

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.

HDs 620, 621, 622:

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 objective is at least 30 bulls: 100 cows, which is for all HDs in the Missouri River Breaks EMU.

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

The 2005 Elk Plan prescribes limited either-sex (ES) permits. The standard regulation is prescribed when bull ratios are at least 30 bulls:100 cows. The restrictive regulation is prescribed when bull ratios are under 30 bulls:100 cows for two consecutive years. The elk plan details these antlered regulations:

General season regulations:

- Standard regulation- 50 or more either-sex permits (*160 were issued in 2021*)
- Restrictive regulation- less than 50 either-sex permits

Archery season regulations:

- Standard regulation- Limited either-sex archery only permits, 1st choice only (*1,400 were issued in 2021*)

Bull ratios during the most recent elk survey (2020) in these HDs was 31 bulls:100 cows and averages 44 bulls:100 cows over the past 10-years. The elk population is currently 20% above objective in these HDs.

We adjust general season ES permits accordingly to observed bull ratios from post-season surveys, to maintain at least 30 bulls:100 cows. Over the past ten years, we have had between 125 and 170 ES permits for the general season. Archery permits have maintained at 1,400 for the past 10 years.

We also work with the Breaks Elk Working Group, wherein the group serves as a citizen advisory group to FWP and provides a venue to discuss elk management. This group has desired an equitable harvest of antlered elk between archery and rifle (general season) harvest and annually reviews harvest and quota recommendations. In 2020, 62% of the 233 bulls harvested was by archers. The ten-year average is 53% of the bull harvest by archers.

The relative acceptance by landowners and land management agencies of the current level of limited bull harvest has resulted in ample public access on public lands and on private lands enrolled in FWP's hunting access programs. In Phillips Co., there are 37 BMAs with 325,081 acres.

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

Removal or liberalizing ES permits would likely result in a decrease in bull:cow ratios to levels below 30 bulls:100 cows. This is based on the most current status of 31 bulls:100 cows, combined with the high level of interest in rifle bull hunting as evidenced by a 5% drawing odd for ES elk permits (3,178 applicants for 160 permits), and relatively good access to bull elk on publicly accessible lands.

We annually hear public comment about crowding on publicly accessible lands in this area and removal or liberalizing ES permits would likely result in further crowding. We also have a long history of collaboration with stakeholders in the area which is formalized by a subset of those represented on the Breaks Elk Working Group <https://fwp.mt.gov/aboutfwp/breaks-elk-working-group> . A large deviation from the current ES permit level would fray our relationship and trust with this group and other stakeholders. This could result in loss of public access through our Block Management Program, lessening our ability to manage elk and other game species.

HDs: 630, 631, 632

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 objective is at least 30 bulls: 100 cows, which is for all HDs in the Missouri River Breaks EMU.

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

The 2005 Elk Plan prescribes limited either-sex (ES) permits. The standard regulation is prescribed when bull ratios are at least 30 bulls:100 cows. The restrictive regulation is prescribed when bull ratios are under 30 bulls:100 cows for two consecutive years. The elk plan details the following antlered regulations in HDs 630, 631, 632:

General season regulations:

- Standard regulation- 20 or more either-sex permits. *(40 were issued in 2021)*
- Restrictive regulation- less than 20 either-sex permits

Archery season regulations:

- Standard regulation- Limited either-sex archery only permits *(300 were issued in 2021)*

Bull ratios during the most recent elk survey (2020) in these HDs was 92 bulls:100 cows and averages 82 bulls:100 cows over the past ten years. The high bull ratio is a function of a relatively small number of cows in the population (166). The elk population is currently 16% above objective in these HDs. Either-sex permits have been maintained at 40 permits for general season and 300 for archery season for the past 10-years. The relatively small elk population, tendency of the elk to seek refuge in neighboring HD 622 with increasing hunter pressure, and public desire for a higher elk population in these districts has driven the stable permit levels. We also work with the Breaks Elk Working Group, wherein the group serves as a citizen advisory group to FWP and provides a venue to discuss elk management. This group has desired an equitable harvest of antlered elk between archery and rifle (general season) harvest and annually reviews harvest and quota recommendations. In 2020, 58% of the 52 bulls harvested was by archers. The ten-year average is 59% of the bull harvest by archers. The relative acceptance by landowners and land management agencies of the current level of limited bull harvest has resulted in very good public access on public lands and on private lands enrolled in FWP's hunting access programs. In Valley Co., there are 52 BMAs with 238,652 acres of private land.

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

Liberalizing ES permits could result in a decrease in bull:cow ratios to levels closer to 30 bulls:100 cows. The relatively small population size would not leave room for too much additional harvest. Removal of ES permits would likely reduce bull ratios below 30 bulls: 100 cows. This is based on the combined high level of interest in rifle bull hunting as evidenced by a 5% drawing odd for ES elk permits (786 applicants for 40 permits), and very good access to bull elk on publicly accessible lands.

We annually hear public comment about crowding on publicly accessible lands in this area and removal or liberalizing ES permits would likely result in further crowding. We also have a long history of collaboration with stakeholders in the area which is formalized by a subset of those represented on the Breaks Elk Working Group <https://fwp.mt.gov/aboutfwp/breaks-elk-working-group> . A large deviation from the current ES permit level would fray our relationship and trust with this group and other stakeholders. This could result in loss of public access through our Block Management Program, lessening our ability to manage elk and other game species.

HD 690:

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 objective is at least 10 bulls: 100 cows during post-season aerial trend surveys.

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

The 2005 Elk Plan prescribes limited either-sex (ES) permits. The standard regulation is prescribed when bull ratios are at least 10 bulls:100 cows and a restrictive regulation when bull ratios are under 10 bulls:100 cows for two consecutive years. The elk plan details antlered elk regulations for HD 690:

General season regulations:

- Standard regulation- at least 10 either-sex permits (*35 were issued in 2021*)
- Restrictive regulation- less than 10 either-sex permits

Archery season regulations:

- Standard regulation- at least 15 either-sex archery only permits (*50 were issued in 2021*)
- Restrictive regulation- less than 15 either-sex archery only permits

Bull ratios during the most recent elk survey (2021) were 46 bulls:100 cows and average 43 bulls:100 cows over the past 10-years. Elk population surveys (and ratios) have been highly variable, ranging from 10-year low of 190 and a high of 1026 during the 2021 survey. The elk population objective is 250 elk.

The current level of limited ES permits is largely a result of matching ES opportunity with the limited public access opportunities in the district, primarily on the BLM lands (20% of the HD) and several large Block Management ranches totaling 70,000 acres.

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

Removal or liberalizing ES permits could decrease bull:cow ratios to levels closer to 10 bulls:100 cows. There is a high level of interest in both archery and rifle bull hunting as evidenced by a 3% drawing odd for ES rifle elk permits (1,242 applicants for 35 permits) and a 7% drawing odd for ES archery elk permits (690 for 50 permits). If either-sex hunting opportunity is given to a large portion of applicants, there would be an increase in bull harvest and lead to limited bull elk presence on publicly accessible lands.

A substantial increase in ES permits would crowd the limited public access opportunities. The Block Management Areas (BMAs) are Type II (requiring permission from the landowner) and currently the requests for permission to hunt far exceed the amount of access provided. Increases in either-sex elk hunter days on BMAs would require a reduction in antlerless elk or other hunting opportunities. Most of the increased hunting pressure would be shifted to public lands. The result on public lands and BMAs would likely be a redistribution of elk to inaccessible lands.

This district currently allows antlerless elk harvest on a general license. Further reductions in public access could reduce antlerless elk rifle harvest; which is the primary tool for elk population management, and further limit the ability to meet population objectives.