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

Species: Elk
Region: 4
Hunting District: 417
Year: 2027

1. **Describe the proposed season / quotas changes and provide a summary of prior history (i.e., prior history of permits, season types, etc.).** This proposal makes the general license and 004-00 elk B license valid north of D-Y Trail/Knox Ridge Rd on private land only and adds a late shoulder season to this area. Additionally, this proposal would add an early shoulder season for antlerless elk on both the 004-00 elk B and general elk licenses on private land only across HD 417. Language in the 2027 Montana Hunting regulations for Elk in HD 417 would read (changes highlighted in RED):

License or Permit	Opportunity	Apply by Date	Quota	Quota Range	Early Season Dates	Archery Season Dates	General Season Dates	Heritage Muzzleloader Season Dates	Late Season Dates	Opportunity-specific Details and/or Restrictions
HD 417 – Armells Creek NOTE: HD 417 Check Restricted Area Legal Description (p. 28-30) Charles M. Russell (CMR) National Wildlife Refuge and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. NOTE: Elk hunters in HD 417 may also hunt on islands in the Missouri River adjacent to where their elk permit is valid. Island is defined as land completely surrounded by water at the time of the hunt.										
Elk										
General Elk License	Antlerless Elk	-	-	-	Aug 15- Sep 04	-	-	-	-	Private land only
					-	Sep 05-Oct 18	Oct 24-Nov 29	-	Nov 30-Feb 15	Only valid south of D-Y Trail to intersection of Knox Ridge Road, then south of Knox Ridge Road thereafter. ~~Not valid west of Stafford Ferry Rd.~~
					-	Sep 05-Oct 18	Oct 24-Nov 29	-	Nov 30-Feb 15	Valid in all Region 4 HDs except HDs 410 and 455 as listed under each HD. Only valid on private land.
Elk B License: 004-00	Antlerless Elk	Jun 1	UNL	-	Aug 15- Sep 04	-	-	-	-	Private land only
					-	Sep 05-Oct 18	Oct 24-Nov 29	-	Nov 30-Feb 15	Only valid south of D-Y Trail to intersection of Knox Ridge Road, then south of Knox Ridge Road thereafter. ~~Not valid west of Stafford Ferry Rd.~~ Not valid on National Forest lands, FWP WMAs, or CMR Refuge. Valid in all Region 4 HDs except HDs 410 and 455 as listed under each HD.
					-	Sep 05-Oct 18	Oct 24-Nov 29	-	Nov 30-Feb 15	Valid in all Region 4 HDs except HDs 410 and 455 as listed under each HD. Only valid on private land.
Elk B License: 417-02	Antlerless Elk	Jun 1	50	50-500	-	Sep 05-Oct 18	Oct 24-Nov 29	Dec 12-Dec 20	-	-
Elk Permit: 417-20	Either-sex Elk	April 1	225	-	-	Sep 05-Oct 18	Oct 24-Nov 29	Dec 12-Dec 20	-	1st and only choice. Permit must be used with valid General Elk License. Holders may not hunt Antlered Elk in any other HD during these described season dates.
Elk Permit: 417-21	Either-sex Elk	April 1	300	-	-	Sep 05-Oct 18	-	-	-	1st and only choice only. Only valid in HDs 417 and 426. Permit must be used with valid General Elk License. Holders may not hunt Antlered Elk in any other HD during these described season dates.

Elk hunting in HD 417 has historically been limited because timber and terrain rendered elk more visible and vulnerable than in the mountainous areas of western Montana. Outside of some general youth opportunity and regional private/DNRC B-licenses, HD 417's antlerless elk opportunity existed through an antlerless permit or license valid district-wide and a license valid only south of D-Y Trail/Knox Ridge Road until 2014. With increasing elk numbers, FWP increased elk hunting opportunity by eliminating those two LPTs and began allowing antlerless harvest with both a general elk license and the Region 4 antlerless elk license.

This change was intended to increase elk harvest and provide additional management flexibility for landowners to address game damage. In practice, hunter pressure increased in the northern portion of HD 417 where there is more public land, but generally fewer elk. This exacerbated elk distribution issues and resulted in no measurable increase in elk harvest relative to the elk population (Table 1). The addition of a late shoulder season in 2020 also did not measurably increase elk harvest. Elk surveys also indicated fewer elk north of D-Y Trail/Knox Ridge Road, formal game damage complaints were limited to landowners in the southern portion of the HD, and hunters regularly commented on too many hunters and too few elk in this area.

To reduce pressure in the northern portion of HD 417, but maintain management flexibility where higher elk concentrations existed, FWP again restricted antlerless elk hunting opportunity in 2022: the 004/general opportunity and late shoulder season were removed north of D-Y Trail/Knox Ridge Road but maintained to the south. A single, HD-wide 417 B-license was created to provide limited opportunity for public and private land elk hunting in the northern portion of the district. That structure remains in place today.

Table 1. Antlerless elk seasons, antlerless elk harvest, and total elk observed during aerial elk surveys in HD 417, 2004 to present.

Year	Antlerless Elk Season structure	Total Antlerless Harvest	Avg. Antlerless Harvest by Season Type	Total Elk Surveyed
2004	Regional Elk B[1] + Antlerless permit[2]	138		777
2005	Regional Elk B[1] + Antlerless permit[2]	126		653
2006	Youth general + Antlerless permit[2]	76		
2007	Youth general + Antlerless permit[2]	73		606
2008	Antlerless permit[2] + Antlerless license[3]	130	98.6 elk	
2009	Antlerless permit[2] + Antlerless license[3]	109		569
2010	Antlerless permit[2] + Antlerless license[3]	60		
2011	Antlerless permit[2] + Antlerless license[3]	140		
2012	Antlerless permit[2] + Antlerless license[3]	60		
2013	Antlerless permit[2] + Antlerless license[3]	74		733
2014	General license + Regional B license[4]	89		
2015	General license + Regional B license[4]	105		1224
2016	General license + Regional B license[4]	107	118.3 elk	
2017	General license + Regional B license[4]	96		1856
2018	General license + Regional B license[4]	121		
2019	General license + Regional B license[4]	148		1970
2020	General license + Regional B license[4] + late shoulder season to Feb 15	162	132.5 elk	
2021	General license + Regional B license[4] + late shoulder season to Feb 15	103		2367
2022	Antlerless license[2] + [General license/Regional B license[4]/late shoulder][3]	117		2545
2023	Antlerless license[2] + [General license/Regional B license[4]/late shoulder][3]	140	120.3 elk	2443
2024	Antlerless license[2] + [General license/Regional B license[4]/late shoulder][3]	107		2038
2025	Antlerless license[2] + [General license/Regional B license[4]/late shoulder][3]	117		

[1] Valid only on private and DNRC lands
[2] Valid district-wide
[3] Only valid S of D-Y Trail/Knox Ridge Rd
[4] Valid on private, BLM, and DNRC lands

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 quota change is to provide landowners in north of D-Y Trail/Knox Ridge Road in HD 417 with more flexibility in managing elk hunting and harvest on their properties, without increasing hunter

numbers and hunter pressure on public lands. Since the 2022 hunting season, two landowners with land north of D-Y Trail/Knox Ridge Road have made formal game damage complaints to FWP. Two other landowners south of D-Y Trail/Knox Ridge Road have also made elk-related complaints in the last four years.

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 in several ways:

1) No additional game damage complaints from landowners would be made for elk-related game damage north of D-Y Trail/Knox Ridge Road
2) Based on past elk surveys and harvest information, FWP estimates that harvesting an additional 100 antlerless elk per year will harvest 'recruitment' and stabilize or begin to reduce the elk population (Table 3). While this proposal alone will likely not accomplish that, providing additional flexibility to area landowners will fulfill FWP's responsibility in meeting that goal.

Table 3. Prescribed harvest required to stabilize the population (prescribed harvest = that year's elk recruitment; additional harvest needed to reduce the population).

Year	Total Elk Observed	C:100C	Calves Recruited		Hunting Season Population		Harvest		% Recruitment Harvested	
			Bulls	Cows	Bulls	Cows	Bulls	Cows	Bulls	Cows
2000	356	56	35	53	143	213	47	39	132%	73%
2003	774	41	65	97	280	494	77	105	119%	108%
2004	777	45	71	107	275	502	87	130	122%	122%
2005	653	53	58	88	292	361	94	117	161%	134%
2007	606	46	54	81	229	377	98	66	181%	81%
2009	569	36	48	71	172	397	71	104	149%	146%
2013	733	43	63	94	275	386	49	69	78%	73%
2015	1224	28	70	106	484	541	50	93	71%	88%
2017	1856	57	186	280	760	1044	65	87	35%	31%
2019	1970	42	160	241	751	990	82	134	51%	56%
2021	2367	44	210	316	762	1605	105	99	50%	31%
2022	2545	24	146	220	815	1730	161	114	110%	52%
2023	2443	22	148	223	597	1846	105	134	71%	60%
2024	2038	27	135	202	564	1474	185	107	137%	53%
2025			No survey 2024-25				185	117		

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 2023 Elk Management Plan (EMP) objectives for elk in HD 417 are to observe between 1,500 and 2,500 elk during winter aerial surveys and a bull:cow ratio of 30-45 bulls:100 cows. The 2023 EMP also has objectives related to maintaining a certain elk distribution (i.e., distribute elk harvest and elk distribution across landownerships with available habitat, minimize elk use of private lands where tolerance is low) and providing public recreational opportunities (i.e., reduce hunter crowding, provide opportunity to harvest antlerless elk and mature bulls, and increase or maintain harvest success rates).

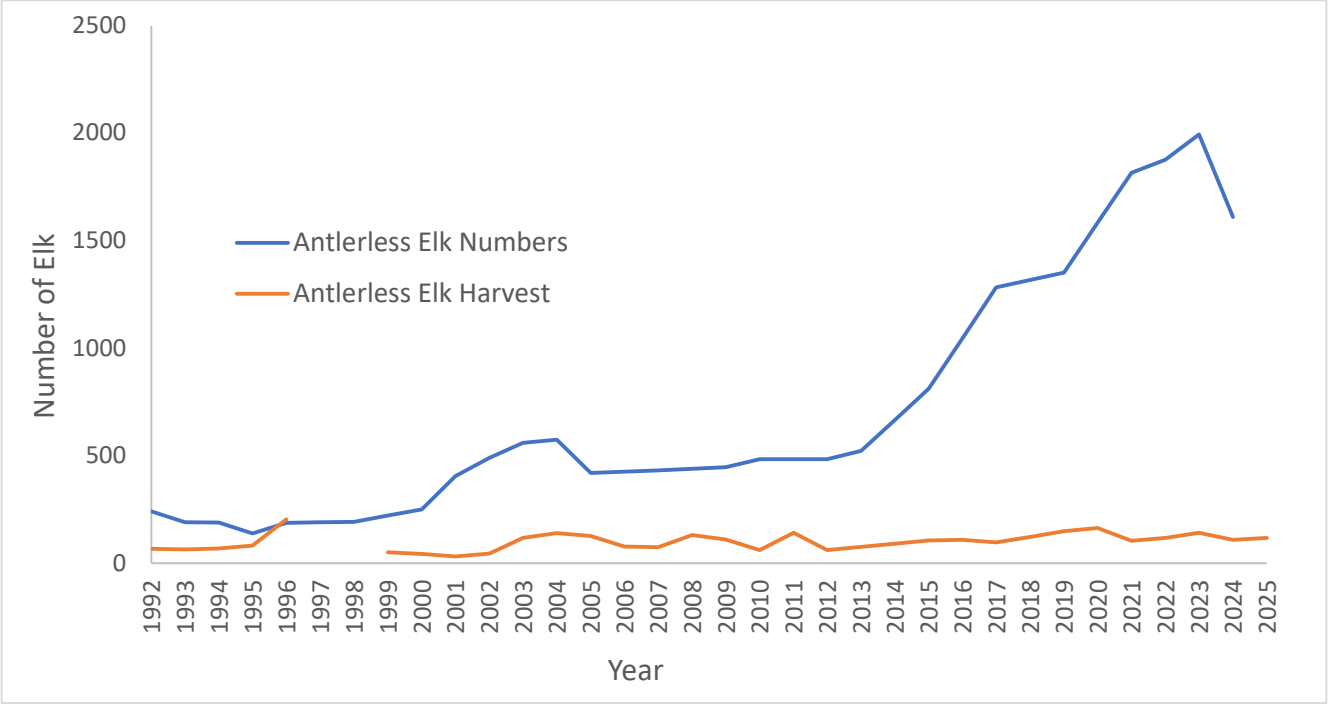
The last survey of HD 417 occurred in winter 2023-24; survey conditions in winters 2024-25 and 2025-26 were not adequate for flying elk. In February 2024, the area biologist observed 2038 total elk; 1272 cows, 337 calves, and 429 bulls. The area biologist calculated calf:cow and bull:cow ratios of 27:100 and 34:100, respectively. At this time, the elk population had stabilized and decreased from a high of ~2,500 in 2022 (Table 2). Several drought years may have reduced calf productivity and recruitment, but precipitation has since improved, and the elk population has likely increased since then.

However, despite the growth of the elk population over the last 20 years, and despite ample harvest opportunity, realized elk harvest has not increased significantly since the early 2000s (Table 1, Figure 1).

Table 2. Hunting district 417 elk surveys, 1992 to present.

Survey Year	----------Bulls----------			Bull Total	----------Antlerless Elk----------			Total	Calves: 100 Cows	Bulls: 100 Cows
	Yearling Bulls	Raghorn Bulls	Mat. Bulls		Calves	Cows	Uncl. Cows/Calves			
1992	49	40	19	108	88	152		348	58	71
1995	14	40	35	89	28	110		227	25	81
1996	59	63	63	185	60	127		372	47	146
1998	25	23	40	88	58	133		279	44	66
2000	39	34	34	107	89	160		356	56	67
2003	59	106	50	215	162	397		774	41	54
2004	63	60	81	204	178	395		777	45	52
2005	57	82	95	234	146	273		653	53	86
2007	51	60	64	175	135	296		606	46	59
2009	46	39	39	124	119	326		569	36	38
2013	58	58	96	212	126	292	103	733	43	73
2015	88	102	98	414	120	435	255	1224	28	67
2017	165	96	313	574	437	764	81	1856	57	70
2019	150	137	304	591	316	749	286	1970	42	62
2021	224	78	250	552	526	1289		2367	44	34
2022	216	172	281	669	366	1510		2545	24	44
2023	146	137	166	449	371	1623		2443	22	28
2024	**113**	**124**	**192**	**429**	**337**	**1272**		**2038**	**27**	**34**

Figure 1. Number of antlerless elk observed in HD 417 and antlerless elk harvest, 1992 to 2005.



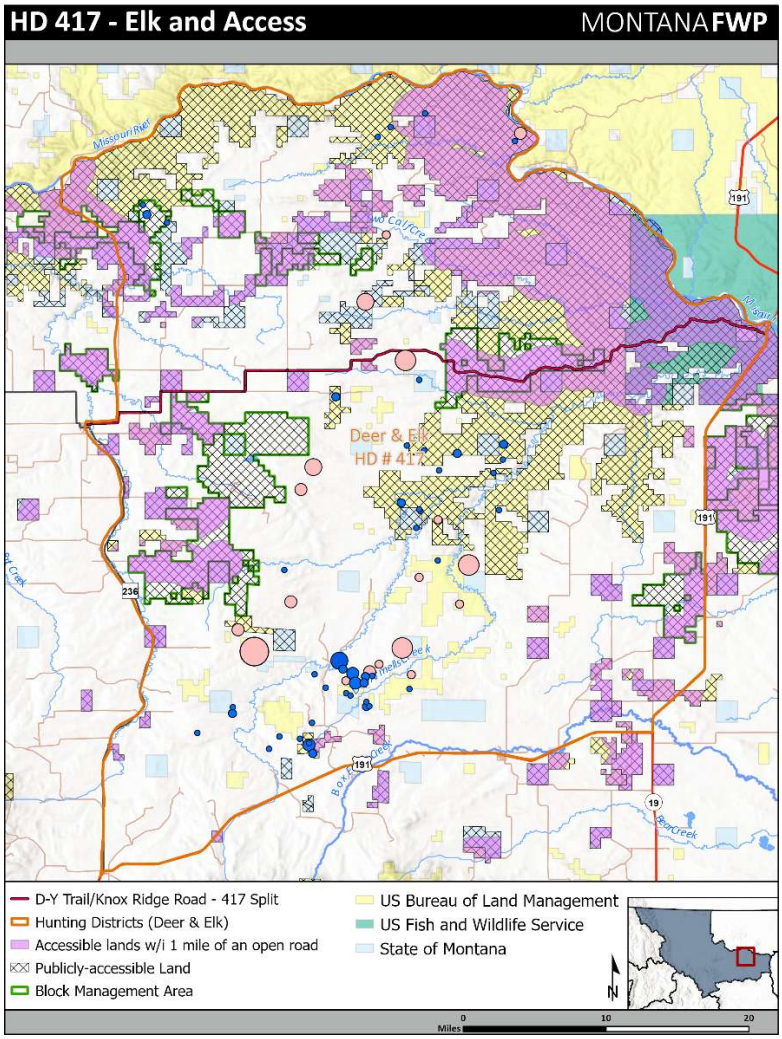
5. **Provide information related to any weather/habitat factors, public or private land use or resident and nonresident hunting opportunity that have relevance to this change (i.e., habitat security, hunter access, vegetation surveys, weather index, snow conditions, and temperature / precipitation information).**

As noted above, elk in HD 417 were increasing, but the population stabilized between 2,000 and 2,500 elk around 2021. Several drought years reduced calf recruitment, but better precipitation in 2024, 2025, and 2026, along with mild winters, are likely facilitating an increase in the population. Additionally, mild winters 2024-25 and 2025-26 did not allow for aerial surveys. An aerial survey of HD 417 is a priority for Region 4 during winter 2026-27.

Hunting access is not ubiquitous across HD 417. While there are a few Block Management Areas (BMAs) and some landowners allow public hunting access, access is still extremely limited given the number of elk and amount of elk habitat in this HD (Figure 2). A lack of access fundamentally inhibits FWP's ability to manage elk populations, and FWP continually tries to work with area landowners to improve hunter access and elk harvest. Antlerless elk management is further complicated by bull management in this HD; HD 417 is a Special Management District (SMD) for bull elk per the 2023 EMP. The demand for limited-entry (LE) rifle and archery permits is high, and competition on public lands and for access to private hands among various hunters (either-sex elk, antlerless elk, deer, upland bird, etc.) further confounds elk management in this and other central MT elk HDs.

This proposal will mitigate landowner concerns about elk game damage within statutorily- and commission-established hunting season timeframes, without further contributing to hunter pressure on already-crowded public lands. Landowners who wish to take advantage of this additional tool may do so, and landowners who have other wildlife or hunter management objectives on their properties are not inhibited from continuing their management.

Figure 2. Elk distribution in HD 417, overlaid on a map of the district depicting legally accessible public lands within 1-mile of an open road.



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 HD 417 landowners and a local legislator in Winifred on September 7, 2026. It received unanimous support. This proposal has also been vetted by area game wardens, who do not object to this change. This proposal will not negatively impact sportsmen, as it represents an increase in hunter opportunity but does not cause additional pressure on public lands. In fact, hunting activity on private lands prior to the start of archery season and throughout general season north of D-Y Trail/Knox Ridge Road may help distribute elk to public lands during that time.

Submitted by: Sonja Andersen
Date: 9/04/2026
Approved: _____
Regional Supervisor / Date

Disapproved / Modified by: _____
Name / Date

Reason for Modification: