

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 411 and proposed HD 535 (currently HDs 511 & 530):

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, on page 350, states as a Management Goal to “provide hunter opportunity for harvesting older bulls.”

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

Limited entry permits are a proven tool to manage for older age class bulls which is the management goal from the 2005 Elk Management Plan. To increase bull harvest but maintain older age class bulls the General Elk License regulation changed in 2014 to include Spike Bull and Antlerless Elk. Average spike bull harvest from 2014-2020 was 32 spikes compared to the average of 8 spikes harvested 1999-2013. In 2020 fifty-three spike bulls were harvested. Elk hunting on publicly accessible public and private lands is extremely limited in these districts. The limited free public opportunities are overcrowded for the archery and rifle seasons. The overcrowded public opportunities usually keep the elk on inaccessible private land for most of the season. The either-sex permits allow for some equitable distribution of elk hunting opportunity across the landscape so that wealth isn't the only factor determining access to elk hunting in these districts.

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

The 411-20 Either-sex elk permit is proposed to increase from 300 to 400 permits. The last increase from 200 to 300 Either-sex permits was in 2018. Several hunters and landowners made complaints about the increase in permit numbers causing increased hunting pressure on public hunting opportunities and the increase in hunters requesting access. Some landowners have voiced support for keeping the either-sex permits to maintain the quality of bulls in these districts. Hunting district 580 is a common example used by landowners and sportsmen to describe a hunting district with either-sex general elk license regulation with a lot of bulls but not that many really big bulls. Amenity landowners are already purchasing property in these hunting districts for the elk hunting opportunity which has contributed to the increased land prices. If these hunting districts are no longer managed with an either-sex permit more amenity landowners will purchase land in these districts because of the high bull quality that would be available for a few years. What little free public hunting opportunities exist will further decrease to only those opportunities on publicly accessible public land. These public lands will be so overcrowded very few elk will be present during hunting seasons. The equitable allocation of elk hunting will be lost to the general public. Only those hunters who can afford to pay thousands of dollars for the opportunity to harvest a bull elk will have access to this public resource in these districts.

HD 555 (formerly 510 and eastern portion of 520) & 502:

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

The elk management plan specifically endorses maintaining limited either sex permits. Prior to the implementation of the ES permits excessive harvest of bulls resulted in bull:cow ratios of less than 5:100. There was some evidence that the low bull:cow ratio negatively impacted calf production. Sportsmen demanded a more conservative season designed to increase bull survival and manage for a diversity of age structure. The public has consistently voiced support for this season type.

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

Biological: Elk in this area, especially bull elk, routinely move between HD 555 and HD 502. Such movement makes it necessary to manage bulls with one license type. The Robertson Draw fire in 2021 burned 30,000 acres much of which was elk security habitat. That loss of habitat makes elk, especially bulls, much more vulnerable to harvest under normal fall weather conditions. While the HD 502 portion of the elk herd is above objective, the HD 555 portion is below objective.

Social: The public continues to demand conservative bull management to avoid repeating the over harvest of bulls that occurred in past years.

Equitable allocation: The current season type results in similar numbers of archers and rifle hunters having access to bulls.

Access: Access to BLM and Forest Service land is very good. The largest landowner in Carbon County with large parcels in both HD 502 and 555. The same landowner provides free public access for both elk and deer hunters. Access in the Roberts/Joliet area of HD 502 is more limited but available. Access west of Bridger in HD 502 is non-existent.

Crowding: Currently there is consistent pressure on elk accessed from public access sites such as Robertson Draw, Line Ck. And Grove Ck. Areas. Crowding is becoming an issue at times during the season. With the recent changes to habitat after the Robertson Draw fire, the Line Ck. and Robertson Draw areas are seeing more crowding as elk are not as available in the Grove Ck. area this year.

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

Biological: The loss of bull security due to wildfire would result in increased harvest of bulls. That harvest could well result in the much lower bull/cow ratios that were seen in previous years.

Social: There would be a significant loss of public support if the ES permit were eliminated.

Equitable allocation: There would no longer be a balance in opportunity for archers and rifle hunters.

Access: The largest landowner in Carbon County currently provides the majority of the private land access. Liberalized seasons could overwhelm their ability to provide access to the same level they are currently providing.

Crowding: A general ES season would result in crowding on Forest Service access points in Line Creek, Robertson Draw and Grove Creek areas.

HD 590:

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 does state as a management goal to “provide opportunity for hunters to harvest older bulls”.

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

Biological: In other districts with high numbers of older class bulls, elimination of either-sex permits resulted in an overall decline in opportunity for harvest of older bulls.

Social and Equitable allocation: There is little access in this hunting district for the general public. Elimination of either-sex permits would result in increased access to older class bulls to those able to afford outfitting services and less opportunity to harvest older class bulls for most of the public.

Access and Crowding: Access to elk on public land is very limited in hunting district 590. Crowding is currently an issue for elk permit holders on accessible public land and would likely increase with an either-sex general elk license valid for the archery only and general seasons.

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

Biological: Over time the number of older age class bulls would decrease. The bull to cow ratio would decrease.

Social: Some public land hunters will oppose removal of permits due to overcrowding on public lands during both archery and general season.

Equitable allocation: There is little access in this hunting district for the general public. Elimination of either-sex permits would result in increased access to older class bulls to those able to afford outfitting services and less opportunity to harvest older class bulls to the majority of the public.

Access and crowding: There is very little accessible public land in HD 590. Crowding is currently an issue for elk permit holders on accessible public land in HD 590 and would likely increase with an either-sex general elk license valid for the archery only and general seasons. Many hunters would be frustrated by the lack of opportunity to find elk on public land in HD 590.