

Briefs for Hunting Districts that are Over Objective and Have Limited Either-Sex Permits

In response to questions regarding the use of limited either-sex (ES) permits for elk in hunting districts (HDs) that are above population objective, the Department assembled a brief for each HD where these circumstances apply. In the past, the Department attempted to be responsive to matching limited permit numbers with levels of existing opportunities, which resulted in either-sex permit quota increases when possible. In 2021, there were 30 HDs that met the above circumstances. As part of the 2021 biennial season setting process, the Department is proposing to remove limited ES elk permits in six of the 30 HDs where these circumstances exist and is also proposing to increase ES permit quota (from 300-400) for three of the current HDs in question.

The Department has limited ES permits for multiple different reasons, which vary across HDs and through time. Some of the current reasons why limited ES permits are used in Montana include: to protect bull elk in areas with low security or in those areas where bull elk are highly accessible and vulnerable to harvest; to provide equitable allocation of the elk resource by designating opportunities via random draw lottery; to limit hunter crowding; to meet the demand for older age class bulls; to address landowner tolerance of hunter density; and to maintain agreements made with existing local working groups. If limited ES elk permits were removed, the primary expected population response would be a significant decrease in the bull segment of the population, with this being more pronounced on public lands.

Lastly, the Department is attempting to decrease populations that are over population objective. All HDs that currently have limited ES permits and are over population objective have liberal antlerless harvest opportunities. Harvesting antlerless elk has the largest effect on population growth, and the Department will continue to manage antlerless opportunities liberally to decrease elk populations in these areas.

See below for summary information on the use of limited ES elk permits in individual HDs that are over population objective.

HD 380:

Does 2005 Elk Management Plan call for managing for older age class bulls, or is there a bull:cow ratio objective for this HD?

Yes, the 2005 Elk Management Plan calls for maintaining the average age of bulls harvested on either-sex permits between 5.5 and 6.5 years of age (age range viewed as a minimum). The 2005 Elk Plan also calls for maintaining a bulls:100 cows ratio observed during post-season aerial surveys of at least 15 bulls:100 cows OR, if bulls:100 cows ratios are not obtained, maintaining a minimum of 10% of the population comprised of antlered bulls.

We are limiting bull harvest in this HD, what are the reasons for doing so (biological, social, equitable allocation, access, crowding)?

Since the late 1980s, HD 380 has been managed by a season structure that calls for a limited number of either-sex permits that are targeted for older age class bull harvest while allowing spike harvest on a general license. The season was put in place for biological reasons, because prior to going to that season type bulls in the Elkhorns EMU were so heavily harvested (great access, most elk in the district are available for hunter harvest) that winter bulls:100 cows were in the very low single digits with almost all the surviving bulls being yearling bulls. The current either-sex permit/spike harvest allowed on a general license season structure has extremely strong public support.

What would the consequences be if you removed the ES permit or liberalized bull harvest (biological, social, equitable allocation, access, crowding)?

HD 380 is one of, if not the most heavily hunted elk district in the state of Montana. In recent years the number of elk hunters hunting in HD 380 annually has been in excess of 3,200+ hunters a year. Given the great hunting access (lots of public land and accessible private land), availability of elk to the public in the HD, and HD 380's reputation for producing older age class bulls, if HD 380 were to go to a general license, older age class bulls would be expected to be eliminated from the population within a couple years.