

HD 204 RESEARCH SUMMARY

Selected Results from Surveys of Elk Hunters & Private Landowners Regarding Elk Management in Montana's Hunting District 204

ABSTRACT

In 2020, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) conducted surveys of hunters and private landowners regarding elk hunting and elk management in Hunting District 204 located just south and east of Missoula, Montana as a follow up to a survey conducted in 2014.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Hunting district 204 (HD 204) is located southeast of Missoula, Montana in the northern Sapphire Mountain Range. A 2014 landowner and hunter survey were conducted by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) to measure perceptions of elk hunting and elk management in HD 204. This 2020 survey instrument is adapted from the 2014 survey to measure if perceptions of elk hunting and elk management have changed over time. The broad objectives of the 2014 and 2020 survey were to measure perceptions of:

- Elk management population objectives
- Elk hunting regulations
- Hunting access

Hunter Survey:

In early November 2020, surveys were distributed to a randomly selected sample of N=2,000 resident elk license holders in Missoula, Ravalli, and Granite counties in Montana. Since this was a replication of the 2014 study, it was determined that a subset of 2,000 from the random sample of 5,000 license holders from the 2014 study would provide sufficient data for analysis. There were two mailings, one in November and a follow-up mailing sent to non-respondents in early January 2021. Of the 2,000 surveys distributed, there were 746 respondents and 135 undeliverable. The overall survey response rate was 40%.

Landowner Survey:

In early November 2020, surveys were distributed to a comprehensive list of 58 private landowners who own 160+ acres in the HD 204 area (as identified by Fish, Wildlife & Parks GIS staff). A follow-up mailing was sent out in early January 2021. Of the 58 surveys distributed, there were 22 respondents, 3 undeliverable, and 1 absentee. The overall response rate was 41.5%.

SURVEY RESULTS

Landowner Respondent Characteristics:

The average age of respondents was 62 years. Eighty-nine percent of respondents were male; eleven percent female.

Motivation for owning land in HD 204? 23.8% agricultural production; 28.6% livestock production; 47.6% other (hunting, fishing, quality of life, rangeland and wildlife stewardship)

Do you have irrigated crops? 62% NO, 38% YES

How much acreage owned? Mean 680

How many years owned: Mean 26 years

(* denotes same question asked in 2014)

Hunter Respondent Characteristics:

The average age of respondents was 52 years. Ninety-two percent of respondents were male; eight percent female. (Same as 2014)

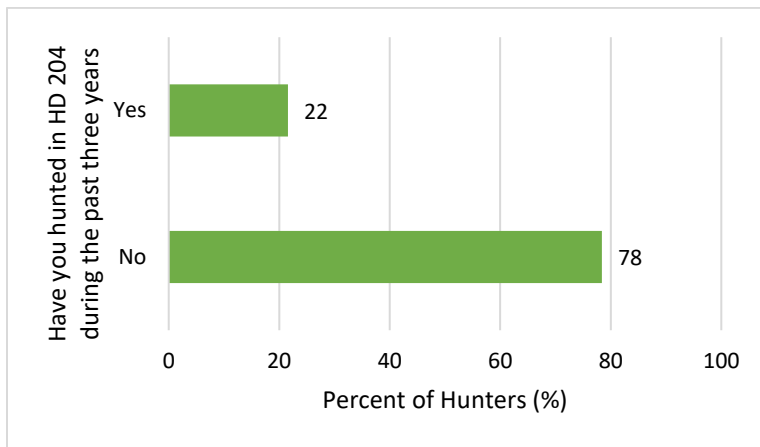
Average number of days hunting elk in HD 204? 8 days

Average number of days hunting elk anywhere in Montana? 16 days

Motivation for elk hunting in HD 204? Overwhelmingly, hunters stated that their motivation for hunting elk in HD 204 is the convenience and close proximity to home (same as 2014).

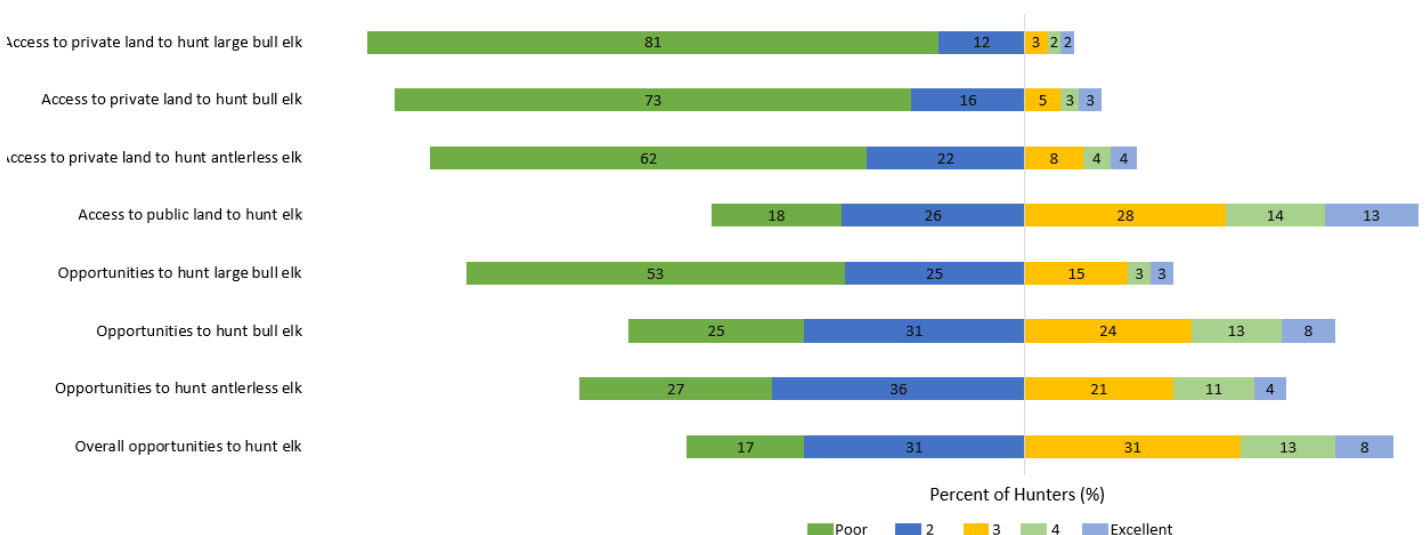
HUNTER RESULTS:

Q1: Have you hunted elk in HD 204 at any time during the past three years?



78% of hunters have not hunted in HD 204 during the past three years; 22% of hunters have hunted elk in HD 204 during the past three years.

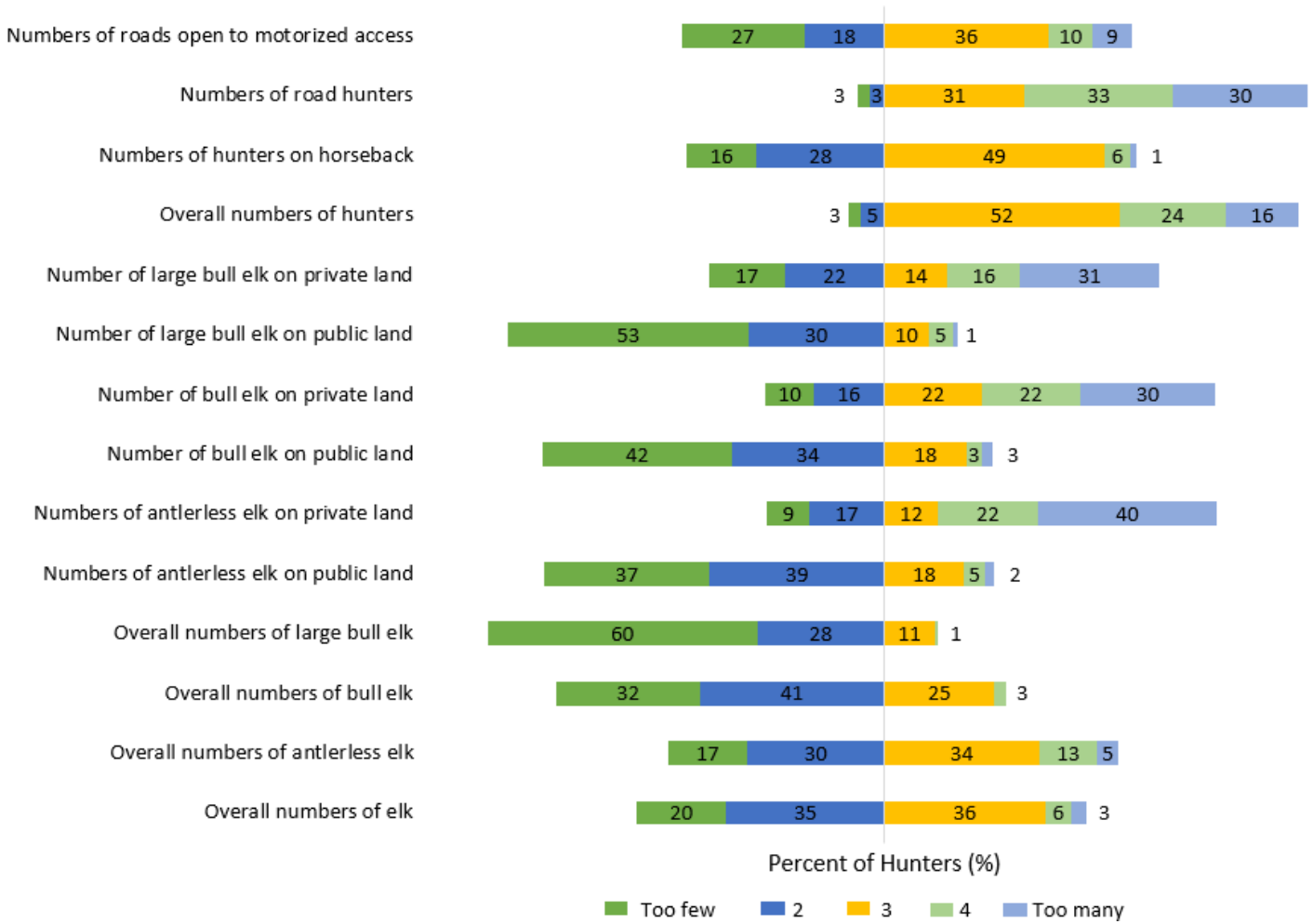
Q2a-h: At present (i.e. last 3 years), on a scale from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent) how would you rate the following in HD 204?



Overall trend similar to 2014.

(* denotes same question asked in 2014)

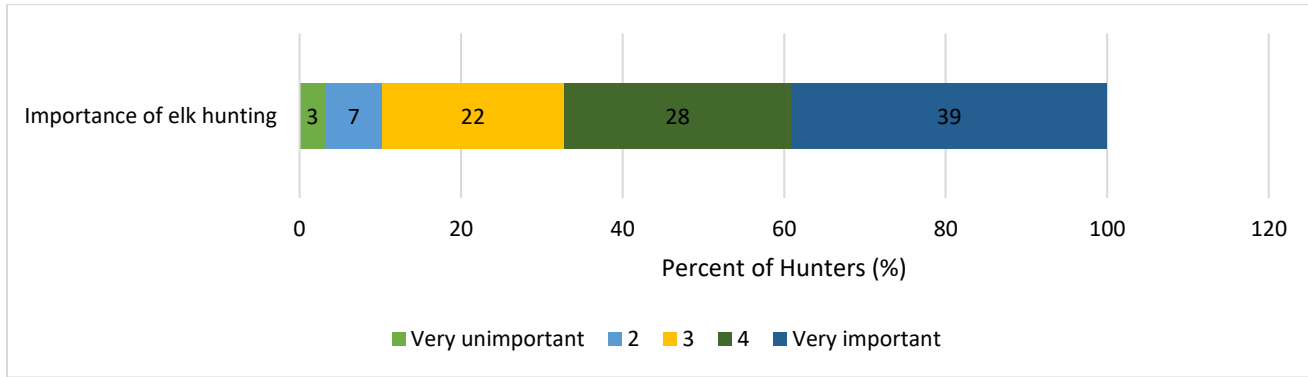
Q3a-n: At present (i.e. last 3 years), on a scale from 1 (too few) to 5 (too many) how would you rate the following in HD 204 during the hunting season?



Overall trend similar to 2014.

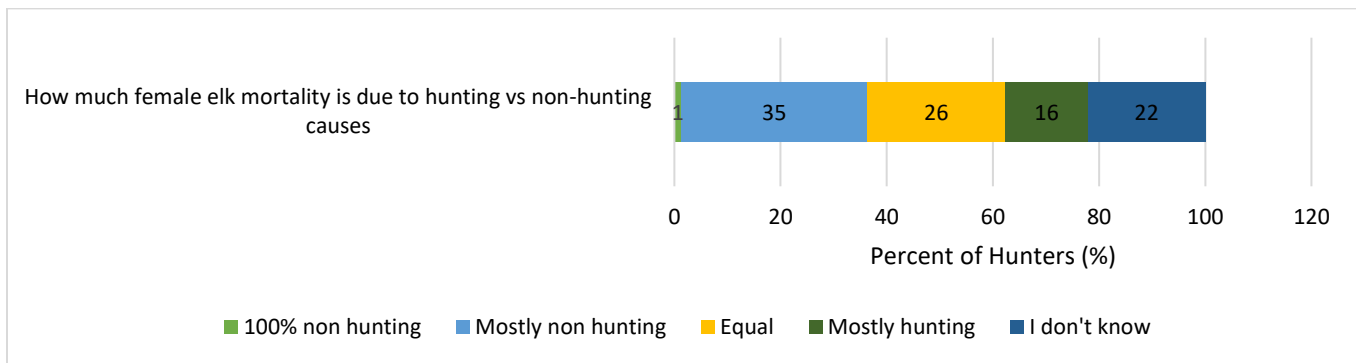
(* denotes same question asked in 2014)

Q4: On a scale from 1 (very unimportant) to 5 (very important), how important is elk hunting to you in HD 204?*



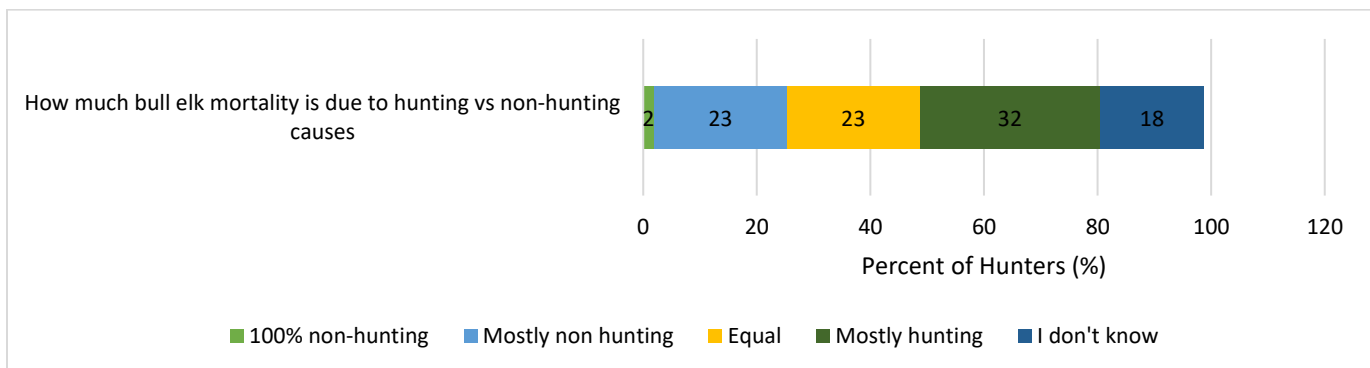
Overall trend similar to 2014.

Q6: In your view, how much adult female elk mortality is due to hunting vs non-hunting causes?



Most hunters believe that adult female elk mortality is due to mostly non hunting causes.

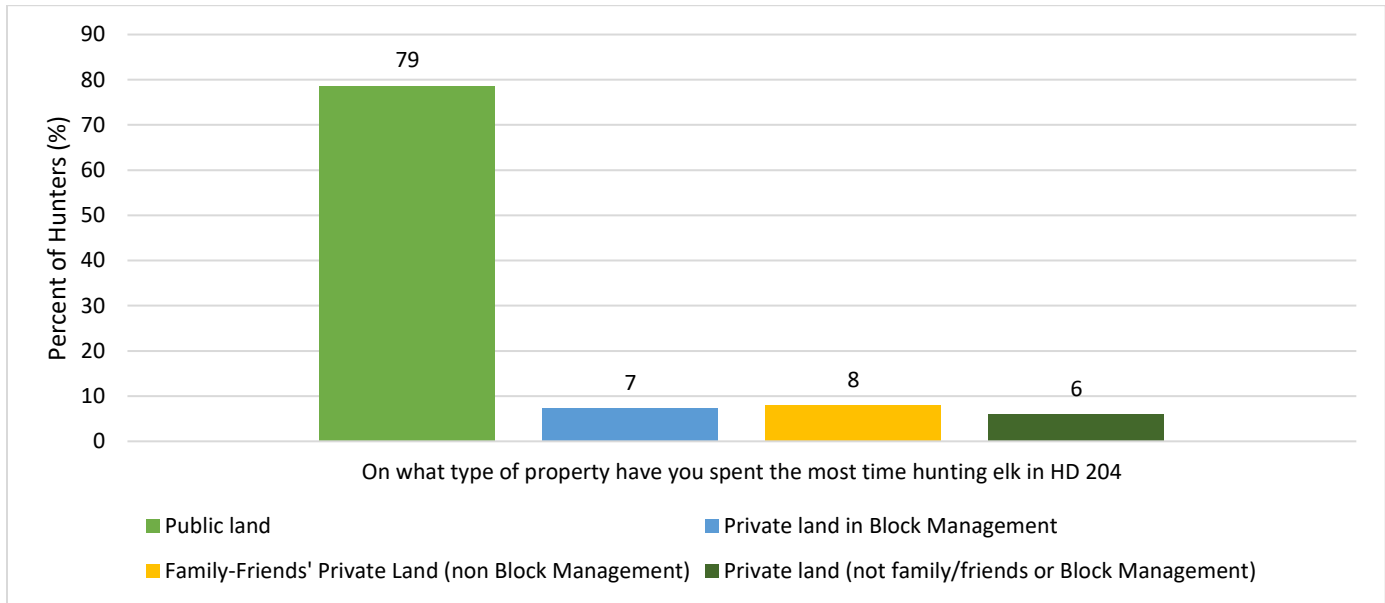
Q7: In your view, how much adult bull elk mortality is due to hunting vs non-hunting causes?



Most hunters believe that bull elk mortality is due to mostly hunting causes.

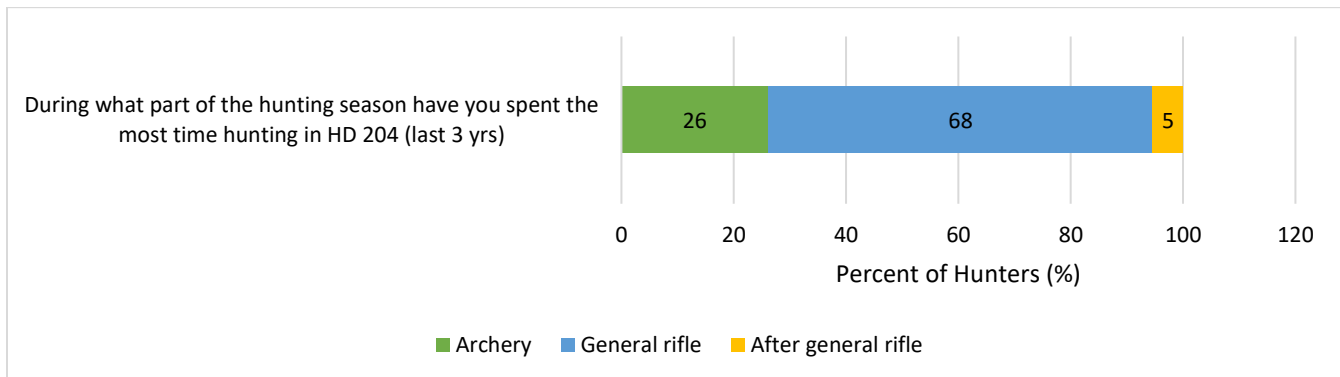
(* denotes same question asked in 2014)

Q8: Over the past three years, what type of property have you spent the most time hunting elk in HD 204?*
 Similar to 2014.



Overall trend similar to 2014.

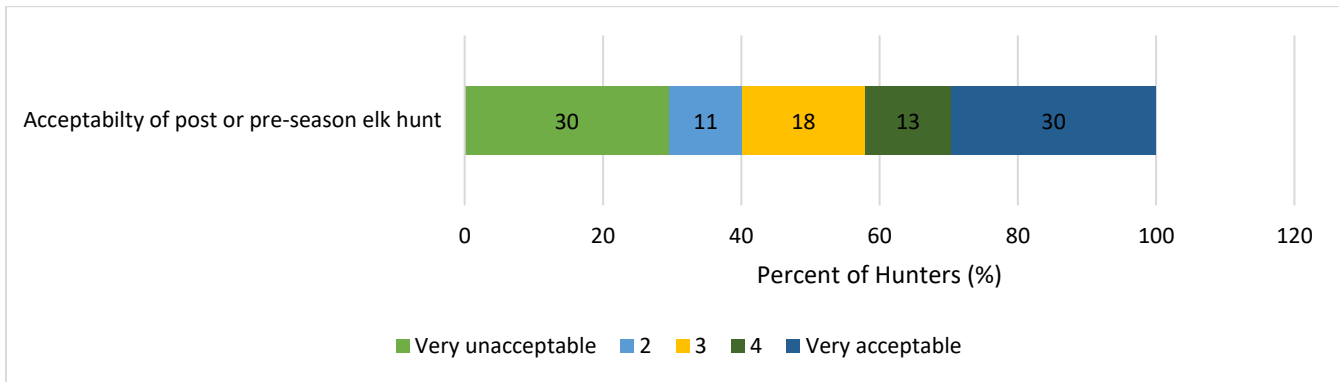
Q9: Over the past three years, what part of the hunting season have you spent the most time hunting elk in HD 204?



Most hunters have spent the most time hunting elk in HD 204 during the general rifle season.

(* denotes same question asked in 2014)

Q11: Acceptability of post or pre-general season hunt in HD 204?

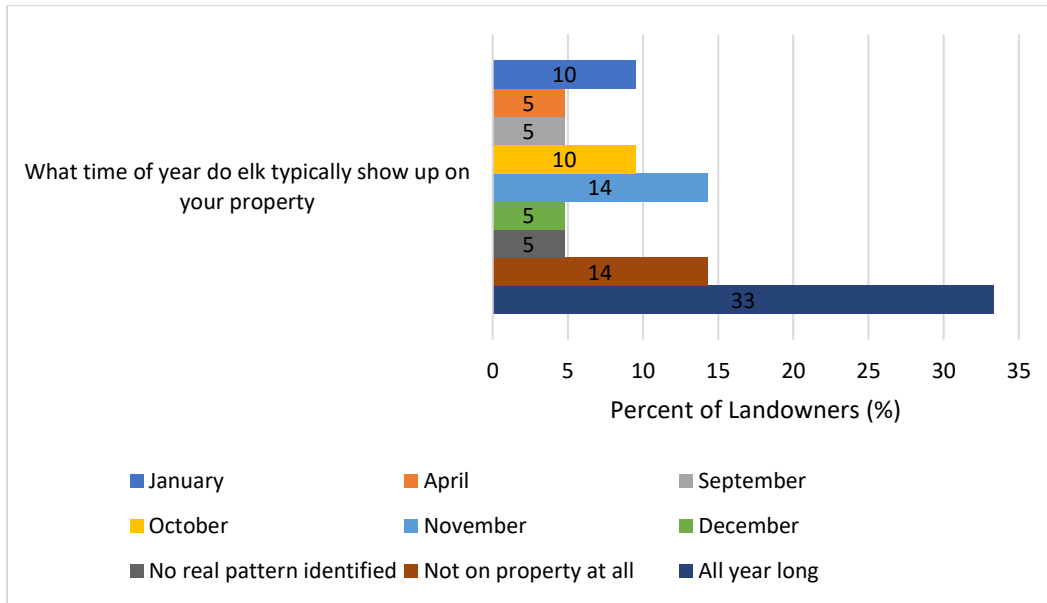


Hunters were split between very unacceptable and very acceptable in regards to post or pre-general season hunt acceptability.

(* denotes same question asked in 2014)

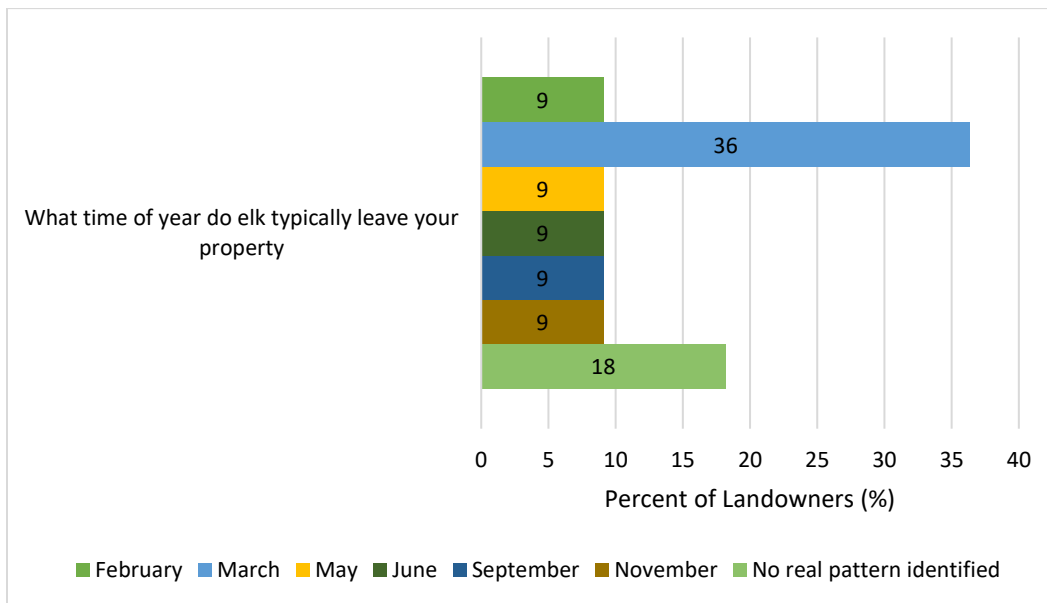
LANDOWNER RESULTS:

Q1: At what time of year do elk generally show up on your property?*



In comparison to 2014, landowners report more elk showing up in November.

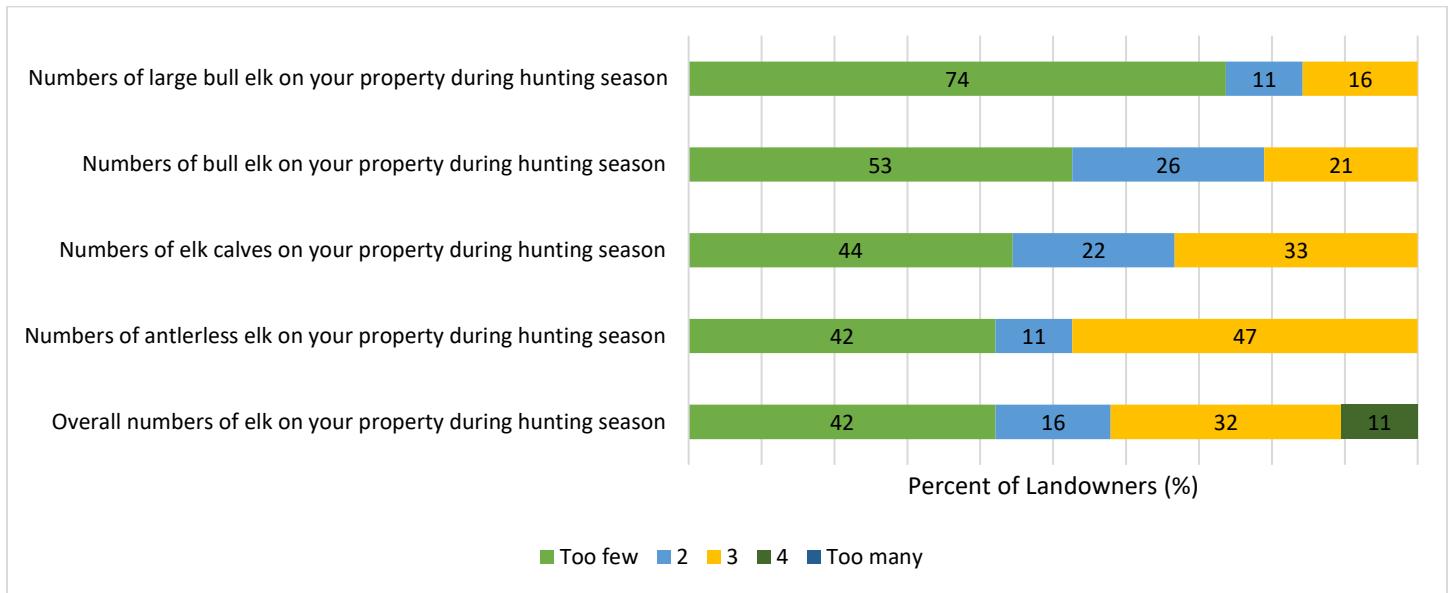
Q2: At what time of year do elk typically leave your property?*



In comparison to 2014, landowners report more elk leaving in March.

(* denotes same question asked in 2014)

Q3a-e: At present, on a scale from 1 (too few) to 5 (too many) how would you rate the following on your property during the HUNTING SEASON?*



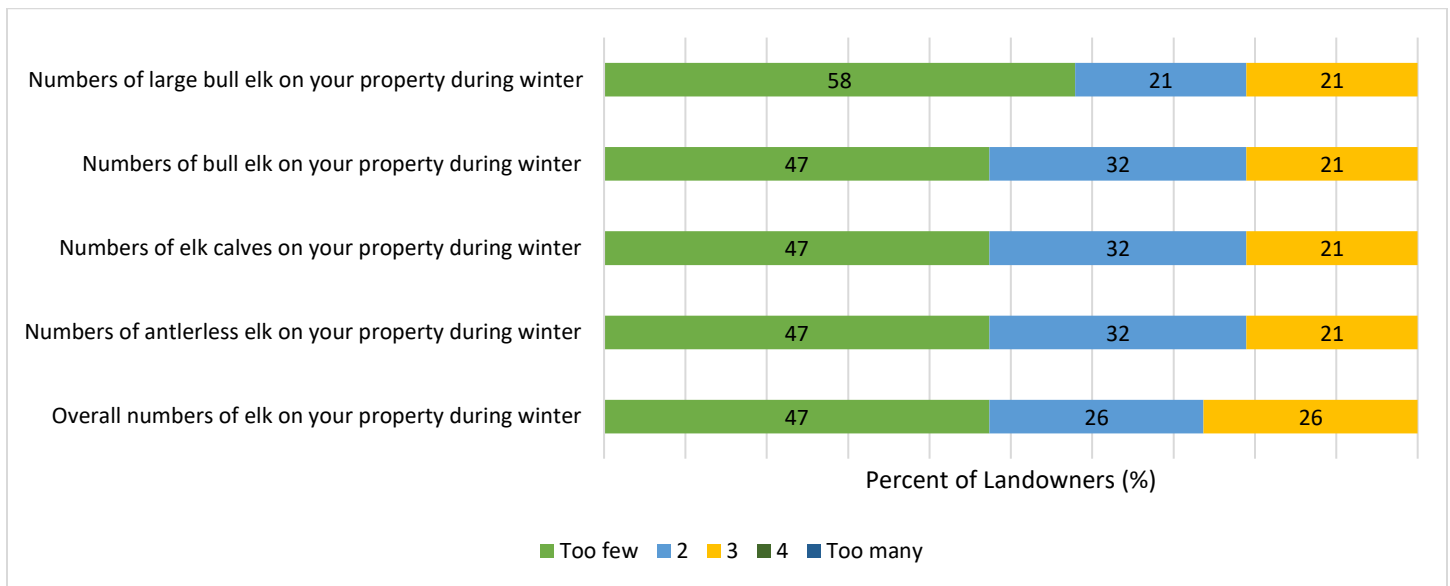
Overall trend similar to 2014.

Q3f: During the HUNTING season, about how many elk are found on your property?

Number of Elk	Percent of Landowners (%)
0	25
5	6
12	6
20	6
30	12
40	12
50	12
60	6
200	6
275	6

(* denotes same question asked in 2014)

Q4a-e: At present, on a scale from 1 (too few) to 5 (too many) how would you rate the following on your property during the WINTER?



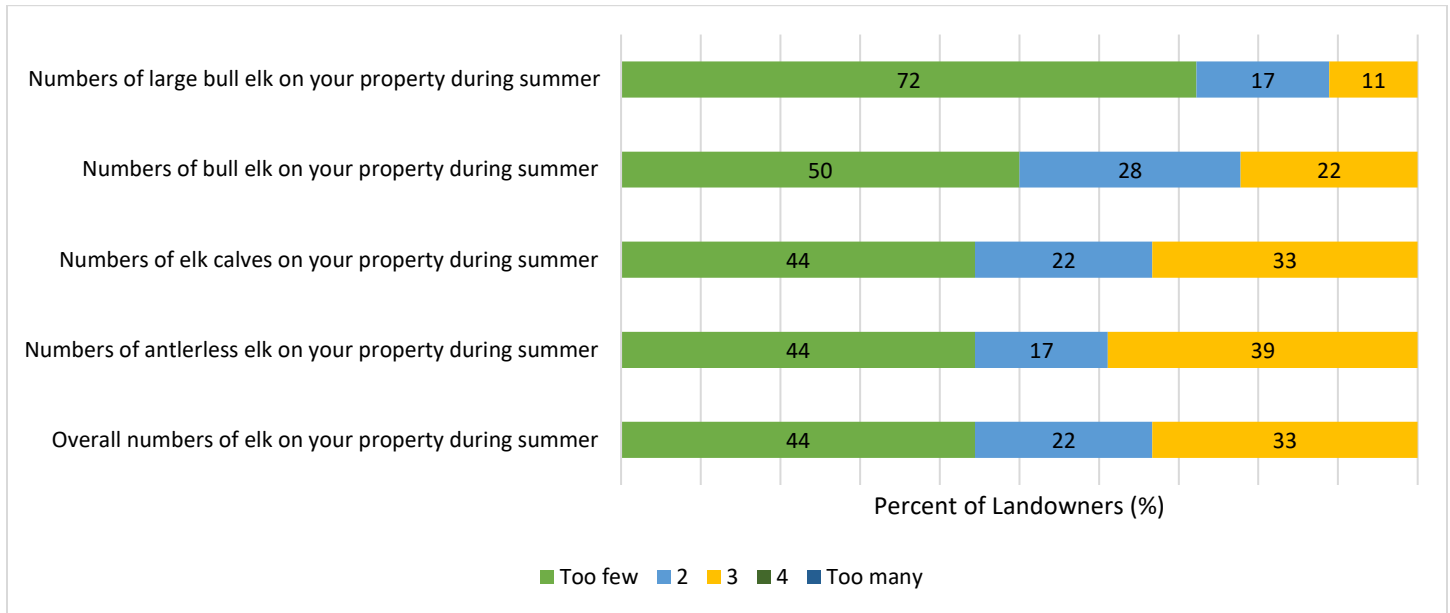
Overall, landowners report too few elk (large bull elk, bull elk, elk calves, antlerless elk, overall numbers) during winter.

Q4f: During the WINTER, about how many elk are found on your property?

Number of Elk	Percent of Landowners (%)
0	29
6	6
7	6
8	6
10	6
20	12
30	12
50	6
60	6
75	6
275	6

(* denotes same question asked in 2014)

Q5a-e: At present, on a scale from 1 (too few) to 5 (too many) how would you rate the following on your property during the SUMMER?



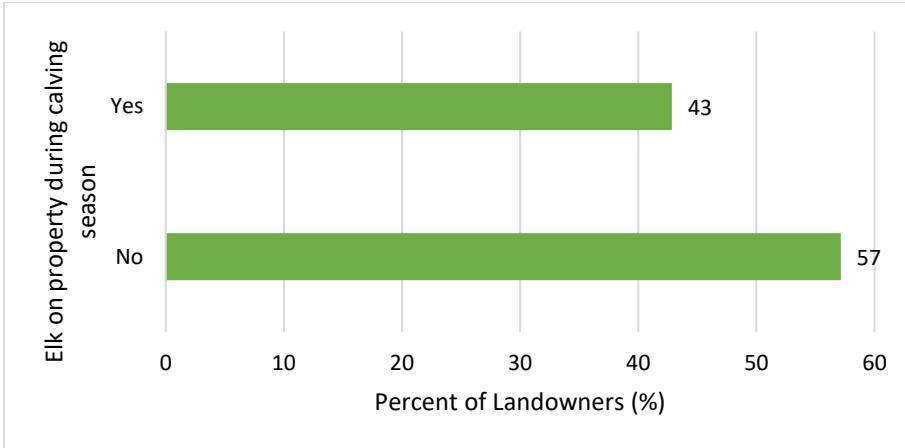
Overall, landowners report too few elk (large bull elk, bull elk, elk calves, antlerless elk, overall numbers) during summer.

Q5f: During the SUMMER, about how many elk are found on your property?

Number of Elk	Percent of Landowners (%)
0	35
3	10
6	5
7	5
8	5
11	5
20	5
30	5
60	5
65	5
75	5
250	5
275	5

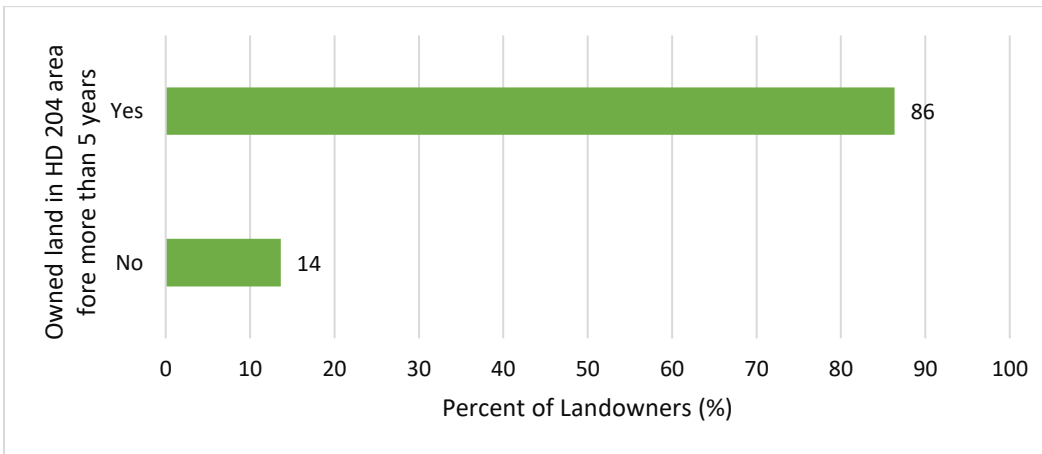
(* denotes same question asked in 2014)

Q6: Are there elk on your property during the primary elk calving season (Memorial Day through middle of June)?*



Contrast from 2014, fewer elk on property during the calving season.

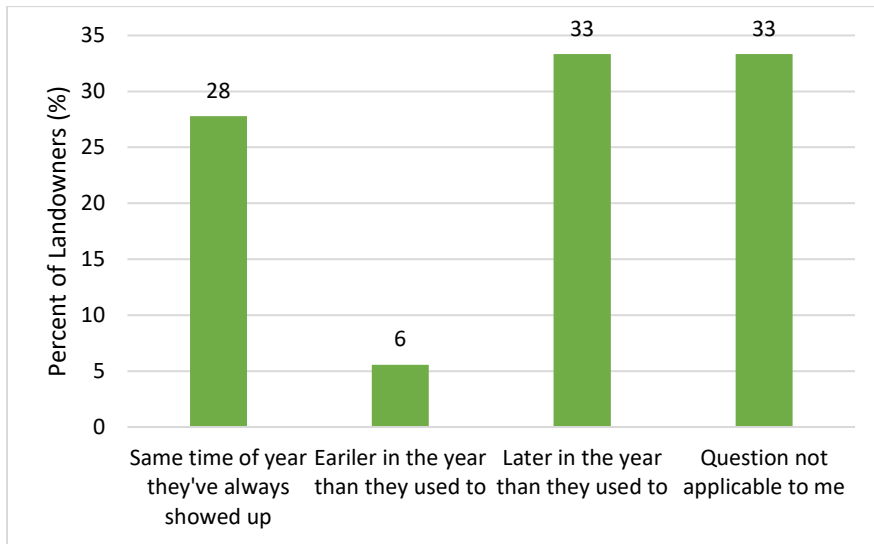
Q7: Have you owned land in the HD 204 area for more than 5 years?



86% of landowners have owned land in HD 204 area for more than 5 years; 14% of landowners have not.

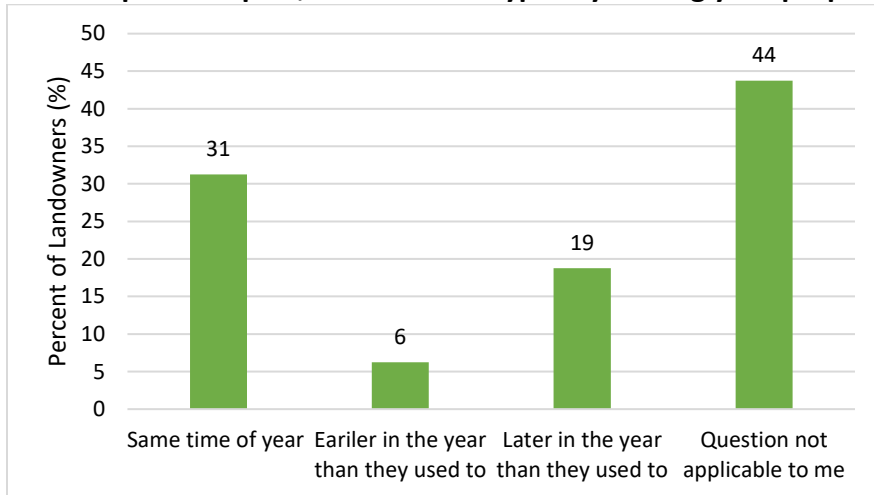
(* denotes same question asked in 2014)

Q8: Compared to past, when are elk typically showing up on your property?*



Contrast from 2014, elk are showing up later in the year than they used to.

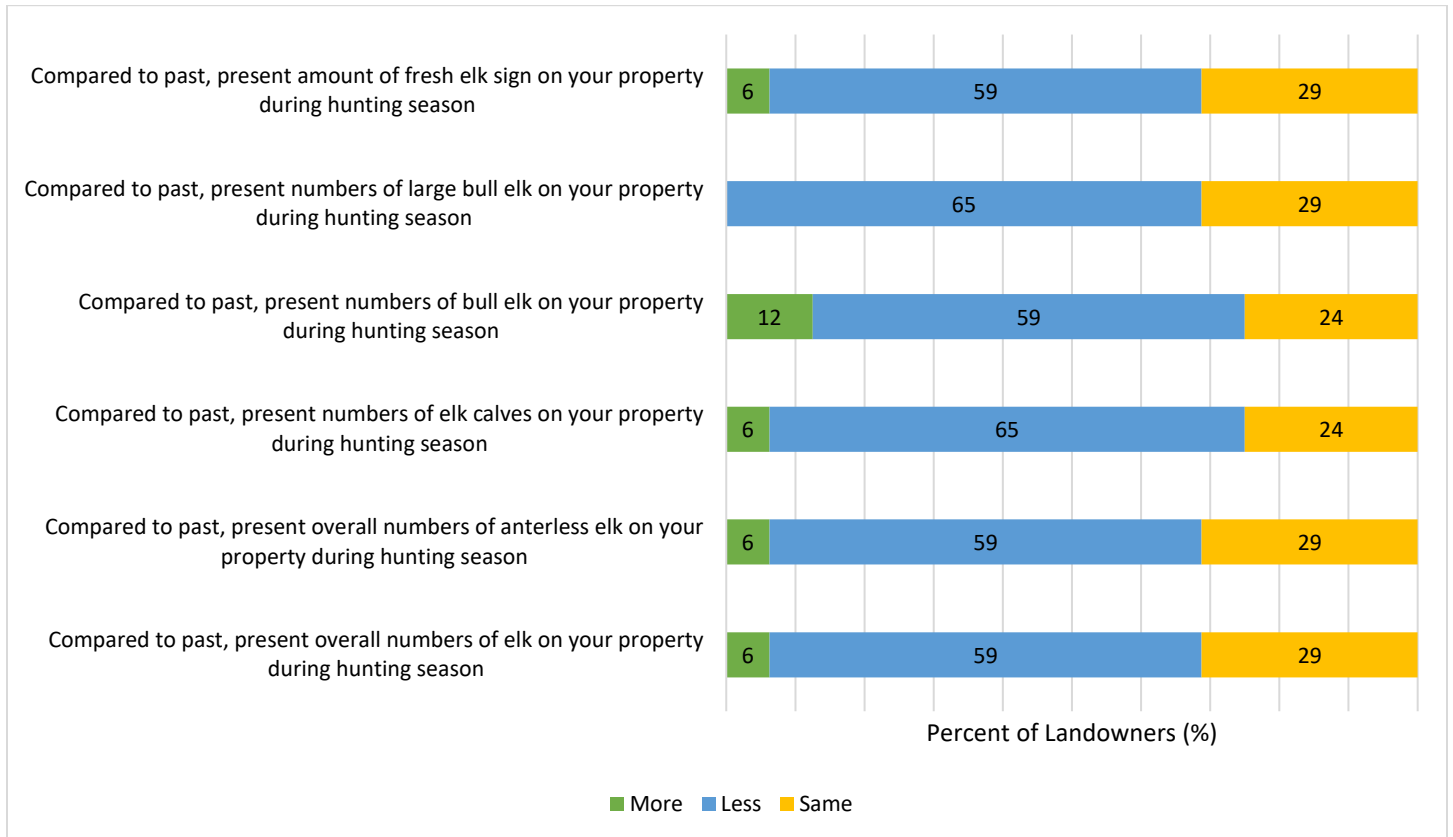
Q9: Compared to past, when are elk typically leaving your property?*



Overall trend similar to 2014.

(* denotes same question asked in 2014)

Q10a-f: Compared to past, at present are you seeing more, less, or about the same amount of the following on your property during the hunting season?



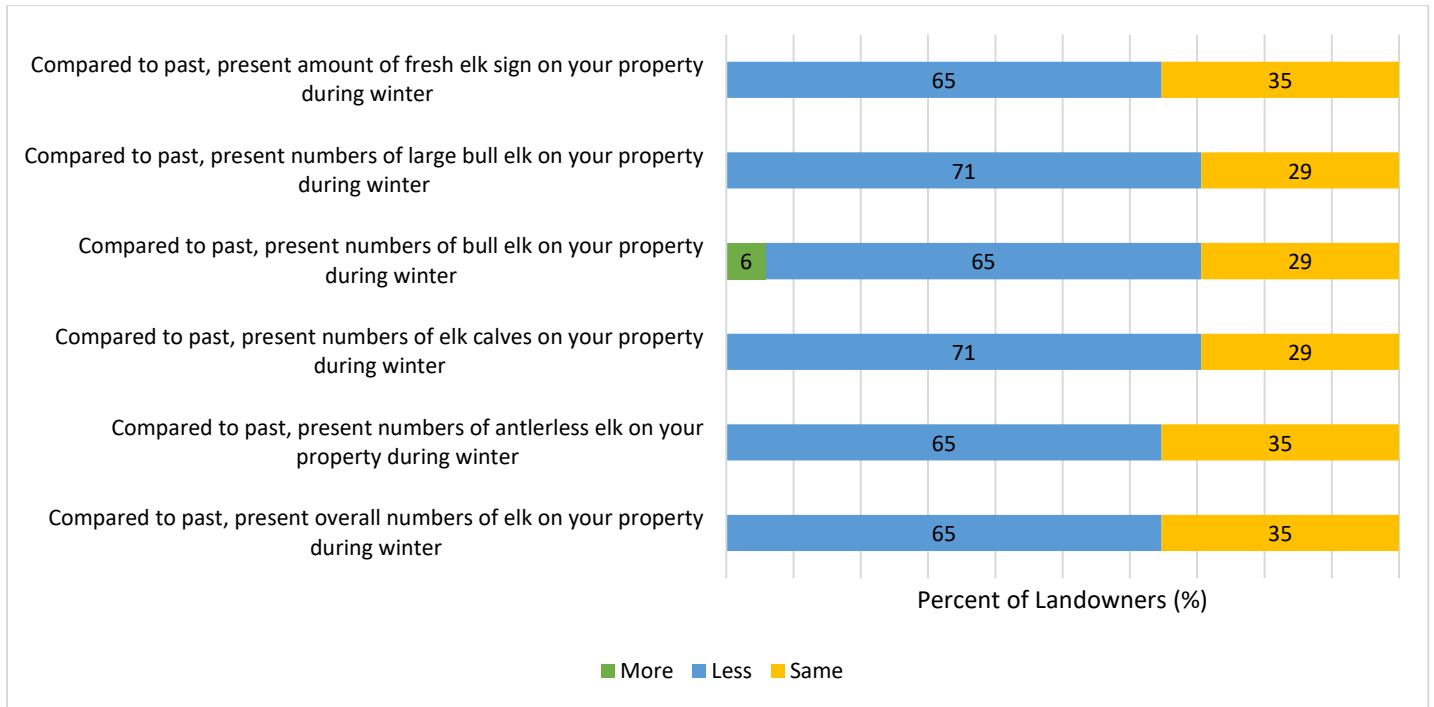
In comparison to 2014, there are less elk overall.

Q10 Primary: More or less elk, what are the primary reasons for this change on your property during the hunting season?*

Same concerns as stated in 2014, predators and increased hunting.

(* denotes same question asked in 2014)

Q11a-f: Compared to past, at present are you seeing more, less, or about the same amount of the following on your property during winter?*



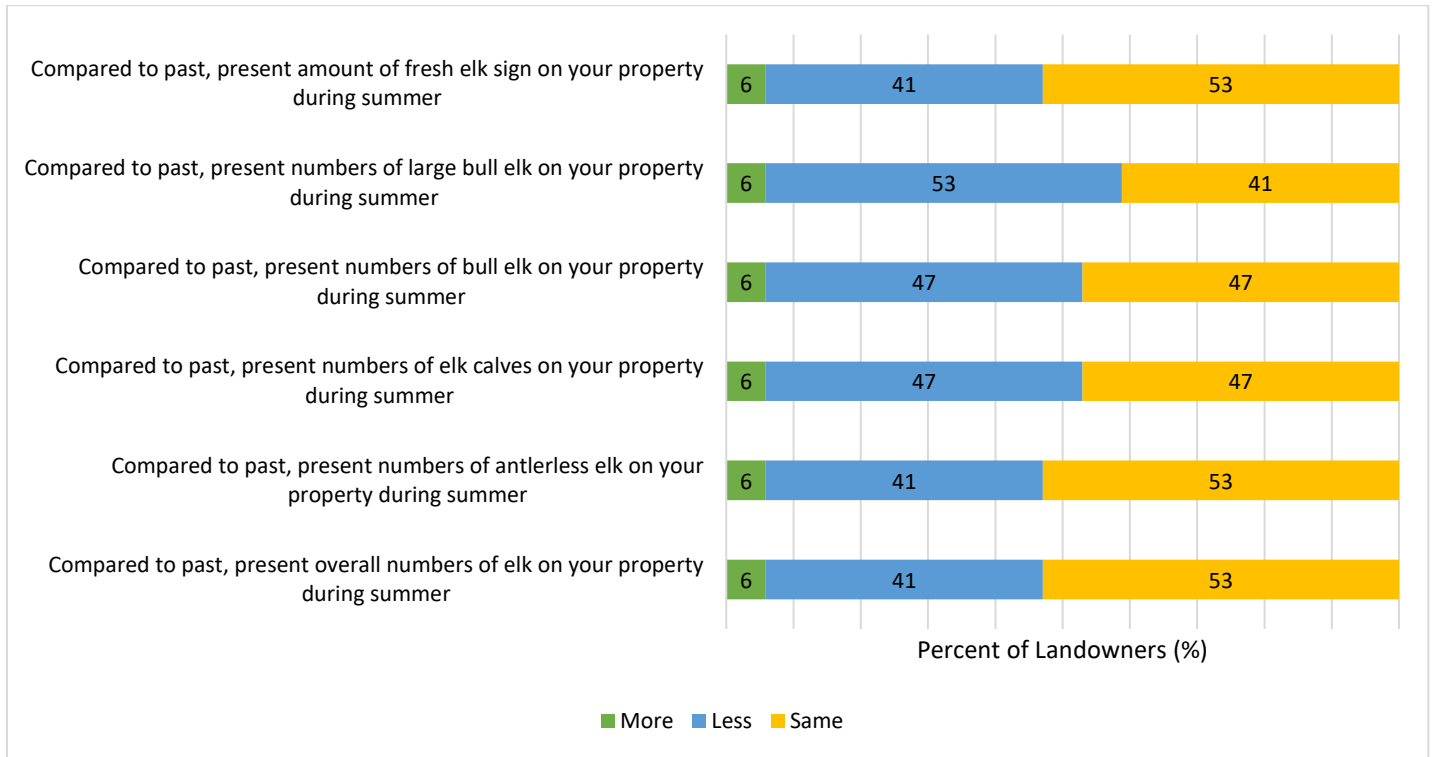
In comparison to 2014, there are fewer elk overall.

Q11 Primary: More or less elk, what are the primary reasons for this change on your property during winter?*

Same concerns as in 2014, predators and increased hunting pressure.

(* denotes same question asked in 2014)

Q12a-f: Compared to past, at present are you seeing more, less, or about the same amount of the following on your property during summer?

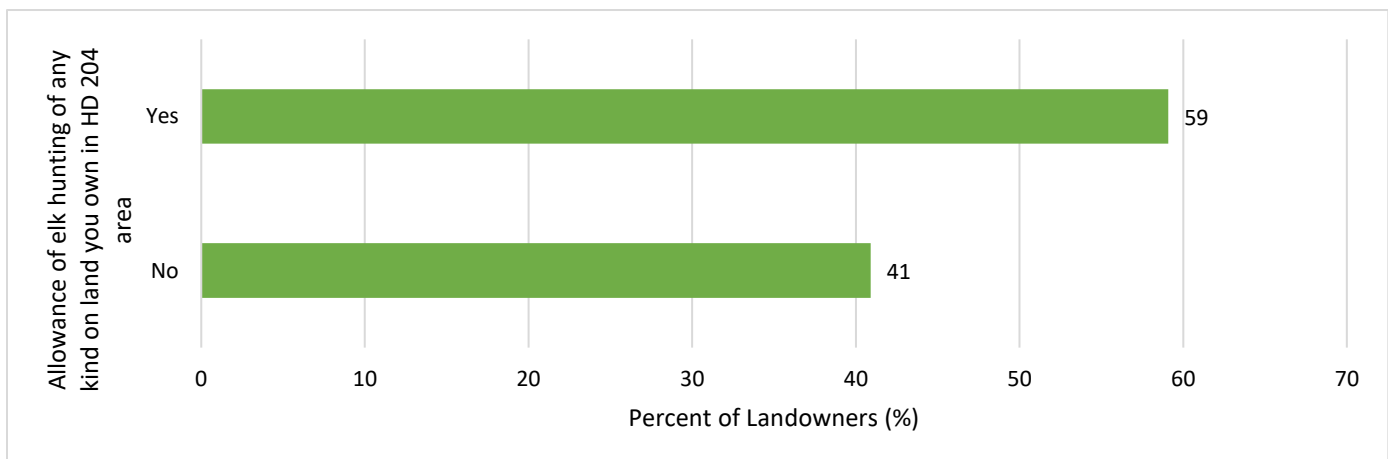


Overall, all categories roughly split between less and same.

Q12 Primary: More or less elk, what are the primary reasons for this change on your property during summer?

Predators.

Q13: Do you allow elk hunting of any kind on any of the land you own in HD 204 area?



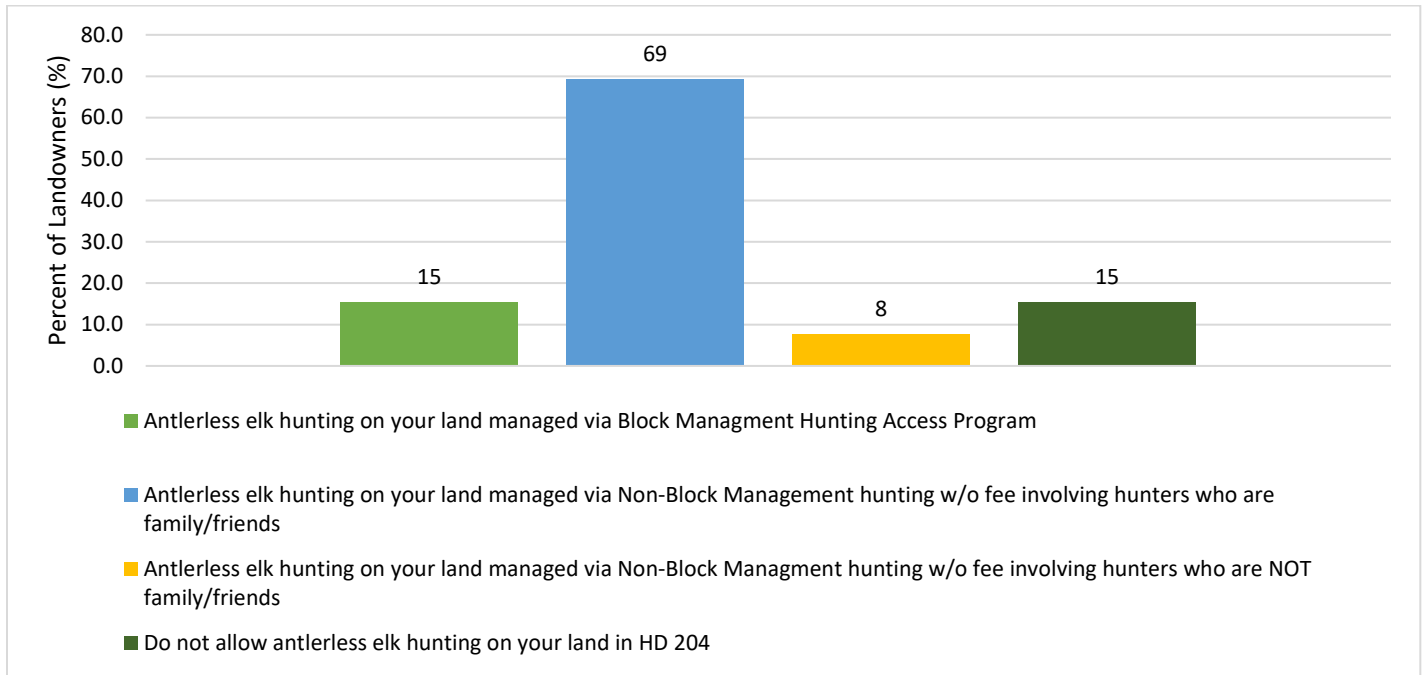
59% of landowners allow elk hunting of any kind on the land they own in HD 204; 41% do not allow elk hunting of any kind on the land they own in HD 204.

(* denotes same question asked in 2014)

Q13 Why Not: If no, why not?

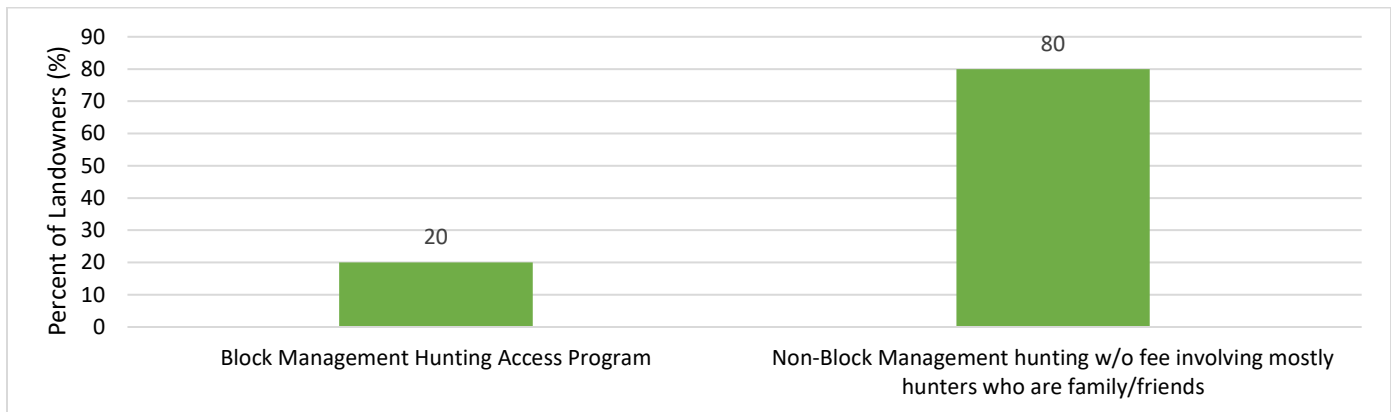
Lack of respect for property, trespassing, providing sanctuary from excessive hunting pressure.

Q14a: Check all systems that apply to how antlerless elk hunting is managed on the land you own in the HD 204 area?*



Overall similar trend to 2014, more allowance of cow elk hunting.

Q14b: Circle only one letter corresponding to the one system that best represents how MOST antlerless elk hunting is managed on the land you own in the HD 204 area.*

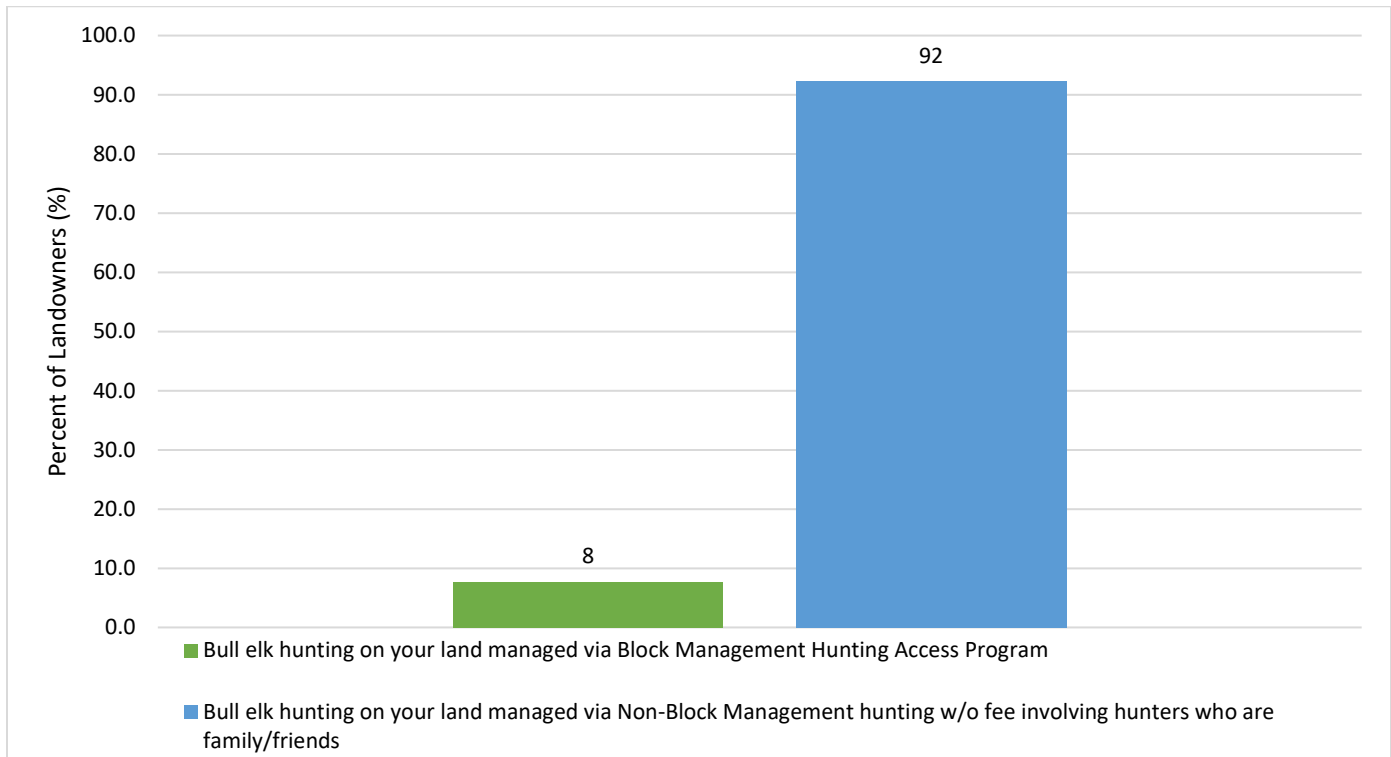


Overall trend similar to 2014.

(* denotes same question asked in 2014)

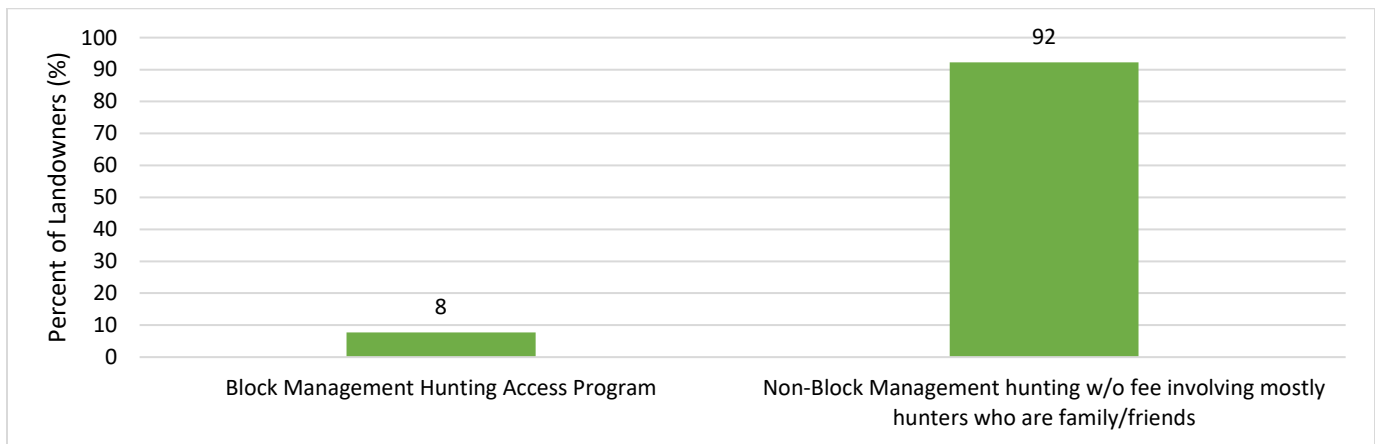
Q15a: Check all systems that apply to how bull elk hunting is managed on the land you own in the HD 204 area?*

More allowance of bull elk hunting , more hunters who are family/friends compared to 2014.



In comparison to 2014, there is more allowance of bull elk hunting and more hunters allowed who are family/friends.

Q15b: Circle only one letter corresponding to the one system that best represents how MOST bull elk hunting is managed on the land you own in the HD 204 area.



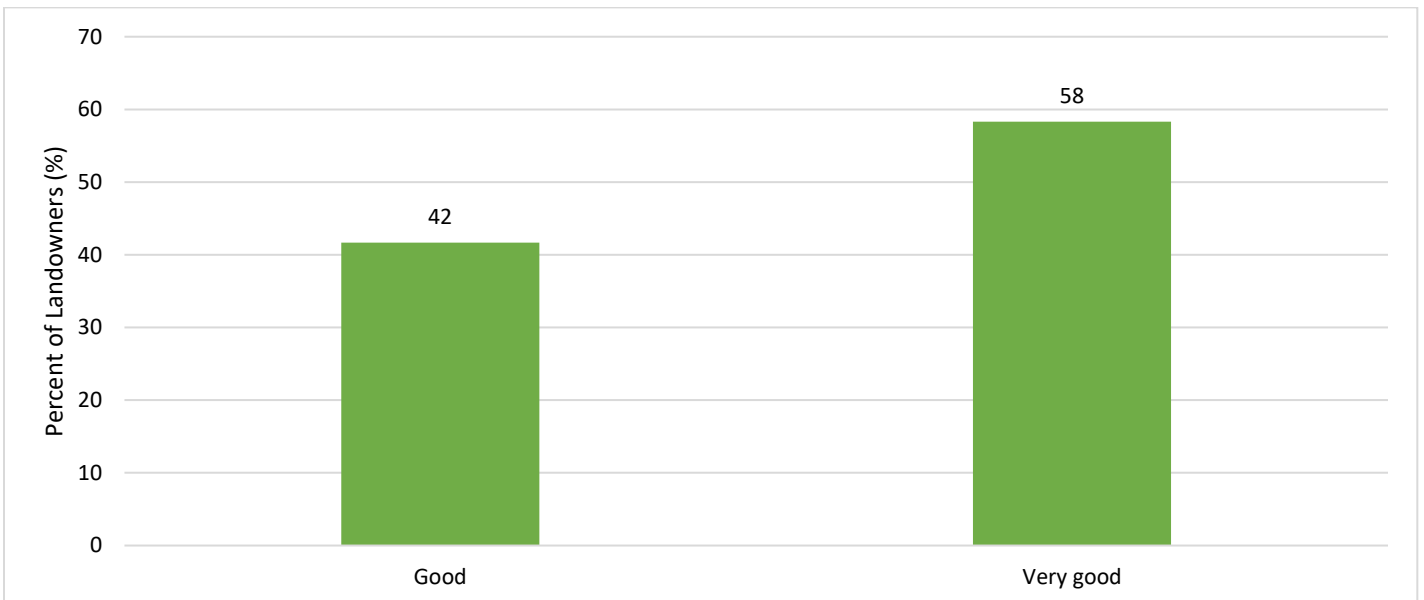
(* denotes same question asked in 2014)

Q16: In total, about how many people do you grant permission to hunt elk on your property each year?

# of Hunters Allowed	Percent of Landowners (%)
2	8
3	8
4	25
5	8
6	25
7	8
10	8
20	8

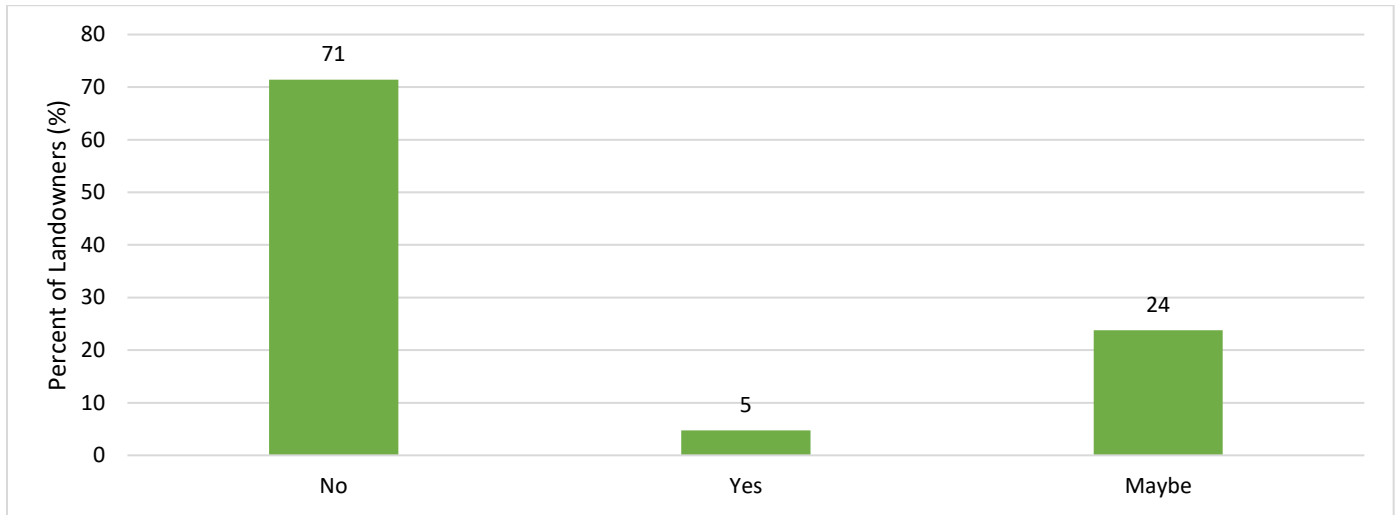
Q17: In general, how would you rate elk hunter behavior on your property?*

In comparison to 2014, better overall hunter behavior. Notably no mention of poor hunter behavior.



(* denotes same question asked in 2014)

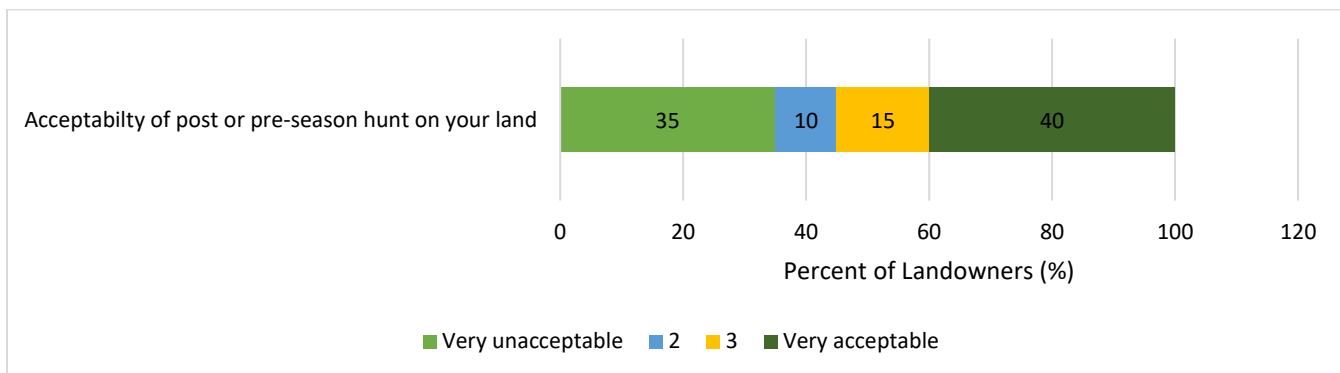
Q18a: Would you consider allowing more public hunting access than what you currently provide on your property in the future?



71% of landowners won't consider allowing more public hunting access; 5% would allow more public hunting access; 24% would maybe allow more public hunting access.

Q18b: What factors, if any, would help you allow more public hunting access on your property in the future?
Better enforcement by FWP, increased education, meat-only hunt.

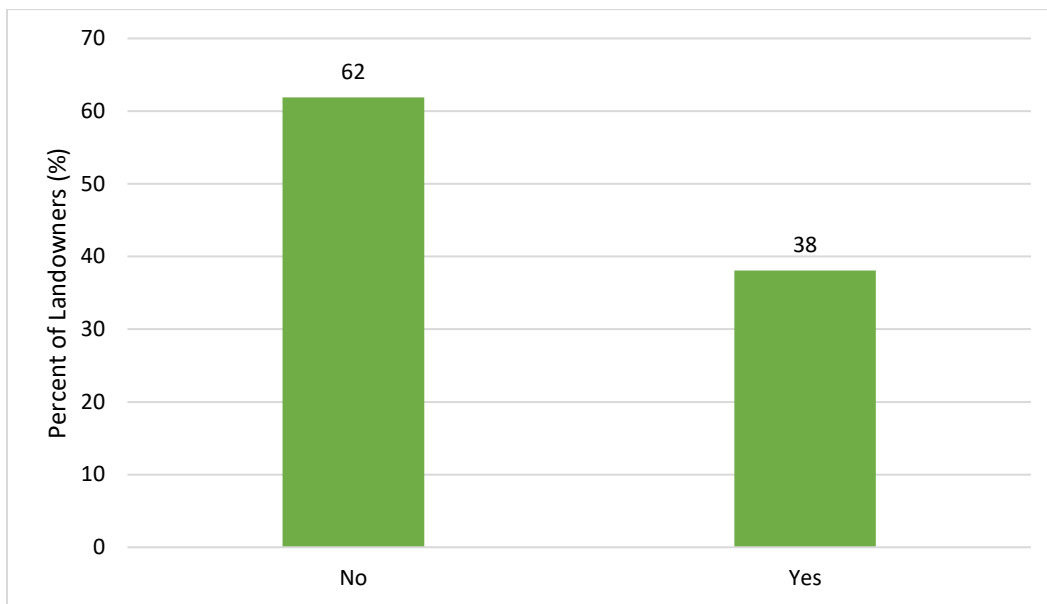
Q19: Acceptability of post or pre-general season hunt?



Split between very unacceptable and very acceptable.

(* denotes same question asked in 2014)

Q20: Irrigated crops on lands you own in HD 204?



62% of landowners do not have irrigated crops on lands they own in HD 204; 38% of landowners do.

DISCUSSION:

Hunters in HD 204 believe there are too many elk on private land and not enough access. 53% to 84% of landowners think there are too FEW elk on their properties (depending on the type of elk asked about, Q3 4 and 5 in the landowner survey), means landowners and hunters view this issue very differently. Out of the 5 types of elk asked about, over 3 different seasons, only one type of elk (overall numbers) in one season (hunting season) were rated by even one landowner as on the 'too many' side of the scale, and then only by 10.5% of landowners. Further, landowners reported that elk were showing up later (on average), but leaving about the same time or only slightly later (so less time on their properties), and the majority of landowners reported declining elk numbers and sign during hunting season and winter (Q10, 11). So, hunters believe there are too many elk on private land, whereas landowners think there are too few and fewer each year during hunting and (potential) late shoulder seasons.

Hunters' belief that there is too little access on private land is supported by the fact that 41% of landowners don't allow any elk hunting, few allow antlerless block management hunting (20%), and even fewer allow bull hunting via block management (8%). It seems the vast majority of landowners who allow elk hunting only allow their friends and family to hunt their land, but few others. Out of those who do allow hunting, a large majority (74%) allow only 6 or fewer hunters (over 40% allow only 4 or fewer). This lines up with the fact that nearly 80% of hunters in HD 204 report mostly hunting public land, and another 8% report hunting land owned by family and friends. 24% of landowners say they "maybe" would consider allowing more public hunting access and 5% say "yes" they would – that means over 71% won't. This seems the crux of the issue and will require some creativity (or regulation) to solve, especially since there were strongly polarized views toward shoulder seasons, both within the hunter population (30% very unacceptable, 30% very acceptable) and also within the landowner population (35% very unacceptable, 40% very acceptable).

(* denotes same question asked in 2014)