reviewed for majority consent ensuring widespread support from the landowner community. The landowners would ensure the major issues and top complaints with allowing public hunting were clearly articulated and addressed in the content.

Training:

- Base Training: Hunters who elect to participate in the program would be required to take online or in person training. The training would be an in-depth continuation of Montana's hunter education course. The course would focus on hunter ethics and landowner relations. (The course could be similar to the Hunter-Landowner Stewardship Project currently offered by FWP but expanded, or training curriculum offered by other states or private groups like One Montana). Successful completion of the base training would allow a hunter to participate in the program.

Supplemental Training

- Marksmanship and the ability to harvest game ethically can be a key landowner concern. If required by the landowner an additional field course certification could be required by the landowner in which hunters would receive marksmanship training and would be required to demonstrate proficiency with their weapon of choice. Blood tracking and animal recovery could be another element to this certification.
- Landowner Specific Training: One of the major landowner complaints is the time it takes to explain their rules to hunters and that hunters pester them at inopportune times. To reduce the burden felt by landowners to explain their rules to hunters a private videography company could be hired to interview each participating landowner and record their rules, do's and do not's. This video would include a google earth or similar fly through with property boundaries so there was no question on where limits of the property extended and where they could and could not park and what roads were available for driving down. The intent would be that they could eliminate the time commitment dedicated to explaining themselves in person to hunters.

Additional Notes

- When practical trainings should be made available through the new FWP app. The basic training and landowner specific videos should be available for download through the app so they could be referenced in the field.
- Reciprocity should be granted for graduates of vetted programs such as the "Master Hunter Program" or "Next Level Hunting Camp"

Limitations/Unintended Consequences:

Landowners participating in Type 1 or Type 2 Block Management may opt to drop out and sign up for the Type 3 system.

Implementation:

- Landowners who would like to participate in the program would meet with FWP biologists (and possibly hunters) to assess the quality of the property, verify species availability, and determine what a reasonable level of hunting pressure the property could sustain. The property would then be graded or ranked for consideration by interested hunters. The landowner could reduce access from recommended levels, but would be encouraged to not allow access beyond recommended levels to ensure a quality experience was maintained. For properties experiencing depredation hunter numbers could be adjusted or time slots could be set aside for targeted hunts aimed at herd reduction.
- Hunters would be selected via randomized draw to eliminate complaints associated with preferential selections with the Type II program.
- The Type 3 program would be a privilege and would have a one strike and you're out for life policy. Any hunter who received a complaint against them that could be substantiated would never be allowed to participate in the program again.
- An interactive dashboard should be created in which a landowner would be able to manage hunters (or this could be the responsibility of FWP if a landowner preferred to be hands off), view a calendar, see who is signed up for hunting, see hunter vehicle descriptions and communicate to hunters through the FWP app (i.e. my cows got out last night and are x field, that field it currently closed to hunting, or it rained last night walk in only hunting today). Landowners would have access to an interactive calendar where they could block out dates or set aside dates for personal use or for return hunters that they have built a relationship with over the years.
- Each hunter would be required to check in/check out of their property using the FWP app if requested by the landowner to keep track of hunters and determine who might be responsible if property damages are experienced.
- Through the app the hunter should be able to upload documentation required by the landowner (i.e. proof of receipt from a carwash before entering their property).
- Hunters would be required to report their harvest and evaluate the property in terms of the overall quality of their hunting opportunity, game abundance, habitat quality, etc.

Compensation:

- The goal of the program would be to encourage no cost hunting though giving landowners confidence the pool of hunters eligible to hunt their land have an elevated skill set and are respectful, courteous and are minimally impactful to their land.
- Recognizing not all landowners will allow free hunting, landowners would be allowed to establish their own use fees based on a cost per day use of their property. The hunter would be made aware of fees prior to applying for the property and they could elect to participate if they so choose. Fee's established by the landowner would be paid directly by the individual hunter (the app could be used for transfer of funds) and would not be paid for through block management funds. No cap would be placed on what a landowner could charge to hunt their property.
- Exchange of services: in lieu of cash payment there should be the ability for a hunter to offer up their services or specialized skills in exchange for hunting and likewise a landowner should be able to post a need that they would like to have a hunter help with. This exchange could happen through the dashboard. Hunters that don't perform or landowners with unrealistic expectations would be prevented from participating in this portion of the program.

Note: The landowner compensation component of this program will require the most scrutiny of this proposal. An equitable compensation framework needs to be established so the hunter feels like they are being treated fairly and the landowner feels like they are being properly compensated for granting access.

People/Organizations:

- Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks Staff
- Hunters
- Private Content Development Company
- Possible Legislative Action Required
- Private Landowners

Timeline:

Goal: Small volunteer test project fall 2022, larger implementation Fall 2023 unless legislative action is required, then implementation would be the season after the next legislative session.

FWP Authority to Take Action:

Need to confirm if this would require legislative action depending on how it would be funded.

Feasibility of Implementation:

Covered under Description.