

Summary of Research



Abstract: *Following the 2022 hunting season, FWP conducted a resident elk hunter survey to help evaluate Montana's elk management relative to hunting and harvest opportunities. Overall, survey respondents find elk hunting regulations to be satisfactory and support the timing of the current general elk hunting season in Montana. However, many resident elk hunters are concerned about a variety of elk hunting related issues. Gaining access to hunt elk continues to be a topic of concern, particularly on privately owned property. Also, there are concerns about the numbers of both antlerless elk and bull elk on publicly owned lands in Montana. Last, but not least, congestion and crowding in the field while hunting elk is becoming more and more of an issue. While important to many, trophy hunting was the least important reason expressed by survey respondents for hunting elk in Montana. Related, 69 percent of the survey respondents prefer less restrictive elk hunting regulations across the state compared to more restrictive regulations that would limit opportunity in favor of more trophy hunting. Overall, 73 percent of the respondents from the survey conducted this past year find elk management in Montana to be satisfactory and place trust in FWP to manage elk in Montana. FWP intends to use results from this survey as an important piece of information in the consideration of future management for this meaningful game species that is so highly prized by resident Montana hunters.*

Background Information

This research summary provides selected results from a resident elk hunter survey conducted by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) in Montana. Following the 2022 hunting season, FWP conducted this survey to help evaluate Montana's elk management relative to hunting and harvest opportunities.

Mail back surveys were sent to a randomly selected statewide sample of 5,000 resident Montana elk license holders pulled from the pool of all resident elk license holders for the 2022 hunting season (as identified from FWP's automated license system). Survey mailings included an initial mailing of the survey in mid-February 2023, followed up by a replacement mailing to non-respondents about 3-4 weeks after the initial mailing of the surveys, and a second replacement mailing to non-respondents about 4-5 weeks later. Surveys were successfully mailed out to a total of 4,849 resident elk license holders (151 surveys were undeliverable).

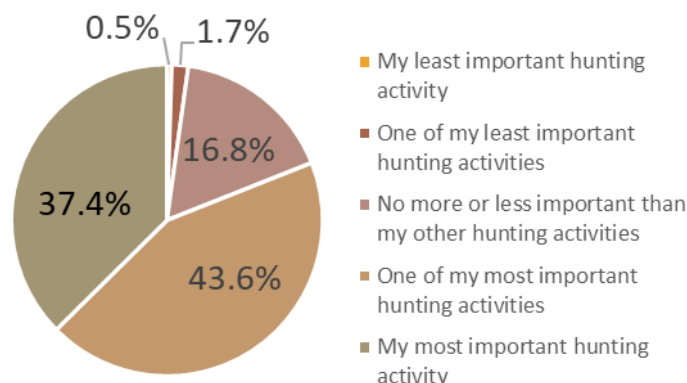
A total of 2,022 resident elk license holders responded to the survey, resulting in an overall 42 percent response rate for the survey. This response rate is considered excellent for a mail back survey of this kind.

Overall, 88 percent of the survey respondents reported they have hunted elk in Montana during the past five years. These resident elk hunters were the focus of this survey. In addition to this research summary, a more detailed study report is available from FWP (Lewis, 2023).

IMPORTANCE OF ELK HUNTING IN MONTANA

Eighty-one percent of the survey respondents reported that elk hunting is "one of my most important" or is "my most important" hunting activity in Montana (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1. Response to... "How important is ELK hunting to you in Montana?"



REASONS FOR HUNTING ELK IN MONTANA

Survey participants were asked to rate the importance of ten different potential reasons for going elk hunting in Montana. These reasons are listed below with the percent of respondents who rated each reason as being “important” or “very important”.

- To enjoy nature and outdoors (91%)
- To get venison for eating (79%)
- To be with friends with similar interests (73%)
- To do something with my family (70%)
- To experience solitude (69%)
- To feel the exhilaration of the hunt (67%)
- To develop my skills and abilities (63%)
- To feel a sense of accomplishment (64%)
- To test my hunting skills (61%)
- To harvest a mature bull (45%)

PERCEPTIONS REGARDING OPPORTUNITIES TO HUNT ELK IN MONTANA

On a scale from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent), 87 percent of the survey respondents rate overall opportunities to hunt elk in Montana as being better than average (a score of three out of five or higher). Using the same scale, 63 percent of the respondents rate opportunities to hunt mature bull elk in Montana as being better than average (a score of three out of five or higher).

PERCEPTIONS REGARDING ACCESS TO HUNT ELK IN MONTANA

On a scale from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent), 78 percent of the survey respondents rate access to hunt antlerless elk on publicly owned lands in Montana as being better than average (a score of three out of five or higher). This percentage drops to 48 percent for privately owned lands in the state.

Using the same scale, 80 percent of the survey respondents rate access to hunt bull elk on publicly owned lands in Montana as being better than average (a score of three out of five or higher). This percentage drops to 40 percent for privately owned lands in the state.

PERCEPTIONS REGARDING NUMBERS OF ELK HUNTERS IN MONTANA

On a scale from 1 (too few) to 5 (too many), 60 percent of the survey respondents rate the overall number of elk hunters in Montana as being nearly too many or too many (a score of 4 or 5). In terms of the number of other hunters typically observed per day when hunting elk, 35 percent rate the numbers they see per day as being “unacceptable” or “very unacceptable” and 23 percent rate the numbers they see per day as being “acceptable” or “very acceptable”. Forty-two percent rate the numbers they see per day as being neither acceptable nor unacceptable.



PERCEPTIONS REGARDING NUMBERS OF ELK IN MONTANA

On a scale from 1 (too few) to 5 (too many), survey participants were asked their perceptions of the numbers of elk in Montana. Table 1 on the bottom of this page provides survey results for this question. Generally, respondents rated numbers of elk (both antlerless elk and bull elk) more numerous on privately owned lands when compared to their ratings on publicly owned lands in the state.

Table 1. Ratings of elk numbers in Montana (aggregate results for all seven regions of Montana combined).

	1 Too Few	2	3	4	5 Too Many
Overall numbers of elk	12.8%	21.5%	50.5%	11.9%	3.4%
Overall numbers of <u>antlerless</u> elk	10.3%	17.5%	47.4%	19.1%	5.7%
Overall numbers of <u>bull</u> elk	19.2%	32.1%	38.5%	8.1%	2.0%
Overall numbers of <u>mature bull</u> elk	31.2%	31.8%	28.5%	7.1%	1.4%
Numbers of <u>antlerless</u> elk on PUBLICLY owned lands	16.8%	27.7%	40.9%	11.8%	2.9%
Numbers of <u>antlerless</u> elk on PRIVATELY owned lands	7.0%	9.0%	25.1%	24.9%	33.9%
Numbers of <u>bull</u> elk on PUBLICLY owned lands	24.6%	33.1%	34.8%	6.1%	1.4%
Numbers of <u>bull</u> elk on PRIVATELY owned lands	10.4%	11.0%	26.4%	22.1%	30.0%

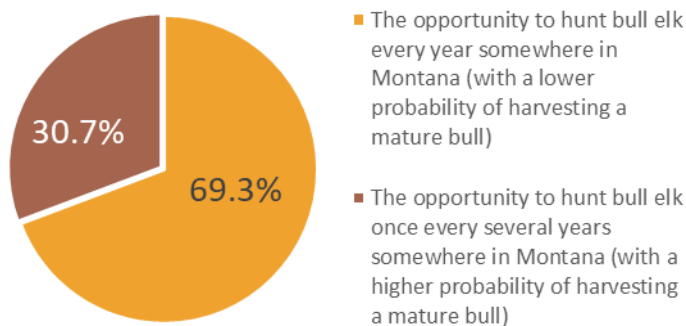
SATISFACTION WITH CURRENT ELK HUNTING REGULATIONS IN MONTANA

On a scale from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied), 72 percent of the survey respondents rate elk hunting regulations in Montana as being satisfactory (a score of three out of five or higher). However, 21 percent of the respondents indicated they believe elk hunting regulations in Montana are “difficult” or “very difficult” to understand.

OPINIONS REGARDING HOW RESTRICTIVE ELK HUNTING REGULATIONS SHOULD BE IN MONTANA

Managing for higher numbers of mature bull elk (e.g., bull elk four to five years of age or older) may require implementing more restrictive elk hunting regulations. For instance, in current limited permit areas in Montana the average drawing odds are once every ten years. Keeping this in mind, survey respondents were asked forced-choice questions communicating potential tradeoffs to help assess how restrictive elk hunting regulations should be in Montana. Results are presented in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2. Response to... “Given only ONE CHOICE, which of the following would be most favorable to you in Montana as a whole?”



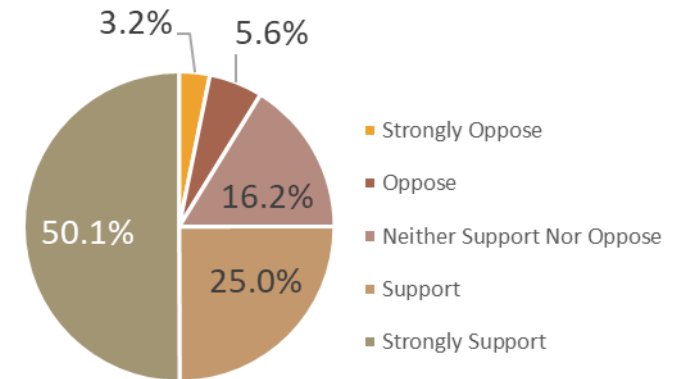
Related to the forced-choice question discussed above, respondents were also asked, “How important is it to you to be able to consistently hunt elk in the same place in Montana each and every year?” Seventy-five percent of the respondents indicated this was “important” or “very important” to them. Eight percent reported this was “unimportant” or “very unimportant”.



OPINIONS REGARDING THE TIMING OF THE ELK HUNTING SEASON IN MONTANA

A strong majority of respondents (75 percent) “support” or “strongly support” the current timing of the five-week general rifle season for elk hunting in Montana (see Figure 3 below). Nine percent “oppose” or “strongly oppose” the current timing of the five-week season.

Figure 3. Response to... “On a scale from 1 (strongly oppose) to 5 (strongly support), to what extent do you support or oppose the current timing of the five-week general rifle season for elk hunting in Montana which starts the third weekend in October and ends the Sunday after Thanksgiving?”



In addition to the above, 61 percent of the survey respondents believe it is “important” or “very important” that the general rifle season for elk hunting matches up with the timing of the general rifle season for mule deer hunting in Montana. Twenty percent of the respondents think this is “unimportant” or “very unimportant”. Nineteen percent reported this is “neither important nor unimportant” to them.

SATISFACTION WITH ELK MANAGEMENT IN MONTANA

On a scale from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied), 73 percent of survey respondents rate elk management in Montana as being satisfactory (a score of three out of five or higher); however, only eight percent reported being “very satisfied”. Twenty-seven percent reported being “dissatisfied” or “very dissatisfied”.

TRUST IN FWP TO MANAGE ELK IN MONTANA

On a scale from 1 (little or no trust) to 5 (very high trust), 73 percent of survey respondents place trust in FWP to manage elk in Montana (a score of three out of five or higher). Twenty-seven percent reported low trust in the agency by scoring a one or two for this question.

BACKGROUND CHARACTERISTICS OF RESPONDENTS

Sixty-two percent of the respondents have hunted elk each of the past five years in Montana. Ten percent reported hunting elk in the state four of the past five years, 11 percent reported three of the past five years, 10 percent reported two of the past five years, and seven percent reported one of the past five years.

Seventy-four percent of respondents reported they have also hunted mule deer in Montana during the past five years. When these respondents were asked how often they also hunt elk (or would harvest an elk) while they are primarily mule deer hunting, 77 percent reported they regularly do so...a score of three out of five or higher on a scale from (1) rarely or never to (5) all the time.

The average age of respondents was 51 years (median age was 54 years).

Discussion

Results from this survey confirm that elk hunting is very important to resident Montanans. This tracks with the fact that elk hunting is a very popular hunting activity in Montana (in terms of total numbers of elk hunters and hunters days).

Overall, survey respondents rate current elk hunting regulations as being satisfactory and support the timing of the current elk hunting season in Montana. However, many resident elk hunters are concerned about a variety of elk hunting issues. Gaining access to hunt elk continues to be a topic of concern, particularly on privately owned property. Also, there are concerns about the numbers of both antlerless elk and bull elk on publicly owned lands in Montana. Of note, 44 percent and 58 percent of the survey respondents have the perception that there are not enough antlerless and bull elk, respectively, on publicly owned lands found in Montana. Last, but not least, congestion and crowding in the field while hunting elk is becoming more and more of an issue. Sixty percent of the survey respondents rate the overall number of elk hunters in Montana right now as being “many” or “too many”.

Each year, FWP hears from a segment of hunting public that more emphasis needs to be placed on trophy hunting in the state. That said, 63 percent of the respondents rated opportunities to hunt mature bull elk in Montana as being better than average. While

important to many, trophy hunting was the least important reason expressed by survey respondents for hunting elk in Montana. Related, 69 percent of the survey respondents prefer less restrictive elk hunting regulations across the state compared to more restrictive regulations that would limit opportunity in favor of more trophy hunting.

Overall, 73 percent of the respondents from the survey conducted this past year rate elk management as being satisfactory and place trust in FWP to manage elk in Montana. As public trust managers of Montana’s wildlife populations, FWP is continually challenged to meet the desires of increasingly diverse people and special interest groups who are passionate about their interests in elk management. The information obtained via this survey can only help the agency in striving to understand and meet those diverse interests. FWP intends to use results from this survey as an important piece of information in the consideration of future management for this meaningful game species that is so highly prized by resident Montana hunters. 🌲

REFERENCES

Lewis, Michael S. 2023. *Results from a Montana 2023 Resident Elk Hunter Survey, A Survey Conducted by Montana FWP.* Agency Technical Report. Helena, MT: Wildlife Division; Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks.

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