

**MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS**  
**HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

**Species: Elk**  
**Region: 2**  
**Hunting District: 201**  
**Year: 2024**

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

Remove restriction for Elk B-license 201-01 that makes it "*Not valid east of HWY 93*".

During the 2021 biennial season setting we originally proposed creating the 201-01 B-license without this restriction. There was some concern from sportsmen at that time because the herd was below objective, and we responded by including the restriction. Since then, the herd has been steadily growing and we are readjusting the population objective. This herd has a history of growing quickly and can be hard to manage at larger numbers, so we think it is important to offer some more harvest opportunity to ensure we keep this herd within objective and at a manageable level. This is a challenging area to achieve harvest, so we are not very concerned about overharvest.

- 2. 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.**

The objectives of this proposed change are to simplify hunting regulations by removing a portion restriction of a B-license, maintain the population within objective, minimize game damage complaints, maintain landowner tolerance of elk, and reduce risk of elk habituation in the urban interface. Allowing the use of the 201-01 without a portion restriction during the general season could be helpful in keeping the population from continuing an upward trajectory, and would likely target the non-migratory Evaro herd, which are more problematic.

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

The success of this proposal will be measured by annual spring green-up survey counts and whether the counts stay within the objective range. We will also measure success by whether game damage complaints and urban conflict remain low. We will be closely monitoring the harvest in the North Hills/Evaro herds through communicating with private landowners as well as annual hunter harvest surveys.

- 4. 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).**

The new proposed population objective in the new Elk Plan for the North Hills is for winter aerial survey counts between 170-250 elk. The North Hills (migratory) and Evaro (non-migratory) herds typically join up on the North Hills winter range. There were 225 elk counted in spring 2023 (Figure 1). This combined herd is the largest herd wintering in the Missoula Valley and past experience has shown they can grow very quickly. When the herd was 300+ there were numerous management problems including game damage and concern with habituation.

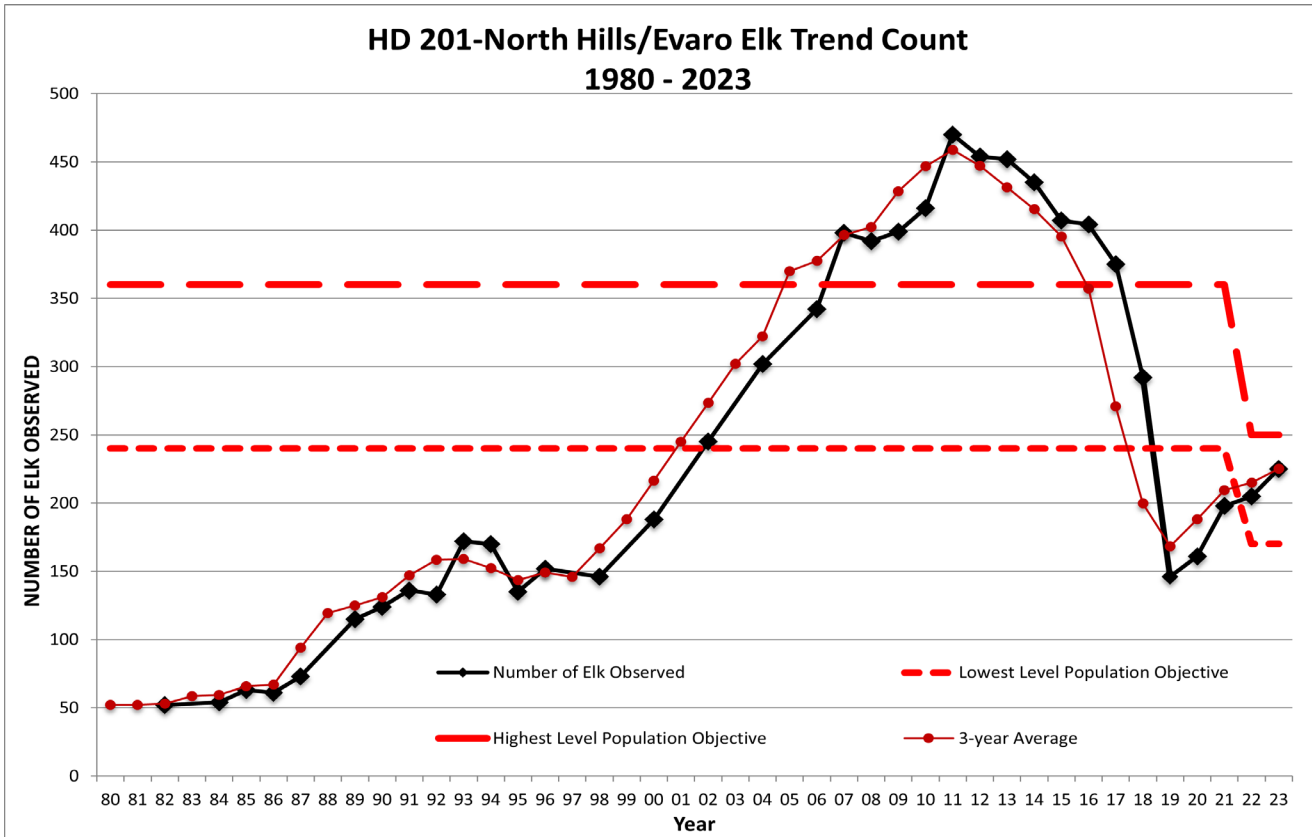


Figure 1

**5. 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).**

Most harvest on the North Hills/Evaro herd has historically occurred in a late season game damage hunt as the North Hills herd (larger of the 2 herds) are usually not down on the winter range during the general season and access is controlled by private landowners. Any harvest during the general season is more likely to target the Evaro herd which is non-migratory and more problematic but harvest is difficult to achieve in this area during the general season.

**6. 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).**

We have a long history of working with landowners in the North Hills to achieve elk management goals and for many years held annual meetings with the North Hills Elk Working Group. When the population dropped in 2017-18 there was no further need to hold these meetings because conflict essentially stopped and we no longer had to find creative solutions to increase harvest. We are currently working on scoping this proposal.

Submitted by: Ryan Klimstra  
 Date: July 21, 2023  
 Approved: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Regional Supervisor / Date

Disapproved / Modified by: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Name / Date

Reason for Modification:

**MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS**  
**HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

**Species: Elk**  
**Region: 2**  
**Hunting District: 204**  
**Year: 2024**

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

Add a general license antlerless opportunity to the north portion (Eight Mile-North) of HD204, private land only, good from the start of rifle season to January 8 AND remove late season opportunity on the 262-01 license from the rest of HD204.

Late season opportunities in HD204 have always been restricted to private land only, with a January 8 end date beginning in 2022, but they were achieved only through the OTC 262-01 B-license. General license antlerless opportunity has, for at least a decade, been limited to archery season and youth/PTHFV rifle opportunity. See Question #5 for a more thorough explanation of the history of elk management in this area.

- 2. 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.**

The objective of this proposed change is to achieve a level of antlerless harvest to bring the north-HD204 portion down to the population objective (the population objective proposed in the upcoming revised Elk Management Plan). Populations elsewhere in the Sapphire Elk Management Unit (which includes HDs 204 and 261) are within or below objective, and late season opportunities should be removed.

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

The success of this proposal will primarily be measured through a combination of harvest data and aerial survey data. Specifically, the elk population in the north portion of HD204 (Eight-Mile and all other areas to the north) should decline toward its population objective of 500 elk (400-600). The population should also increase or stabilize in the remainder of HD204 (Eight-Mile to Burnt-Fork) with late season opportunities removed.

Most of the anticipated harvest is likely to occur on and around MPG Ranch between Florence and Lolo. This proposal is intended to increase harvest on and around that property specifically, as the majority of the elk reside there. MPG Ranch keeps meticulous harvest data records which they share with FWP, and we will also evaluate the success of this proposal by assessing harvest trends on the ranch. MPG Ranch also monitors the "severe" (according to them) habitat degradation occurring on their rangelands due to the abundant elk, and we expect this monitoring to continue, and to be shared with FWP.

- 4. 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).**

The elk population in this northernmost portion of HD204 has been problematic for the last decade. Prior to the 2023 Elk Management Plan revision, the population objective for HD204 was 700 elk; this was consistently exceeded. Regulations intended to reduce this population were also valid elsewhere in the HD, potentially affecting elk herds that were not causing problems with game damage and habitat degradation.

The revised Elk Management Plan proposes breaking up HDs 204 and 261 into 3 portions (the middle portion encompassing parts of both HDs) to better target problematic elk herds while reducing pressure on other herds. For the north portion of HD204, the proposed population objective is 500 (range 400-600) elk. The most recent survey in spring 2023 yielded a total of 723 elk in this portion, with just 659 elk in the remaining 2 portions.

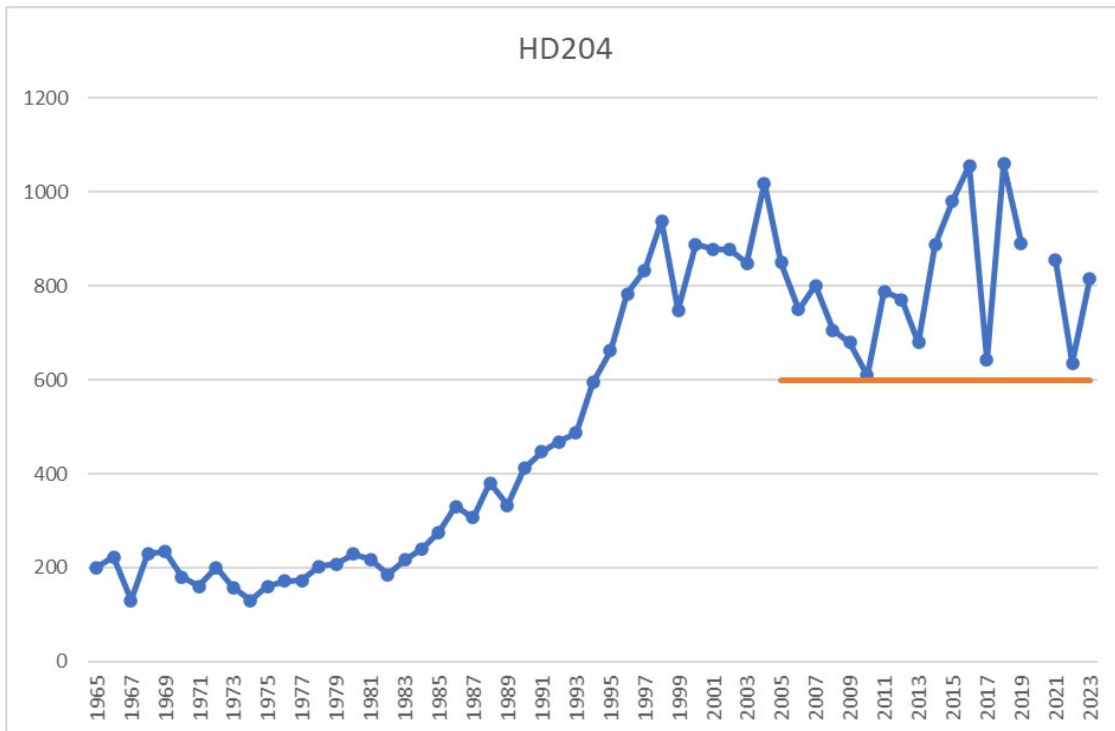


Figure 1. Elk population trend in HD204 based on current 2005 Elk Management Plan objectives. The population objective is 700 elk, which has been exceeded every year since 2010. However, most of the growth in the population occurred in elk herds in the northern portion, including MPG Ranch and surrounding areas. Note that low survey points in 2017 and 2022 were due to poor survey conditions and are not representative of the population.

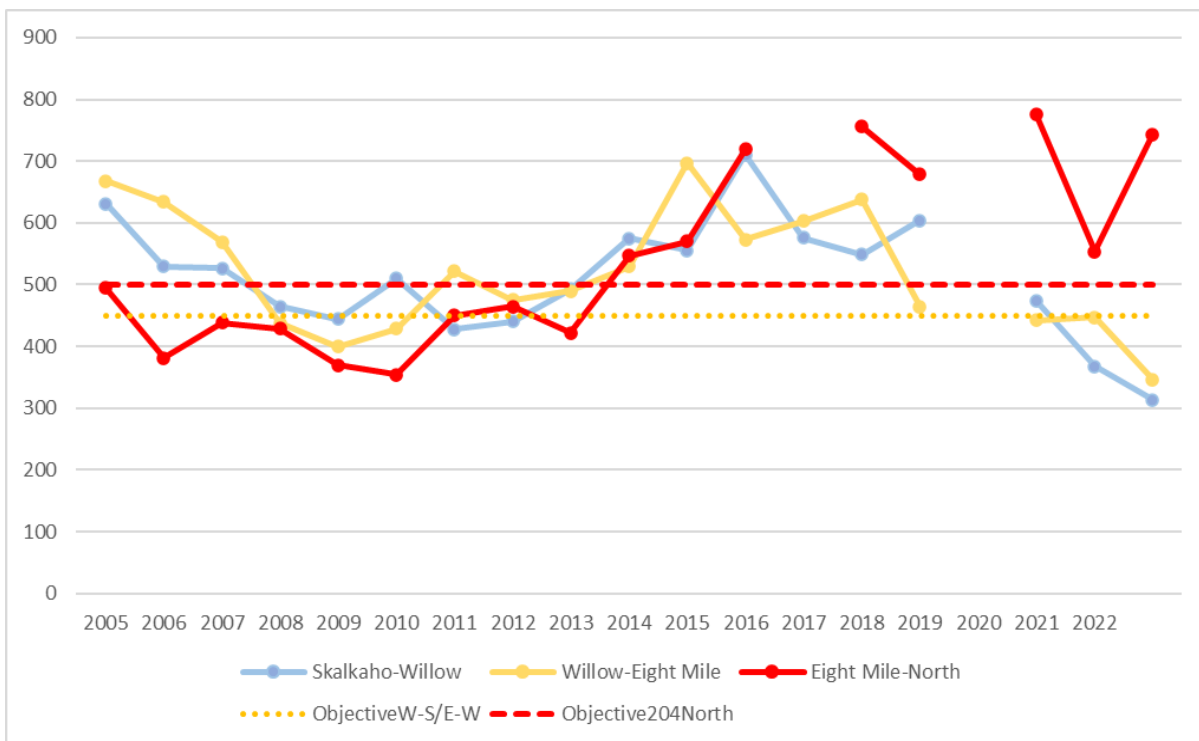


Figure 2. Elk population trends for the 3 proposed portions of the Sapphire EMU for the revised Elk Management Plan. Dashed lines indicate proposed population objectives. The objective for both the Skalkaho-Willow (261) and Willow-Eight Mile (261/204) portions is 360-540 elk each. The objective for the Eight Mile-North portion (204) is 400-600 elk.

**5. 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).**

There are significant issues that have contributed to the current situation and the reason we are proposing this change. MPG Ranch contains over 15,000 acres of prime elk winter range. Historically, hunting access to the ranch has been very restricted because of ongoing wildlife research/conservation activities that occur there. This, unsurprisingly, led to a rapid increase in the elk population, which increasingly became resident on the ranch, with little migration to higher elevations in the summer. FWP's North Sapphires Elk Research Project was initiated in 2014 to better understand the movements and survival of elk in this area, and showed that few cow elk are migratory likely due to nutritious irrigated agricultural production on ranches around MPG Ranch (on which summer game damage from these elk regularly occurs). Additionally, hunter pressure on the surrounding Lolo and Bitterroot National Forests is high, in part due to the area's proximity to a major urban center (Missoula).

MPG ranch has a long history working with FWP on research projects and developing hunting regulations to understand and address the elk issue. In 2018, Region 2 developed a region-wide, over-the-counter B-license valid on private lands with/without shoulder seasons to address over-objective elk herds. In 2020, this B-license was eliminated, but retained in Bitterroot HDs including HD204 (the 262-01 Elk B-license). Prior to this, antlerless hunting was restricted by a limited B-license, and MPG ranch had difficulty obtaining ample hunter numbers. With the OTC B-license, MPG Ranch has increased the total number of hunters it allows (while still chaperoning hunts to prevent conflicts with other ranch activities) For the last 4 years, the majority of antlerless hunting in HD204 occurred solely on MPG ranch.

It is critical to understand the importance of this property's cooperation in achieving any antlerless harvest in HD204 at all. In more recent years, as they have increased hunting pressure on antlerless elk, they have observed a shift in the elk movements, where the elk will leave MPG Ranch and find harbor on other ranches to the north that do not allow any public hunting. The bottom line is that MPG Ranch, at this point, cannot simply bring on more hunters to harvest more elk; rather, regulations that would allow each of their hunters to harvest 2 elk at a time (using the general license + the 262-01 license) may help achieve necessary harvest increases without a corresponding increase in pressure that would completely bump the elk off the ranch.

**6. 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).**

This proposal is supported by the Ravalli County Fish and Wildlife Association and MPG Ranch.

Submitted by: Rebecca Mowry

Date: May 8, 2023

Approved:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Regional Supervisor / Date

Disapproved / Modified by:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name / Date

Reason for Modification:

**MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS  
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

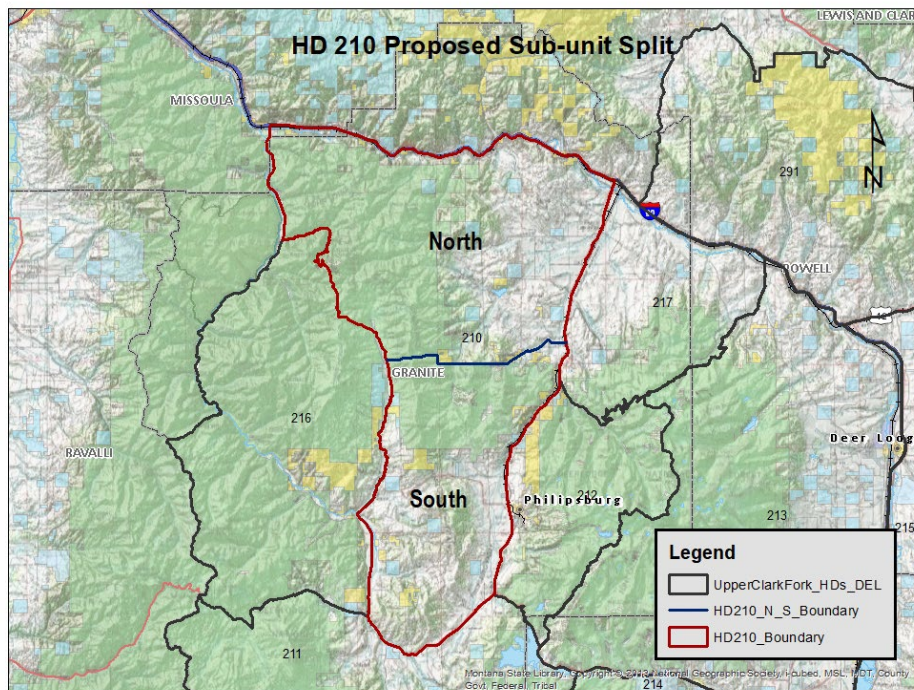
**Species: Elk**  
**Region: 2**  
**Hunting District: 210**  
**Year: 2024**

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

**Proposed changes**

- A. Make changes to B-license 210-03: 1) Add restriction “Valid on private lands in HDs 210 South, 211, 212, and 216.” 2) Add late season from end of general rifle to January 8<sup>th</sup>.
- B. Add new B-license 210-04: Quota = 50; Quota range = 5-200. “Valid on private lands in HD 210 North.”

For these B-license changes we propose splitting the hunt district to create North and South hunting district portions (see map and description below).



The proposed portions can be described as follows:

**HD 210 North:** Beginning at Drummond at the junction of Interstate Highway 90 and Highway 1, then southerly along Highway 1 to the Henderson Creek Road 448, then westerly on the Henderson Creek Road to the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Boundary, then west and north on the USFS Boundary to the South Fork of Copper Creek, then westerly on the South Fork of Copper Creek and down Rattling Gulch to the Upper Willow Creek Road 88, then northwesterly along said road to FS 4308, then northwesterly along FS 4308 following Brewster Creek to the Rock Creek Road (County Road 102), then northerly on the Rock Creek Road to Interstate 90, then easterly along said highway to Highway 1 at Drummond, the point of beginning.

**HD 210 South:** Beginning at the junction of Highway 1 and Henderson Creek Road 448, then westerly on the Henderson Creek Road to the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Boundary, then west and north on the USFS boundary to the South Fork of Copper Creek, then westerly on the South Fork of Copper Creek and down Rattling Gulch to the Upper Willow Creek Road 88, then southerly along said road to County Road 348, then southerly along Road 348 to State Route 38, then easterly along Route 38 to Highway 1, then northerly along Highway 1 to the Henderson Creek Road, the point of beginning.

### **Background information**

Elk populations vary greatly between the northern and southern ends of HD 210. Although some comingling is possible, elk observed in the northern end are believed to be relatively independent to the elk that winter in the southern end. Annual winter surveys indicate a declining elk population in the north. The three-year average count from 2013-15 was 727 elk compared to the most recent three-year average count (2020-22) of 331. Here, elk are largely resident but may migrate westward during the summer.

In contrast, winter counts indicate that the elk that typically winter in the south are increasing in number. These elk tend to be migratory in nature and likely use multiple HDs (HD 210, 211, 212, and 216) throughout the year. The winter count occurs when the animals are congregated on winter range in the southern end of the valley. The three-year average count from 2013-15 was 1,565 elk compared to the most recent three-year average count (2020-22) of 2,122.

In 2016, an aggressive harvest strategy was implemented in various HDs in Region 2 where elk populations were over objective and losses to agricultural and livestock producers were high. Elk B Licenses valid only on private land with early and late shoulder seasons were implemented. Liberal allocation had a significant effect on the northern subpopulation resulting in a low annual count of 215 elk in 2019.

In the southern end, harvest objectives have been difficult to meet, and populations have grown. Public access to private land is a challenge locally resulting in large numbers of (harbored) elk where the public has little to no hunting access. Heavy losses (game damage) to neighboring agricultural and livestock producers have regularly occurred in this area and have required large-scale, late-season damage hunts. With the increasing population trend here, conflict is expected to continue to increase in kind. Given the inconsistencies in population trends and differing social issues between the north and the south, FWP has proposed separate management objectives and strategies in the revised Elk Management plan currently in review. The licensing changes recommended for the 2024-25 biennial season setting are in line with the proposed changes in the new plan.

To better address localized issues, such as above objective numbers and a high incidence of conflict in the southern end in contrast to declining elk populations in the northern end, we propose managing the private land hunting opportunities separately to better achieve the desired harvest necessary across the HD. In addition, a late (shoulder) season, currently, does not exist in the district. As a result, post-season losses to local producers have been mitigated via game damage hunts. We propose implementing a late-season hunt in the southern end of HD 210 to provide an additional tool to address conflict.

## **2. 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.**

Elk population trends and social issues differ between the northern and southern elk herds in HD 210. As a result, FWP has proposed separate management objectives and strategies in the revised Elk Management plan currently in review. The proposed changes are in line with the new management plan in that they would allow FWP to manage the below-objective northern herd with a conservative harvest strategy and the above-objective southern herd more aggressively. Maintaining minimal game damage in the north and reducing damage complaints in the south are also objectives.

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

Success will be measured when annual winter counts are considered relative to population objectives. Estimates of harvest success will be assessed and quotas modified, if needed. Losses to producers and game damage complaints will also be scrutinized.

**4. 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).**

Annual surveys indicate that the overall elk population in HD 210 is increasing. However, when the data for elk that reside in the northern end of the district are analyzed separately, a declining trend is evident (Figure 1). The new Elk Management Plan sets the population objective for this subherd at 500 (range 400-600). The three-year average (2020-22) population count is currently 331 and below this new objective. A significant reduction in the elk population here has resulted in fewer game damage complaints. In contrast, populations are increasing in the southern end (Figure 2), and several game damage complaints are filed each year. The new management plan sets the objective here at 1,300 (range 1,040-1,560). Thus, this population is substantially over objective with a current three-year average count of 2,122. Harvest data are collected at the hunt district level; thus it is not possible to assess harvest trends for the north and south separately.

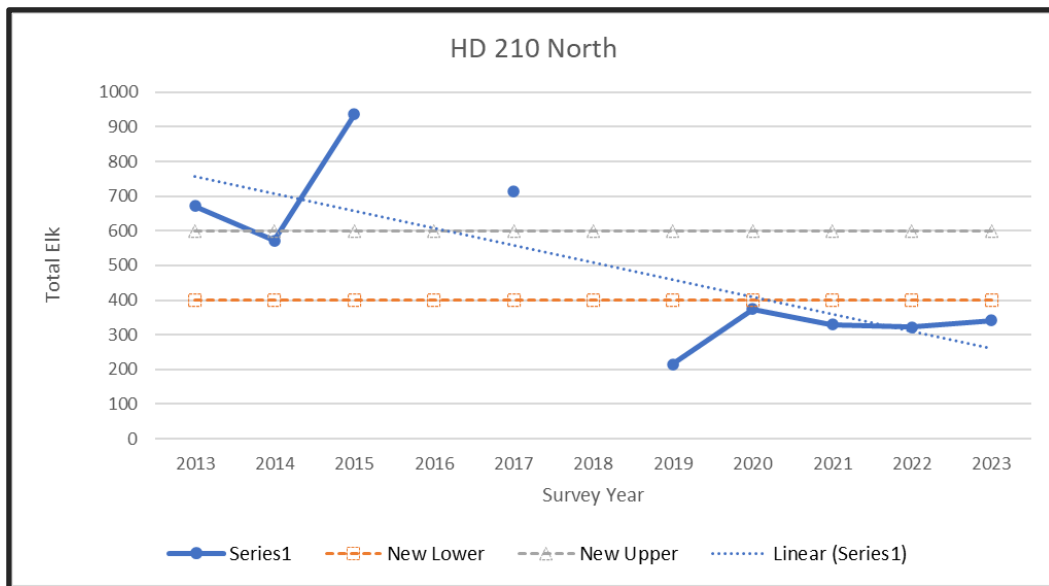


Figure 1. A population decline has been observed in the elk subherd that resides in the northern end of HD 210. The population is currently below the objective stated in the new management plan.



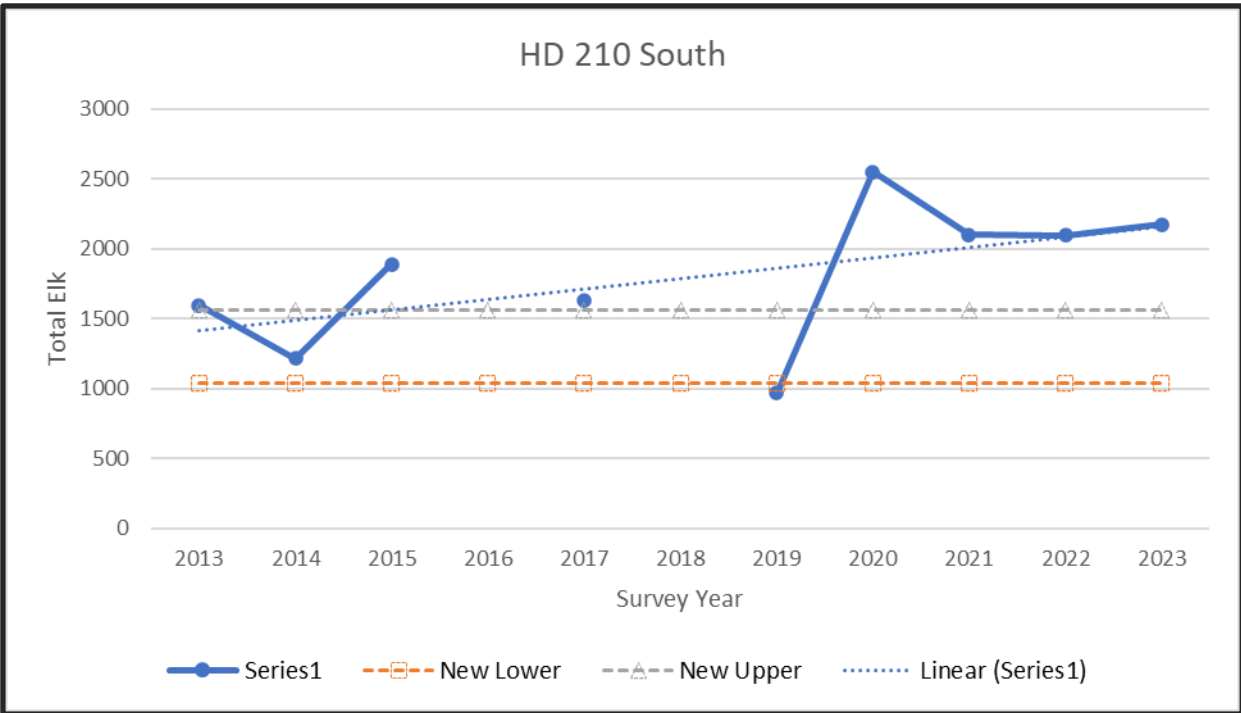


Figure 2. A population increase has been observed in the elk herd(s) that winter in the southern end of HD 210. The population is currently above the objective stated in the new management plan.

**5. 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).**

By managing the northern and southern elk herds separately, current antlerless opportunities would be revised. Because the population is below objective in the north, allocation would likely be conservative until populations rebound to within the objective range. A specific private land only Elk B license is being proposed for this area. Quotas (opportunity) would be adjusted as needed. In contrast, the population in the south is above objective and game damage complaints are many. Antlerless opportunity on private lands would likely be more liberal until the population is reduced to within the objective range and number of game damage complaints declined.

**6. 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).**

The proposed changes to HD 210 have been thoroughly discussed with local sportsmen’s groups including the Anaconda Sportsman’s Club, other members of the local hunting community, and a few private landowners. Initial consideration for a north/south separation was spurred by local landowners and sportsmen who voiced their concerns over low elk population numbers observed in the north. As a result, the data were analyzed separately, and a population decline confirmed. The details of the proposed split in the new Elk Management Plan and the changes recommended in the 2024-25 biennial season setting process to adjust the harvest strategies to be in line with the new plan will be discussed at the public meetings scheduled to take place at five local venues in June.

Submitted by: Kirstie Yeager

Date: 5/22/23

Approved: \_\_\_\_\_  
Regional Supervisor / Date

Disapproved / Modified by: \_\_\_\_\_

Reason for Modification:

Name / Date

**MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS**  
**HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

**Species: White-tailed Deer**  
**Region: 2**  
**Hunting District: 210, 211, 214, & 216**  
**Year: 2024**

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

Modify the Either-sex White-tailed Deer opportunity that is offered at the beginning of the General Season on the General License in HDs 210, 211, 214, and 216 from nine days to seven days to align with an analogous seven-day opportunity currently offered in other HDs in Regions 1 and 2.

Over the years, white-tailed deer antlerless opportunities in Regions 1 and 2 have been offered through a variety of manners including a seven, eight, or nine-day General Season, B Licenses, or combinations of the aforementioned. Currently, seven-day seasons and B Licenses are offered in many of these districts. However, a nine-day season still exists in four hunt districts in Region 2 (HDs 210, 211, 214, and 216). Modifying these opportunities from nine to seven days aligns these hunt districts with others where similar opportunities are offered, simplifying the regulations.

**2. 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.**

The objective is to continue to offer the Either-Sex White-tailed Deer opportunity on the General License in HDs 210, 211, 214, and 216 while modifying the dates to align with other hunt districts in Regions 1 and 2 resulting in a simplification of the regulations.

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

We will compare harvest data under this 7-day season to the average harvest during the 9-day season. We are hoping that harvest is similar, or only slightly lower before, as this proposal is primarily to create a consistent set of regulations across HDs and regions.

**4. 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).**

Consistent population monitoring for whitetails has not historically occurred here; thus, precise trend data are not available. Whitetails are known to inhabit fragments of the hunt districts; but much of the area is currently not considered optimal whitetail habitat. In view of this, whitetails occur in relatively low numbers here. Maintaining the abridged either-sex opportunity (whether seven days or nine) offered on the General License is advisable.

**5. 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).**

The current, nine-day season includes two weekends. By shortening the season to one week, the season would be two days less and only include one weekend.

**6. 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).**

This proposal was discussed with the Anaconda Sportsman’s Club during their April meeting. They understood the desire to simplify the regs but did not like the idea of losing opportunity (two days). They commented “Why don’t you extend the seven-day seasons to nine instead of shortening the nine-day season to seven?” This topic will be discussed further during the biennial season-setting, public-engagement process.

Submitted by:

Date:

Approved: \_\_\_\_\_  
Regional Supervisor / Date

Disapproved / Modified by: \_\_\_\_\_  
Name / Date

Reason for Modification:

**MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS  
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

**Species: Elk**  
**Region: 2**  
**Hunting District: HD 217**  
**Year: 2024**

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

**Recommended changes**

- 1. Remove early season opportunity on general license for youth/PTHFV and ArchEquip only.**
- 2. Change early season dates for B-license 217-02 to August 15 to the day before Archery Only season. Add Archery Only season.**

**Background information**

HD 217 was created in 2016 to better address local challenges including large numbers of inaccessible (harbored) elk on private lands, heavy losses (game damage) to agricultural and livestock producers, and excessive hunting pressure on bordering public lands resulting in shoot-out scenarios. In 2016, the annual survey in HD 217 yielded 1,225 elk. The population objective for this new hunt district was set at 600 (range 480-720). To address excessive hunting pressure on neighboring public lands, all bull harvest was regulated via permits and quotas. To reduce the total population to meet the new objective range, an aggressive antlerless harvest strategy was implemented. This aggressive strategy included early and late shoulder seasons and the additional early season opportunities on the General License that included a youth/PTHFV hunt and an extended archery season. By 2018, the population was within objective at 725 elk and has been within objective range since. The elk population in HD 217 is no longer over objective; thus, an aggressive harvest strategy is no longer necessary. In addition, the added opportunities on the General License do not exist anywhere else in Region 2. Therefore, FWP proposes to modify the harvest strategy in HD 217 to be more in line with maintaining a stable population and no longer focused on population reduction. The additional early season opportunities on the General License are no longer needed.

FWP recommends the early (shoulder) (rifle) season be retained as damage issues have historically been problematic here. However, strong public opposition to the dates overlapping with the regular Archery Season have been expressed. Given the elk population is now within the objective range, FWP proposes the early season dates be modified to end just prior to the start of the regular Archery Season. An Archery Only season will be added in the wake of the shortened early season.

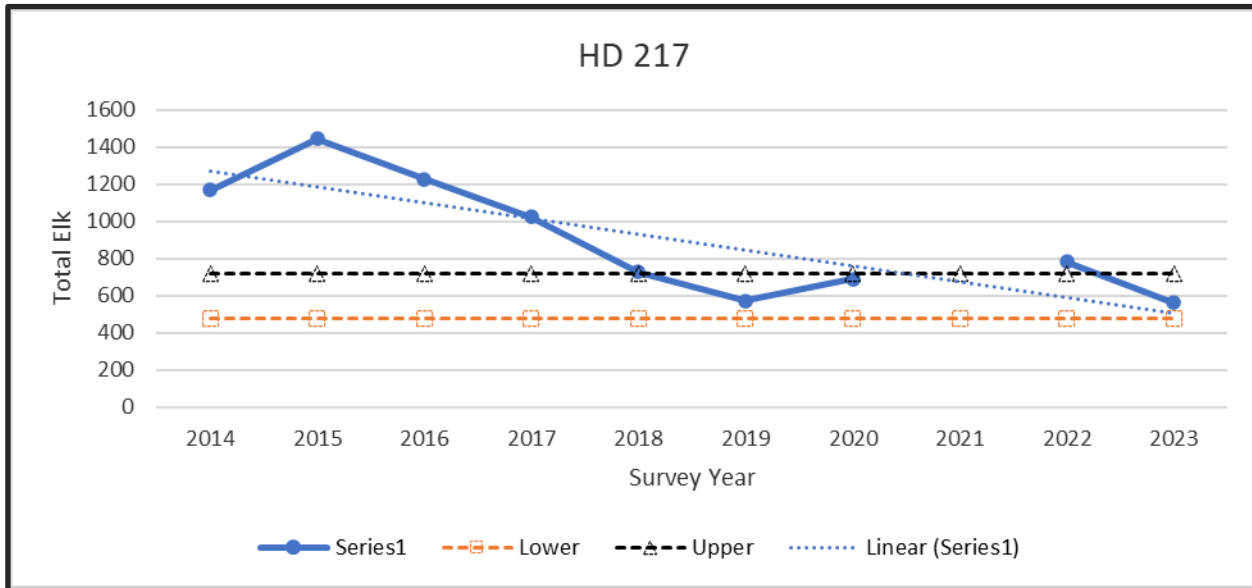
- 2. What is the objective of this proposed change? This could be a specific harvest amount or resulting population level or number of game damage complaints, etc.**

The objective of these proposed changes is to modify the harvest strategy to be one that maintains a stable population and is not focused on population reduction. The current (aggressive) harvest strategy places additional harvest pressure on elk late summer, prior to the start of the regular Archery Season. Though some early season pressure is necessary to address localized game damage issues, excessive pressure is not. This added pressure may be modifying the behavior of the elk beyond the intent and impacting hunter experience during the regular seasons. FWP hopes to implement a more conservative harvest strategy while maintaining minimal game damage and improving hunter experience.

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

Success will be measured by an assessment of game damage complaints, annual harvest surveys that indicate the population is within the objective range (480-720), and general hunter satisfaction in the community.

4. **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).**



**Figure 3.** The population in HD 217 has been within objective since 2018.

5. **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).**

This proposal removes early season opportunity from youth and hunters with a PTHFV and restores the archery season to be within the regular dates on the General License. This added harvest pressure is no longer needed; and these opportunities do not exist anywhere else in Region 2.

Reducing the early shoulder season dates to end prior to the start of the regular Archery Season should improve the hunting experience for local archery hunters. Producers may experience increased game damage that may need to be addressed via a damage hunt.

6. **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).**

Local sportsmen have requested that FWP shorten the early (shoulder) season dates so that there is no overlap with archery. Many conversations have taken place with sportsmen regarding this topic. Local landowners have not been individually approached. FWP will engage these stakeholders during the five season-setting public meetings scheduled in the area. Although local sportsmen have asked that FWP reduce pressure on elk now that the population is within objective, the specifics of eliminating the added early season opportunities on the General License have not been discussed. This topic will be discussed during the public meetings.

Submitted by: Kirstie Yeager

Date: 5/22/23

Approved:

\_\_\_\_\_ / Date  
Regional Supervisor / Date

Disapproved / Modified by:

\_\_\_\_\_ / Date  
Name / Date

Reason for Modification:

**MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS**  
**HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

**Species: Mule Deer**  
**Region: 2**  
**Hunting District: 240**  
**Year: 2024**

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

Remove the 240-01 antlerless mule deer B-license (current quota 25).

This limited, private-land only B-license was established in 2020 to replace the general license opportunity that had previously existed since prior to 2014 in the HD (archery season, then first week of rifle season, both on private land only).

**2. 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.**

The objective of this proposed change is to simplify hunting regulations by removing a license that has seen little to no harvest.

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

As this is a proposal to remove a little-used license, measuring success is not straightforward. We anticipate that this proposal may result in two potential consequences: first, an increase in mule deer game damage complaints on private lands in HD240; second, complaints from the public about a loss of opportunity (despite the low harvest, the applications for this B-license have always exceeded the quota). However, because harvest on this B-license has never been significant, both these possibilities are unlikely.

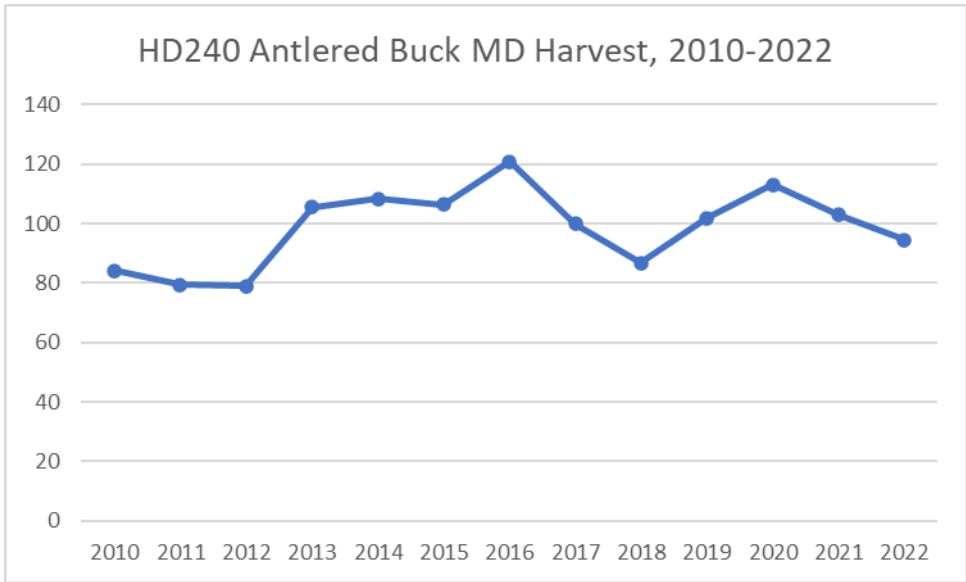
Because harvest on this license has always been low, we do not anticipate this change will result in any meaningful increase in the mule deer population.

**4. 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).**

Mule deer in HD240 were not surveyed until spring 2022. Surveys beginning that year are problematic due to the heavily timbered nature of the habitat, and the spring 2023 green-up survey was not completed due to helicopter availability problems. However, fawn recruitment data collected during this short time has been promising.

Mule deer populations in HD240 are primarily assessed through buck harvest data, which itself has been problematic due to the previous existence of an unlimited buck permit until 2022 (with a 3-week season). However, this data shows a stable mule deer population (see Figure). The buck permit was removed in 2022 (the 3-week season was maintained).





**5. 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).**

HD240 is a rugged, heavily-forested habitat that includes the Bitterroot Mountains and canyons on the west side of the Bitterroot Valley. Most of the winter range is private land, which has seen unprecedented amounts of conversion to housing subdivisions as the human population in the valley has swelled. Wildfire suppression due to proximity of homes has further reduced available habitat. Mule deer movements from low to high elevation are unknown, although some deer are often observed well west into the Bitterroot range during summer. HD240 supports a high predator density, especially black bears and mountain lions (as well as some wolf packs). Mountain lion quotas were increased in 2022 but the female quota did not fill.

**6. 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).**

This proposal was a late addition and has not been reviewed by the Ravalli Fish and Wildlife Association.

Submitted by: Rebecca Mowry  
 Date: May 9, 2023  
 Approved: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Regional Supervisor / Date

Disapproved / Modified by: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Name / Date

Reason for Modification:

**MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS  
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

**Species: Mule Deer  
Region: 2  
Hunting District: 261  
Year: 2024**

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

Reduce the antlered buck mule deer permit quota (261-50) from 15 to 10, and change the quota range from 15-200 to 1-100.

HD261 is a designated Special Management Area according to the Mule Deer Adaptive Harvest Management Plan, such that buck hunting has been managed through limited permits in order to improve opportunity for older-age class deer. HD262 was created in 2014 from the westernmost portions of HDs 204 and 261. When HD262 was initially created, it was added to the HD261 permit area (so that people who drew the highly-coveted permit could hunt either/both HDs). In 2018 the buck hunting opportunities between HDs 261 and 262 were split into two different permits, in order to address growing game damage caused by buck mule deer in HD262. Permit quotas have steadily increased in HD262 and decreased in HD261.

Both permits remain highly desirable to hunters with low draw success rates. Draw success has been **increasing** in HD262 (as desired, suggesting reduced demand for older bucks) and **stable to slowly increasing** in HD261 (fewer applicants, potentially due to perceived loss of buck quality compared to other HDs). However, harvest success (measured via annual phone survey) has decreased significantly in HD262, due to a combination of access issues and a perceived reduction in both population and buck quality. Harvest success is more variable in HD261, with the 2022 harvest success rate of 20%. For comparison, harvest success in neighboring HD270 (also a Special Management Area with limited permits) is consistently 75-100%.

The quota in HD262 was reduced from 30 to 20 for the upcoming 2023 season, but due to the limited quota range for HD261, a corresponding change was not able to be proposed. This proposal seeks to address that.

Year	combined HDs			HD261			HD262		
	quota	harvest success	draw success	quota	harvest success	draw success	quota	harvest success	draw success
2011	25	87.6	2.33						
2012	25	80.8	2						
2013	25	48.4	1.69						
2014	25	100	1.59						
2015	25	46	1.32						
2016	35	70	1.6						
2017	35	56.6	1.59						
2018				15	14.3	1.01	25	20.3	4.33
2019				15	66.7	1.07	40	17.5	7.34
2020				15	77.9	1.18	30	9	6.99
2021				15	30	1.23	30	7.7	8.7
2022				15	20	1.44	30	23.3	10.64

**2. 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.**

There are two primary objectives to this proposed change:

1. Better match permit quotas to the practical opportunity and improve harvest success in both HDs;
2. Increase flexibility to make annual quota adjustments.

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

The success of this proposal will be measured primarily by buck harvest success rates. There is no guidance provided in the Mule Deer AHM Plan, but Special Management Areas should have a much higher success rate than general districts. In HD261—a designated SMA—anything below 50% success is a management failure. This is a highly desirable mule deer permit, in which applicants give up sometimes maximum bonus points to draw the tag.

We also are exploring adding trend surveys to HD261 and/or HD262 to better monitor changes in population and sex ratios.

**4. 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).**

Much of this has been addressed in Question 1. HD262 is technically managed as a Special Management Area due to its history with HD261, but because it is private land with chronic game damage problems, deer management has progressed toward higher quotas. However, we still do not fully understand the impact of this management on deer in HD261. Of primary concern is how/when deer move between the two HDs and where these deer are being harvested.

The HD261/262 system was recently identified as a focal area in an upcoming, statewide mule deer research plan. By collaring bucks and does in both HDs, we hope to better understand movements, survival, and causes of mortality, to help us better manage this culturally important deer herd. Currently, this herd is not aerially surveyed.

**5. 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).**

HD261 is a mix of public and private land, with variable levels of public access and generally high private land tolerance for mule deer. HD262 is almost entirely private land. Much of HD262 remains in agricultural production, however it is increasingly being converted to small-acreage subdivisions to meet the growing housing demand in HD262. High deer densities exist especially around the communities of Corvallis and Grantsdale. Mule deer hunting is challenging in these situations. Several small BMAs have recently been enrolled in HD262, largely for mule deer opportunity.

**6. 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).**

This proposal came at the behest of many concerned sportsmen, both hunters who live in or near the HDs in question, and/or hunters who have recently drawn the permits and been dissatisfied with the number and quality of deer. This proposal is supported by the Ravalli County Fish and Wildlife Association.

Submitted by: Rebecca Mowry

Date: 5/9/2023

Approved:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Regional Supervisor / Date

Disapproved / Modified by:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name / Date

Reason for Modification:

**MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS**  
**HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

**Species: Elk**  
**Region: 2**  
**Hunting District: 262**  
**Year: 2024**

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

Add a limited brow-tined bull elk permit to HD262 (quota = 20, quota range 1-50).

Currently, bull hunting in HD262 is limited to ArchEquip only, on the general license. This proposal would add an additional, limited rifle opportunity for brow-tined bull elk.

- 2. 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.**

The objective of this proposed change is to reduce game damage complaints in HD262 caused by adult bull elk, while avoiding creation of a "trophy area" (managing at a level that will not intentionally grow large, older-age-class bull elk).

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

We do not expect harvest on this permit to be high (see Question 5 below). The quota will be adjusted based on a combination of harvest success (ideally 30% of greater) and number of applications (with the objective being 0 surplus permits); if neither of those measures are met consistently, we will reduce the quota or eliminate the permit. We can also measure the success of this proposal through monitoring of complaints through the game damage database.

- 4. 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).**

We do not have population data specific to HD262, because elk counted here during spring green-up surveys are included in counts for the adjacent HD/HD portion.

HD262 consists of mostly private land (96%), including large agricultural operations and suburban housing developments. It was created in 2014 by carving out the westernmost areas of adjacent HDs 204 and 261 in order to address widespread winter game damage. It is currently considered part of the large Rock Creek Elk Management Unit in the 2005 Elk Management Plan, with an objective of 0 elk. Under the proposed revision to the Elk Plan, HD262 would remain connected to HDs 204 and 261 as part of the North Sapphires EMU; it would not have a population objective, since most of the elk present in HD262 during winter move into HDs 204/261 for the remainder of the year.

Elk populations in the adjacent HDs have been at or above population objectives for the last decade. More recently, populations in the southern end of the North Sapphires EMU have declined, but are still within the 2005 population objective.

Traditionally, bull elk are infrequently observed in HD262, remaining in the adjacent HDs for most of the year; however, in recent years, more and more people are observing elk here during general hunting seasons, likely due to the restricted hunting opportunities (HD262 intentionally did not have much bull hunting opportunity in order to focus hunting pressure on cows/overall populations). Bachelor herds have begun causing extensive damage to stored crops and fences, and little can be done due to the limitations of the current hunting opportunity.

**5. 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).**

As mentioned before, HD262 is composed of 96% private land. Because of this, we do not expect harvest on this proposed permit to reach levels we would expect in an area with more public land. We anticipate that most, if not all, of the people who apply for this permit will be landowners or have access to agricultural properties where elk cause damage. We will also be keeping the general license archery-only bull opportunity. Together, we hope these regulations will allow landowners to deal with destructive bachelor herds at a level and in such a way that it will not become a coveted opportunity for older age class, "trophy" bulls. However, because holders of a bull permit may not hunt any other HD, we need to take care to issue a quota that provides holders with a reasonable chance of being successful.

**6. 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).**

We presented this proposal to the Ravalli County Fish and Wildlife Association. So far, we have not received any feedback from them about it.

Submitted by: Rebecca Mowry

Date: May 8, 2023

Approved: \_\_\_\_\_  
Regional Supervisor / Date

Disapproved / Modified by: \_\_\_\_\_  
Name / Date

Reason for Modification:

**MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS**  
**HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

**Species: Elk**  
**Region: 2**  
**Hunting District: 262**  
**Year: 2024**

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

Remove the late season in HD262 (on the 262-01 OTC B-license) so that it ends on the last day of general rifle season.

HD262 has existed since 2014, carved out of the westernmost (private land valley bottom) sections of adjacent HDs 204 and 261. Since its inception, HD262 has always had some form of a late season to address chronic game damage. The shoulder season regulations have varied between limited B-licenses and over-the-counter multi-HD B-licenses (current), with the end date variable between January 15 and February 15 (current). The current regulations have been in place since 2022; for the preceding biennium, the end date was January 15.

**2. 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.**

The objective of this proposed change is to moderate levels of antlerless harvest in the North Sapphires Elk Management Unit, now that problematic elk populations have been reduced.

Previous fluctuations in the end date of the shoulder season (between January 15 and February 15) were not based on the status of elk populations in the Bitterroot, but on statewide regulation changes made in response to public opposition to shoulder seasons. We believe that manipulating this end date may be the best way to regulate harvest in this EMU, due to HD262's importance in contributing to antlerless elk harvest (see Question 4 below). However, a previous version of this justification to shorten the season to January 15 (still allowing some late-season opportunity) was rejected by Helena staff, so we are modifying it to entirely remove the shoulder season. Thus, we expect some level of game damage to continue to occur in the winter months, which will be addressed on an individual basis through the game damage assistance program.

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

The success of this proposal will be measured by the annual harvest survey, in which we expect to observe a moderate decrease in the total antlerless harvest. We also expect to observe the effects of this decrease in a slightly higher spring elk population, as observed on annual spring green-up surveys. This proposal will almost certainly result in increased game damage complaints from December 1-February 15, and such complaints—including the size and location of elk herds causing problems—will be monitored. If the elk population rebounds and game damage becomes increasingly problematic, we may propose adding a shoulder season again in future bienniums.

**4. 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).**

After years of above-objective status, elk populations in the southern end of the North Sapphires EMU (Skalkaho-Willow and Willow-Eight Mile portions, HDs 204/261/262) have moderated, falling within the objective range and, in some years, below it (Figure 1). Antlerless elk harvest in HDs 204 and 261 has been low and stable. HD262—which comprises most of the winter range formerly in HDs 204 and 261—has provided the majority of antlerless harvest in the EMU (Figure 2).

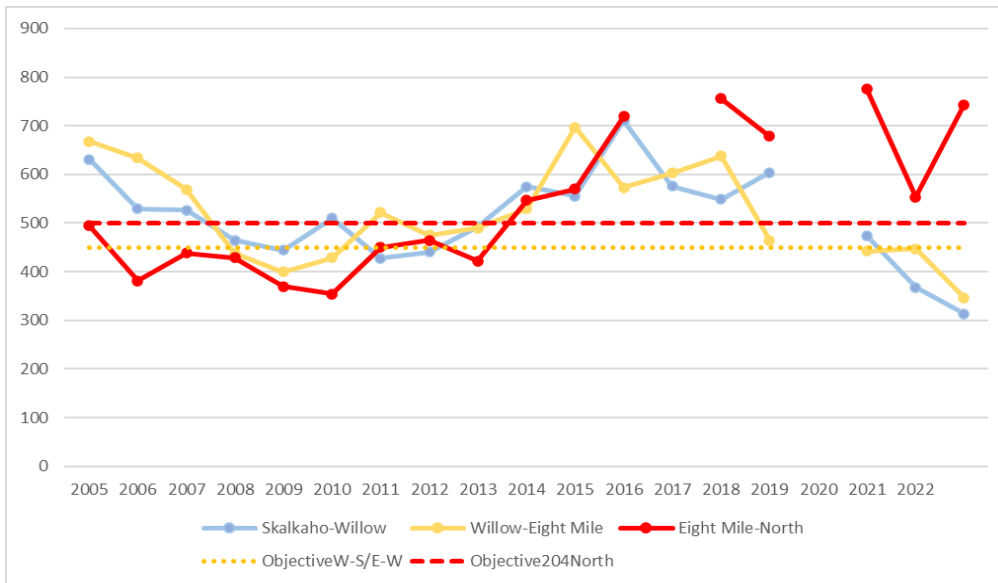


Figure 1. Elk population trends in the three North Sapphires EMU portions.

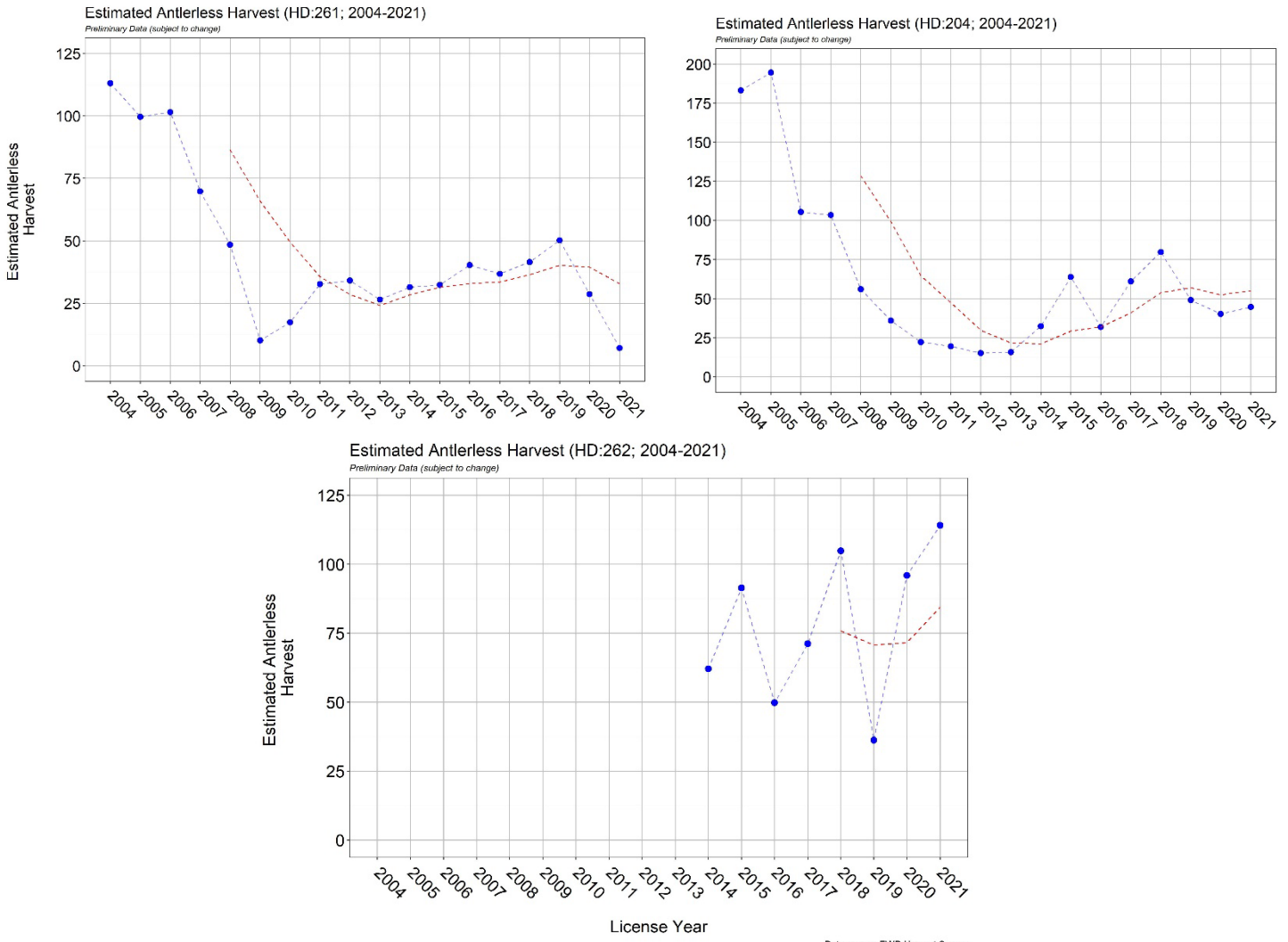


Figure 2. Antlerless elk harvest in HDs 261 (top left) and 204 (top right), 2004-2021. Harvest in these HDs has been relatively stable to decreasing in recent years, with an 8-year average harvest of 34 (HD261) and 42 (HD204) antlerless elk. Since its inception in 2014, antlerless harvest in HD262 has exceeded either of its neighbors, with an 8-year average of 78 elk.



**5. 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).**

During more severe winters, elk in HDs 204 and 261 increasingly use HD262 (which is lower-elevation, open land on the western edges of HDs 204 and 261—i.e., historic winter range) and cause damage to agricultural properties. HD262 is comprised of 96% private land and hunting is often limited to producers who are experiencing damage, as well as several small Block Management Areas. Although some elk may remain resident in HD262 year-round, the majority travel up in elevation as spring progresses into HDs 204 and 261. HD261 does not have a late season; HD204 does, although there are changes being proposed to remove late season opportunities from the southern portion of HD204.

**6. 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).**

This proposal was supported by attendees of the Hamilton scoping meeting on July 12, 2023. I also reached out to several landowners in this area and all expressed support.

Submitted by: Rebecca Mowry

Date: July 24, 2023

Approved:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Regional Supervisor / Date

Disapproved / Modified by:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name / Date

Reason for Modification:

**MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS**  
**HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

**Species: Elk**  
**Region: 2**  
**Hunting District: 204**  
**Year: 2024**

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

Expand the 262-01 license to be valid in entirety of HD270, not just the "north of Rye Creek" portion.

The 262-01 license has been valid north of Rye Creek since 2018. (For 2018-2019 seasons, it was a regionwide license called 002-00, but with same functionality in 270 as 262-01 license.) This restriction was put in place due to a popular Block Management Area (the Lazy J Cross Ranch) in the south portion of 270 which attracts a lot of hunters and has experienced "shoot-outs" in the past. In 2020, this BMA instituted changes to its access requirements which places limits on the number of hunters who can enter the BMA per day. (Formerly, hunters could park anywhere in the vicinity and enter the BMA; in 2020, hunters may not park along public roadways and enter, but must park only in designated parking areas.) These changes should allow the use of the OTC 262-01 license without the danger of a flood of hunters entering the BMA when elk are present. However, a reduction in the 270-02 license quota (valid in the south portion) is warranted out of an abundance of caution, until we are able to evaluate the impact of the 262-01 license in this area. We would make this within-range quota adjustment at the proper time after the biennial season setting process has completed.

**2. 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.**

The objective of this proposed change is primarily to simplify hunting regulations by removing a portion restriction of a B-license. The 262-01 is valid in multiple HDs across the Bitterroot, and the inability to use it in the south portion of HD270 has caused confusion in the past. A secondary objective of this proposal is to allow an increase in antlerless elk harvest in the French Basin area, where elk spend much of their time on private lands (some publicly accessible, some inaccessible), without the danger of shoot-outs. As of spring 2023, the population is nearly at the upper range of its population objective.

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

The success of this proposal will be measured by decreased complaints/questions from hunters, and increased antlerless harvest on the 262-01 B-license in HD270. Game damage complaints may also be somewhat mitigated by allowing this license on private lands in this portion. We will be closely monitoring the harvest in the French Basin area, primarily through the Darby Check Station, as well as annual hunter harvest surveys.

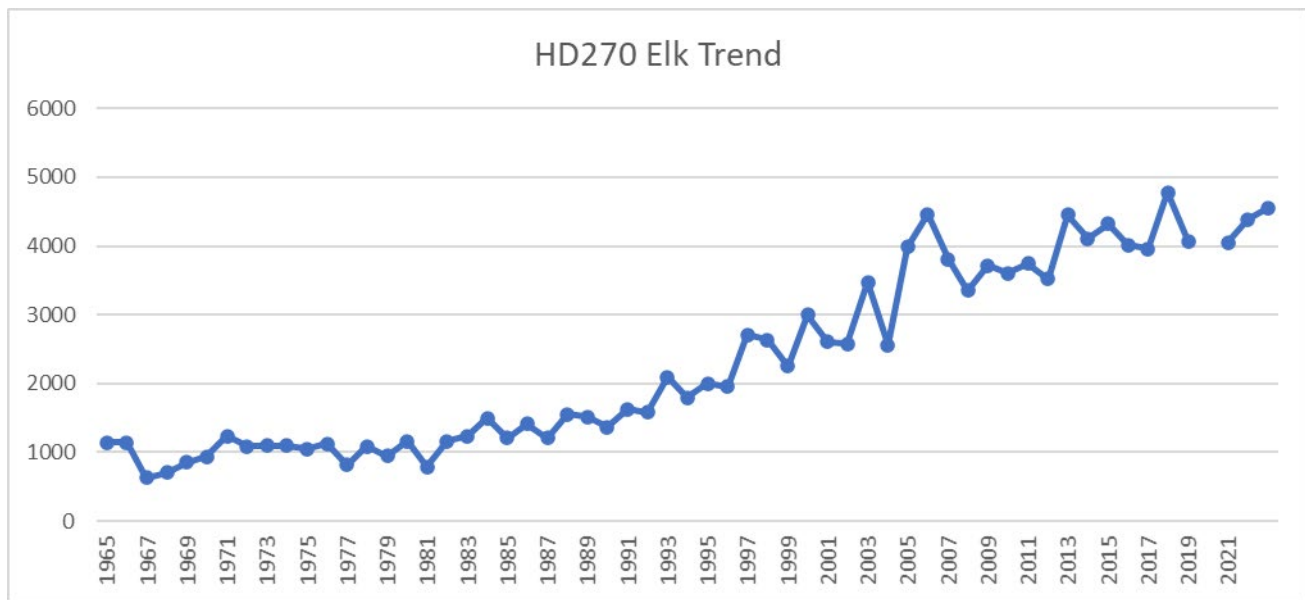
**4. What is the current population's status in relation to the management objectives? (i.e., state management objectives from management plan if applicable; provide current and prior years of population survey, harvest, or other pertinent information).**

The elk population in HD270 is barely within its population objective of 3,800 (+/- 20%). The most recent aerial survey, conducted in spring 2021, yielded 4,554 elk. Only 7 more elk would have pushed it above the 20% population objective range (4,600 elk).

There are two other B-licenses valid in HD270, which are not restricted to private land, as is the 262-01 license. Fill rates on these two B-licenses average 16% (270-01 license) and 32% (270-02 license) from 2018-2021. On the 262-01 and 002-00 licenses, which have been valid for the last 4 years in the North Rye portion, an average of 34 elk were harvested. This license has been a valuable tool for many ranches in the area to harvest antlerless elk, including through the use of public hunters (primarily disabled and youth hunters). Collectively, the B-license harvest

and general license antlerless opportunity for archery, youth, and disabled hunters, has resulted in an average antlerless harvest of 190 elk in HD270 from 2018-2021. This is far lower than the number of elk that may be harvested annually to maintain the population at the objective of 3,800. The stagnation of the population is likely due to habitat limitations and resulting low calf: cow ratios (averaging 23 calves: 100 cows for the past 3 years).

We expect that expanding the 262-01 license into the south portion will result in a sustainable increase in elk harvest on private land, both BMAs and private lands that restrict access. Increased pressure on private land may also result in higher harvest success on public land as well, as elk are periodically moved back and forth. Increasing antlerless harvest should result in increased calf: cow ratios, increased overwinter survival of adults and calves, and, indirectly, increased bull: cow ratios through improved annual recruitment of bull calves.



**5. 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).**

HD270 is a unique place in that the elk population in the southern portion is partially migratory, with a large influx of elk from the Big Hole into the French Basin area, typically during the general rifle season (but weather-dependent).

The area is extremely popular with hunters, owing to the excellent public access and the large elk population. Hunter pressure is high during rifle season, despite antlerless hunting being restricted to B-license only, and brow-tined bull hunting restricted by an unlimited, 1st-choice only bull permit. Many elk ultimately take refuge on private lands in French Basin, some with extremely limited hunting opportunity/public access, while others do allow some hunters. The Lazy J Cross Ranch is enrolled in the Block Management Program (and is actually a conservation easement held by the Bitter Root Land Trust, with public hunting required in the terms of the easement). Landowners in the area are often frustrated by the heavy hunter pressure, and a history of poor hunter behavior offers little incentive to allow access. Thus, bringing in the OTC 262-01 license here may allow these ranches to be more selective on who they allow onto the property to hunt, which may indirectly benefit public hunters by periodically pushing elk back into accessible areas.

**6. 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).**

This same regulation change was proposed for the 2022-2023 biennium, and was ultimately scrapped due to concern from the public about shoot-outs on Lazy J Cross Ranch. However, the parking limitation that was first employed in 2021 has now been in place an additional year (two years by the time this regulation would go into effect), giving hunters more time to understand and comply with the new rule.

Submitted by: Rebecca Mowry

Date: May 8, 2023

Approved: \_\_\_\_\_  
Regional Supervisor / Date

Disapproved / Modified by: \_\_\_\_\_  
Name / Date

Reason for Modification:

**MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS  
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

**Species: Elk  
Region: 2  
Hunting District: 270  
Year: 2024**

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

Increase the 270-01 (north of Rye Creek) quota from 200 to 300 and change quota range from 10-200 to 10-400.

This B-license has existed in HD270 for many years as one of the tools to harvest antlerless elk north of Rye Creek. General license opportunity also exists during archery season, and for youth/PTHFV. Additionally, the 262-01 OTC B-license is valid on private land only in this portion.

- 2. 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.**

The objective of this proposed change is to increase antlerless elk harvest and bring the population closer to its population objective of 3,800 elk.

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

The success of this proposal will be measured by annual spring elk surveys, where we aim to maintain the elk population within the population objective of 20% above or below 3,800 elk. The population is nearing the upper end of that range.

We will also evaluate harvest success on this B-license, which for the last 4 years has been low at 16%. Our aim is to maintain or increase harvest success.

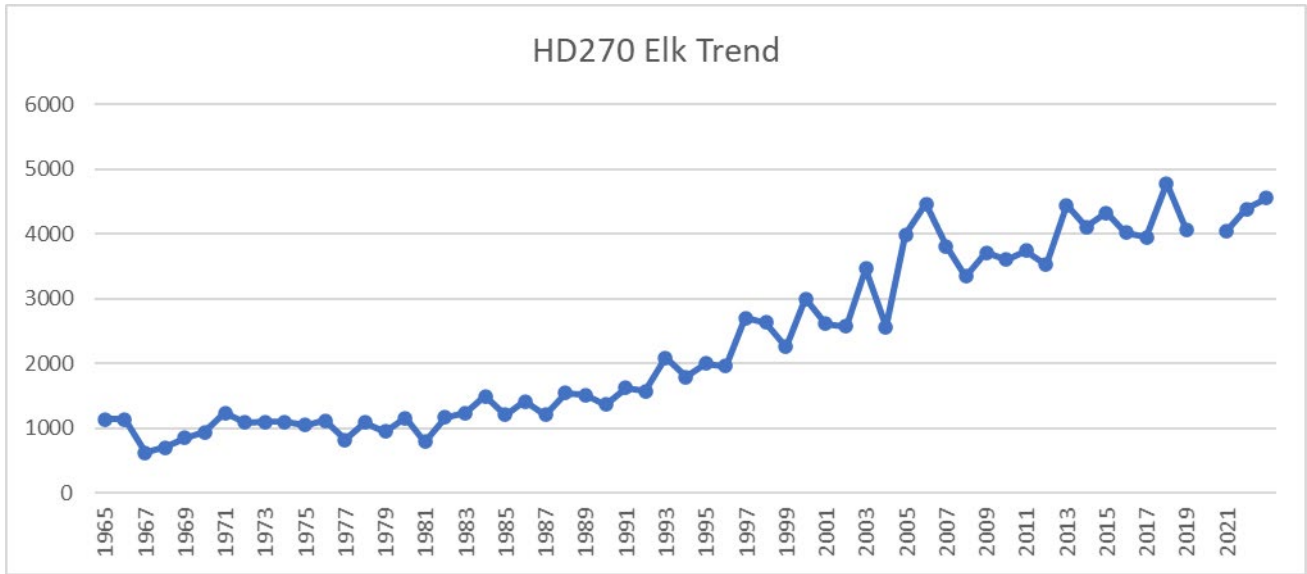
Indirectly, we hope that reducing the elk population in HD270 may improve habitat and forage availability for competing species including mule deer and bighorn sheep.

- 4. 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).**

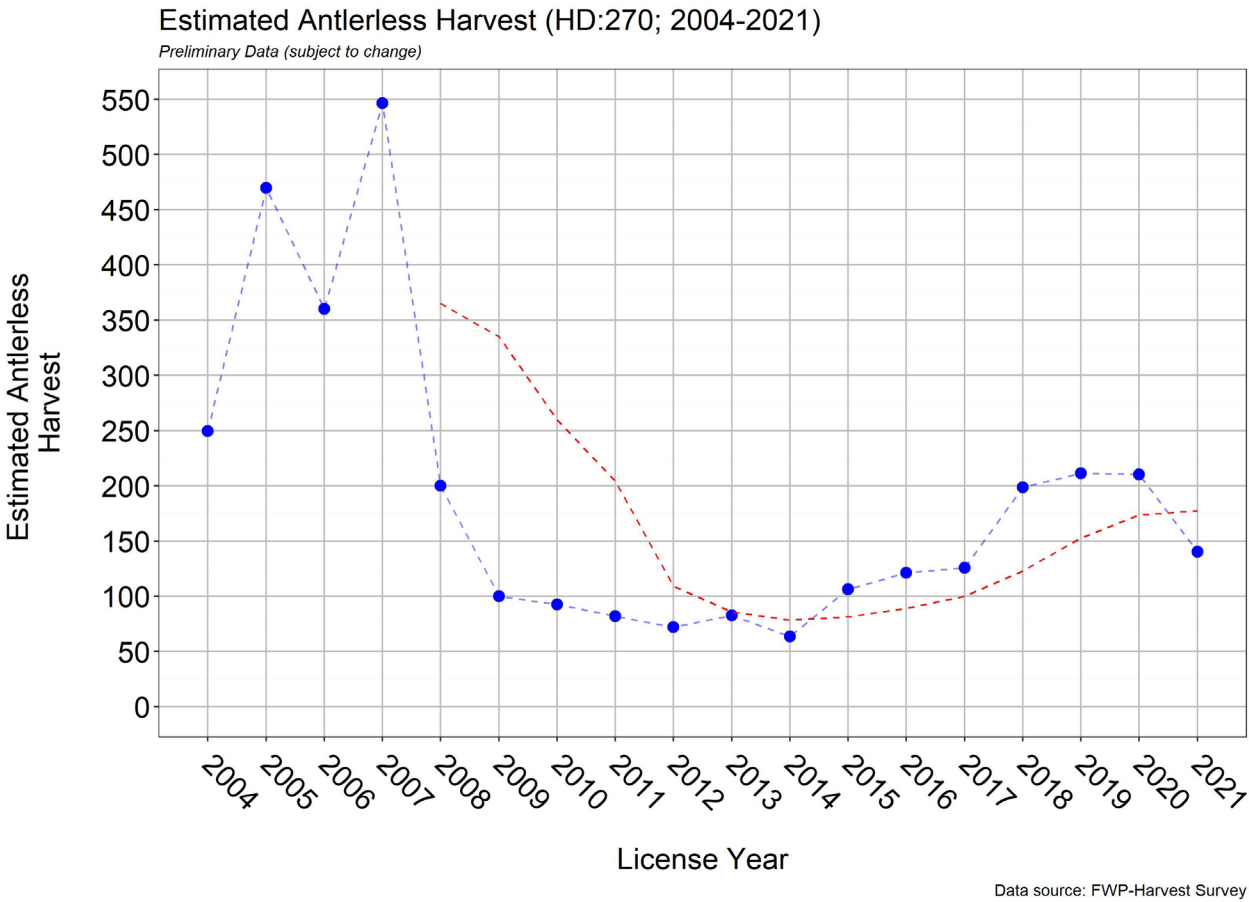
The HD270 elk population is technically within the population objective range; however, observing just 7 more elk during the 2023 spring survey would have tipped it over that range. The upper end of the range is 4,600 elk, and we observed 4,554. See Figure 1.

Increasing antlerless harvest has been difficult, owing to hunter crowding issues that push elk onto inaccessible private lands. Over the years, we have increased antlerless opportunity in several ways, however HD270 is prone to "shoot-out" situations that occur when elk migrating out of surrounding HDs congregate on open, accessible lands. Thus, antlerless opportunity must be managed to prevent such occurrences. The north portion of HD270 experiences these issues to a lesser degree, so we have added the 262-01 private land B-license and some additional general license opportunity (youth/PTHFV), which may explain why the harvest success on the 270-01 license is lower than its counterpart (270-02). We intentionally kept the 270-01 quota low when we instituted these changes, to avoid overharvest, which does not show evidence of having occurred.

We also proposed to increase the quota on the 270-02 from 400 to 500 licenses in 2023.



**Figure 1. HD270 population trend via aerial surveys. Population objective is 3,800 elk (range 3,040-4,600).**



**Figure 2. Antlerless elk harvest in HD270, 2004-2021. Existing levels are not sufficient to reduce the elk population.**

**5. 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).**

A significant portion of the elk that winter in HD270 migrate from higher elevations within the HD and in adjacent HDs, most notably HD321 (the Big Hole). This migration is weather-dependent, and elk may not become accessible to hunters if weather conditions remain mild throughout the hunting season. This also can contribute to low levels of antlerless harvest in some years.

**6. 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).**

This proposal has not been reviewed by the public.

Submitted by: Rebecca Mowry

Date: 5/10/2023

Approved: \_\_\_\_\_  
Regional Supervisor / Date

Disapproved / Modified by: \_\_\_\_\_  
Name / Date

Reason for Modification:

**MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS  
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

**Species:** Elk

**Region:** 2

**Hunting District:** 281 (281-01)

**Year:** 2023 Biennial Season Setting (Lic. Year 2024-25)

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

New Opportunity – LPT 281-01. Restore limited antlerless B-tags in HD281 (n=10; Quota Range 5-200).

LIC YR	SPECIES NAME	LPT DEF	PREFIX	SUFFIX	QUOTA MAIN	QUOTA MIN	QUOTA MAX	LICENSE PERMIT
2017	Elk	Antlerless	281	'01	50	5	200	Permit
2018	Elk	Antlerless	'281	'01	75	5	200	Permit
2019	Elk	Antlerless	'281	'01	25	5	200	Permit
2020	Elk	Antlerless	'281	'01	10	5	200	Permit
2021	Elk	Antlerless	'281	'01	10	5	200	Permit
2022	<i>Opportunity Removed</i>							
2023								

**2. 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.**

- Provide a limited opportunity for antlerless harvest in HD281
- Provide an opportunity to provide hunter pressure and redistribute elk along the boundary of HD281/HD284 where there is historic game damage issues.

During the 2021 Biennial Season Setting process a proposal to combine HD 281 with other HDs in the upper Blackfoot was ultimately pulled due to public feedback. Accordingly, final proposals required rebuilding HD281 LPTs, but the area biologist had vacated the position at this time. The limited opportunity for antlerless harvest in HD281 was mistakenly not included, likely because the confusion surrounding opportunities for tags < 50. Thus, it was FWP oversight for the loss of this opportunity and this proposal fixes this error.

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

The success of this proposal will be measured by:

- Continued public support for this license and >10% harvest success,
- The frequency of game-damage complaints around the HD281/HD284 boundary
- Stable or increasing 3-year average of elk survey data ensuring this is not contributing to a population decline.

**4. 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).**

The population has been below objective since 2017. The long cold spring resulted in delayed greenup by about 26 days in the Upper Blackfoot and then rapid greenup conditions making scheduling of helicopter time very difficult given the department was down one helicopter this spring. Overall this resulted in poor survey conditions for the 2023 spring season casting uncertainty about the magnitude of under objectiveness.



However, numbers were adequate for recruitment estimates which were poor < 20 calves: 100 cows. This opportunity is associated with social aspects of elk management more than biological and 10 additional antlerless opportunities is a conservative allocation of antlerless harvest under these conditions. An alternative, which was used in the interim on 2022 and 2023, is to provide supplemental game damage hunts to deal with game damage issue and not provide antlerless harvest in HD281. The public spoke out about the desire to have some limited opportunity to harvest antlerless elk in this district during elk plan meetings and locally at season setting meetings in Ovando and Lincoln.

Elk harvest success under this limited quota main (n=10; the same as the quotas in 2020 and 2021) average 0.45, so the expected harvest should be conservative. In previous years (2016-2019) elk B-permits had higher quotas ranging from 25-75 and hunter success on these permits ranged between 10-20%.

**5. 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).**

The long winter and cold spring resulted in green-up conditions being almost 1 month late. It was a long-cold winter, but snow depths were not extreme, they just arrived early and it never warmed up. Low recruitment reflects the winter conditions.

**6. 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).**

I have spoken with Helena Hunters and Anglers, some private landowners around Lincoln (e.g., Grosfield Ranch), enforcement, Region 2 wildlife program manager, and sportsmen calling directly about the loss of cow opportunity in this unit. This proposal was presented at 4 Season setting meeting in Missoula, Ovando, Lincoln, and Seeley Lake and there was generally support by those that attended. There was one comment submitted online (not local) in opposition to this opportunity, due to below objective status. However, they indicate that they thought the opportunity was intentionally removed to due to a decrease in elk numbers, which was not the case.

Submitted by: Mike Ebinger

Date: 8/01/2023

Approved:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Regional Supervisor / Date

Disapproved / Modified by:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name / Date

Reason for Modification: