

ELK HUNTING ACCESS PROGRAM

“454” ACCESS AGREEMENT

2025 PROGRAM EVALUATION REPORT



MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS

Parks and Outdoor Recreation Division | 2025

2025 Elk Hunting Access (EHA) Agreement Program Evaluation Report

Program Overview

The Elk Hunting Access Agreement Program (EHA) was established by the 2001 Legislature through House Bill 454 (87-2-513, MCA). These agreements, often called “454 agreements,” allow landowners to receive an elk license, permit, or both to hunt on their own property in exchange for providing free public elk hunting access to at least three hunters—one of whom may be chosen by the landowner. Landowners may assign their license benefit to an immediate family member, an authorized full-time employee of the landowner, or a person with a developmental disability or physical disability.

The legislature has modified the EHA Program multiple times throughout the years- most recently allowing a landowner to assign their license benefit to a person with a developmental or physical disability (SB148, 2025).

The EHA program is a voluntary, license/permit incentive-based initiative designed to increase public hunting access opportunities on private lands while supporting landowners in managing elk populations and minimizing impacts to agricultural operations.

Through strategic landowner partnerships, the program seeks to enhance public hunting opportunity and help balance wildlife distribution across Montana’s landscapes.

2025 Results

The department received 31 complete EHA applications with the Fish and Wildlife Commission approving all as presented by the Department. This resulted in the Department issuing 47 licenses/permits to landowners or eligible designees through the Elk Hunting Access (EHA) agreements. Unlike previous years, in 2025 no landowner applications were denied or sent to a post commission meeting random drawing due to exceeding the department recommended allocation (10% above the biennial quota) for these EHA opportunities. Of the 31 agreements, 13 were landowners also participating in the Block Management program. Overall, the 2025 EHA program enrolled a total of 423,901 acres- some of which were also simultaneously enrolled in Block Management.

In accordance with [ARM 12.9.908](#) and to better understand the hunter/landowner satisfaction of the 2025 EHA program, FWP staff conducted a mixed-method approach to obtain this year’s report data.

2025 program survey methods

To evaluate harvest success and satisfaction, access program staff sent a post season email with a link to an online survey to landowners and designees (if applicable), as well as public hunters, on February 23, 2026. Reminder emails were sent to all participants approximately two weeks after the initial email. Survey results were compiled on April 8, 2026.

Additionally, staff utilized Block Management (BMA) permission coupons and permission slips to survey hunters or provided post-hunt survey cards when it was not possible to email hunters. FWP did not offer an online EHA sign up for public hunter opportunities on lands enrolled in both EHA and Type 1 BMA (self-administered permission and unrestricted) because these properties were already open to the public. Therefore, FWP was not able to collect email addresses and used BMA permission coupons, slips, or survey cards instead.

For private lands offering additional access and enrolled in Type 1 BMA, Type 2 BMA (someone other than hunter administered permission and often restricted) or lands not at all enrolled in BMA, but open through the EHA program, public hunters had the opportunity to sign up online from July 1-July 15. Public hunters who held the appropriate permits/licenses were randomized by licensing staff and access program staff contacted the public hunters via email to secure commitments to hunt lands enrolled in the EHA program.

Landowner evaluation and satisfaction

Responses were received from landowners for 13 of the 31 agreements (41.9%) regarding their satisfaction with the program. Respondents suggest most landowners (93%) were satisfied or very satisfied with the experience they had being enrolled in the EHA program in 2025. Likewise, most landowners were satisfied or very satisfied (93%) with the behavior of the people who hunted lands enrolled in the EHA program with most respondents (93%) wanting to participate again in the future. However, as in previous years, some landowners expressed frustration by the lack of public hunters contacting them to secure hunting opportunities (despite the hunter agreeing to the opportunity with the department earlier in the season).

When asked if landowners provided free public elk hunting access during the archery and the general rifle season in addition to the statutorily required public hunters, a majority (73%) of landowners responded “YES” to the question. However, it is important to note many if not most of these additional public hunters were identified because a landowner is simultaneously enrolled in Block Management and some were reporting Block Management hunter days (e.g, unlimited).

Suggestions for EHA program improvement from landowner respondents include:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Speed up the office paperwork.</i> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Better communication with FWP on who’s been designated to hunt as it was unclear who was picked and it changed once. It was confusing.</i> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Hunters parking where asked at designated parking areas and following landowner rules. (Hunters were driving up and down county roads and entering unassigned areas).</i> |

Landowner/designee harvest

Responses were received from 26 of the 47 (55%) landowner/designee hunters regarding their days spent hunting on enrolled lands. Of the respondents, most hunted (96%) and approximately half (52%) of landowners and/or designees harvested elk on enrolled lands. Most landowners and/or designees harvested a branch antlered bull (92%) during the general rifle season (83%) hunting for an average of 9.3 days.

Landowner-selected public hunters

Of the 31 agreements, 20 landowners indicated they wanted to pick a public hunter or hunters (depending on access permit/license terms) from the successful drawing lists or general license opportunities. Responses were received from 13 of the 32 (41%) landowner-selected public hunters

regarding their satisfaction and harvest on enrolled lands. Of the respondents, most (77%) found it was easy or very easy to get in contact with the landowner (or ranch manager) to plan elk hunting trips to the enrolled property. One landowner-selected public hunter did not attempt to contact the ranch to ask for permission and 1 found it to be very difficult to get in contact with the ranch to plan an elk hunting trip.

For respondents, only 9 (69%) reported that they went hunting on enrolled lands while 4 (31%) did not hunt the enrolled property. When asked why they did not hunt, the most common response was: “I heard or was told there were no elk on the ranch” (3), “I couldn’t get in contact with the ranch” (1), “I hunted and/or harvested elk at another location” (1), “Other reason” (1)- respondents could select more than one option.

For those who reported they hunted (9), all saw elk and two-thirds (66.67%) harvested elk hunting an average of 6.1 days each. A total of 6 elk (1 antlerless and 5 branch antler bulls) were reported harvested by landowner-selected public hunters all during the general rifle season. For those who reported (9), most were satisfied or very satisfied (88.9%) with their experience they had via the EHA program.

When asked if they’d like to participate or be selected again in the future, 10 said “yes” (77%), 2 said “no” and 1 was unsure.

Feedback from landowner-selected public hunters about their experience or suggestions on how to improve the program included:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>I grew up in this state, know what good hunting is. The barriers around where you could and couldn't go were huge. All the elk were in a certain area that they held for themselves. I'd recommend not giving these types of tags for landowners that don't want to provide a sniff of equal opportunity. Another participant that I was camped next to also got frustrated and left. I gave up as well and ended up just paying someone for access. I paid the 2x what they were asking due to how they actually treated people, they were fantastic!</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Really not allowed to go where big bulls were, good area was "saved". It's taken me 30 years to draw the tag. Landowner a good person, but severely exploited the tag system for own benefit.</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>The workers were very professional and had a good layout of what was happening on the land.</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Cowan & Son Hunting is a Godsend for hunters such as myself! I have hunted their ranch for 19 years and harvested numerous Elk. It is a quality hunt, surpassing most Elk Hunter's wildest dreams, even when not successful it is an awesome adventure and memory maker. Many thanks to the family!! Hats off to them.</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Do away with the program if this allows for special landowner tags. It's BS and lots of landowners are doing it. They are 100% completely manipulating Montana FWP. (At least in this trophy area)</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Very satisfied at this time, thank you for working with the landowners</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Getting in contact with the ranch was more difficult that I thought. I would just suggest a prompt response from the contact.</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>I would say it will be hard to improve on but go for it! Thank you to FWP and Landowners for the opportunity!</i>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Continue the program. As being a mobility impaired hunter (quadriplegic) this hunt provided an opportunity for me to harvest a bull elk on land that has limited access. I find it difficult to gain access that allows someone with my disability. I also have a PTHFV endorsement but a lot off the BMA landowners only allow walk-in hunting so basically that excludes me. MTFWP has done a fairly good job with allowing youth and PTHV hunters access in some units but it still falls short overall. This type of program gets a lot of negative comments about catering to the rich landowners but it also provides an opportunity for hunters in my position. I hunted this year on the N Bar Ranch. It is a hard tag to draw but I tried and am extremely happy with the staff and owners for providing me an opportunity. If fellow hunters don't like it don't apply. I would be more than grateful to have better drawing odds. If they would like to use my wheelchair as a 4 wheeler to see how difficult it can be I would loan them mine.</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Was told to contact outfitter on ranch made many attempts to call outfitter never would answer</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Better communication on how it all works</i>

FWP selected public hunters

In total, responses were received from 79 of the 113 (70%) FWP-selected public hunters regarding their satisfaction and harvest on enrolled lands. Of the respondents, most (84%) found it was easy or very easy to get in contact with the landowner (or ranch manager) to plan elk hunting trips to the enrolled property. Two FWP-selected public hunters did not attempt to contact the ranch to ask for permission and a handful (5) found it to be very difficult to get in contact with the ranch to plan an elk hunting trip.

For respondents, 58 (73%) reported that they went hunting on enrolled lands while 17 did not hunt the enrolled property. When asked why they did not hunt, the most common responses were hunting/harvesting elsewhere (5), heard/were told there were no elk on the ranch (4), didn't think it was worth the time to elk hunt there (2), planned to hunt during late elk shoulder season (2), never attempted to contact the ranch (1), couldn't get in contact with the ranch (1), family or work issue prevented from hunting (1), or other reason not listed (5).

For those who reported they hunted, just over half saw elk (51.9%) and a minority (16.5%) of the FWP-selected public hunters harvested elk. FWP-selected public hunters reported hunting an average of 4.4 days each. A total of 13 elk (5 antlerless; 1 spike bull and 7 branch antlered bulls) were harvested by FWP-selected public hunters during the general rifle season.

FWP-selected public hunters who had used the online sign-up (non-Type 1 BMA) were the only hunters asked about their satisfaction with their experience or whether they'd like to be selected again in the future. The FWP-selected public hunters who were also Type 1 BMA hunters were not asked these questions.

For those FWP-selected public hunters who reported (23), just over two-thirds were satisfied or very satisfied (69.6%) with 7 (30.4%) reporting dissatisfaction with their experience. When asked if they'd like to participate or be selected again in the future, FWP-selected public hunters (38) 26 said "yes" (68.4%), 6 said "no" and 1 was unsure.

Feedback from FWP-selected public hunters about their experience or suggestions on how to improve the program included:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Appreciate the Program and Faber Ranch. Thank you all!</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>He had 3 other hunters on the property. I felt I was butting in. They set up 1 guy to get a bull, but it was awkward.</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>It was a very large area, and quite hilly....so finding the elk took a long time, and then evaluating how hard we were willing to work to haul a harvested elk out also was a factor. It would have been very helpful to have had a scouting day prior to our actual hunt.</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The Nbar made my hunt very successful with opportunity</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Land owner only wants you to come when his family is not there. Or kill an elk until his tags are filled. Every time I contacted him he said they had no elk.</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Swanz was the easiest going land owner I've ever talked to and was super easy to get ahold. Service is bad at his ranch and he always called me back within the next day or so. So grateful this opportunity!!</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The owner and Ranch personnel were all great, easy to get along with and a pleasure to hunt with.</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Great people, they were very helpful</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Elk only come onto ranch after snow gets deep in high country. No snow this year. No elk.</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I had a cow elk permit and we did not see any cows.</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Keep up the great work!</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>If I could hunt rifle on his land and with no other hunter in the area</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Having access to the property for a day to scout and get a lay of the land, and being able to use an ATV, or side by side on existing roads within the property to haul out a harvested elk would also have been better.</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Program was a cool opportunity- just did not see any elk and VERY little sign of elk.</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Once I submitted my dates I was not responded too for quit awhile so planning a hunt was difficult. I realize these people are opening their land and it is very much appreciated but hunters cant always leave on a whim if opportunities open up.</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Seems to be a good program. Maybe have a guaranteed number of hunting days for the hunter. Question #4: I DID hunt the ranch but it was during the Dec muzzleloader dates and several dates in Jan and Feb.</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>If hunters would also be allowed to harvest a second elk on a b tag if they were selected for a bull and they had drawn the b tag</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>That was a waste of time and fuel. He drove us right through where you hunt in the dark. No wonder there weren't any elk.</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Make sure the ranches that are enrolled make good effort to accommodate the selected hunter. Especially when they have been well compensated. I was nice and didn't push when 2 of the ranches family members had tags, but then never heard from them again. They were supposed to call when the family had gotten there elk. I admit, I did NOT pursue them aggressively, I try to be respectful to landowners.</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>When I first called, this specific land owner told me that he wanted his grandkids to get their elk first. He stated that there were only small bulls that ever came down and</i>

<p><i>that he would call me, and others if they were there. This was difficult because we live two hours away and have to plan around work. He never did end up calling.</i></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Very hard to kill elk.. have to walk miles to see any thing and if you do, you need to think about getting the carcass out,, wish they would let us drive in if we get one on the dirt roads, understand most hunters won't go by rules, but it sucks when you have to think about how long it's going to take to get the carcass out..</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Better communication. I had no idea i was selected to hunt any of these ranches or even had the opportunity to do so. I would have jumped at the opportunity to attempt to harvest an elk on any available properties, but I never received an email or guidance directing me to contact anyone to hunt on these ranches. I have 3 children hunting under 15 years old and I signed all of us for every opportunity through the Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks website that I could find, and never received any correspondence about opportunities to hunt. I am not sure where the disconnect is at, but I would love to have an opportunity for myself or my wife and children to be able to pursue elk on any available properties- that is how we keep our family fed all year long. If someone could let me know what I am missing here I would truly appreciate it! Thank you.</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I was selected for a Late Season Hunt, not General season. I contacted landowner 30 days before the first day I planned to hunt, as it says to in the contract, and we agreed I would call back the day before to confirm I was still hunting. I called the day before leaving and the landowner stated he had people hunting mountain lions on the property, and i should've called 2 weeks ago (we never agreed to that). The property is only 850 acres and since there were guys running dogs for several days, all the elk we're blown out of the area. I don't know the process of vetting landowners applications/elk distribution, but I think it would be worth taking a closer look.</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I couldn't think of one I had a great experience and it all worked out for me. So thank you guys for putting this on and everyone who gets a chance to be in the EHA program should be thankful for the program!</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>This ranch did not have residence elk and only limited acres available. My opinion is in most cases the reason the ranch allow access is for them to get a elk permit.</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I got an email from FWP about this ranch, and apparently all access is handled through FWP instead of the ranch/ranch manager. That's why I marked it a 2 on question 1 - it was very confusing and difficult to get in touch with officials to answer questions and get information. I was fortunately able to harvest an elk much closer to home and did not have a chance to get out on this ranch, and while I hope to be a participant again, I hope I'll be dealing with the landowner directly instead of through the state.</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>WAS GRATEFUL FOR WHAT I RECIEVED AS ITS IMPOSSIBLE TO HUNT PRIVATE IN THE DISTRICK.</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Allow even more hunters in the program. This was quite the gift for me. It is very much appreciated. Thank you very much!</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I can't really think of anything.</i>

The surveys were developed by FWP's human dimensions supervisor. FWP access staff implemented survey distribution, data analysis, and follow-up phone calls and the production of this report.