

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 700:

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 overall population objective for HD700 in the 2005 elk plan is 200-300 elk. This objective was set when the population was very new and repeatable, good survey data was lacking. This population objective does not well represent the carrying capacity of the habitat and landowner tolerance of elk in the district. According to the 2005 Elk management plan FWP is to manage for a minimum of 30 bulls: 100 cows. During the last elk survey conducted (2020) FWP observed 15 bulls: 100 cows, and the two surveys previous to that (2018 and 2016) FWP observed 32 bulls: 100 cows. Both, archery and general season permits are needed to maintain this objective, increased bull harvest would decrease our bull to cow ratio below this objective.

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

We are limiting bull harvest because of the bull numbers we are counting during our biennial full coverage surveys. An increase in bull harvest would reduce the bull numbers below the objective, but also could easily eliminate the bulls in this population. In 2021 we awarded 955 permits, with 3,757 hunters applying for these permits. Interest in hunting this district drastically exceeds supply, as the number of resident first choice applicants is over 32 times the number of estimated bulls in this population. Our bull population cannot support the number of hunters who desire to hunt bulls in this hunting district. The draw odds for landowner preference are 100%, with fewer landowners applying than number of permits allotted. In 2021, 176 archery bull permits were available to landowners and only 2 applied, while 63 rifle bull permits were available to landowners and only 37 applied.

Bull harvest success is significant, with the 2020 rifle bull harvest success being 72% and archery bull harvest being 16%. In 2020 294 bulls were harvested, with 179 bulls being harvested with the rifle permit and 115 being harvested with archery permits. Over time archery hunters have become more successful and are harvesting numbers similar to rifle hunters, which will likely continue to increase as technologies improve.

These permits have successfully minimized elk depredation, with only 3 complaints in this HD since 2018. Private landowners and hunters are at their maximum tolerance for hunter densities in the HD. I regularly get calls, am stopped at the gas station, and talk with landowners while doing block management contracts and other field work, complaining of too many hunters and a desire to have fewer. I regularly hear from hunters through phone calls and while working check stations that they like hunting HD700 because it isn't overcrowded for the most part but in some areas can be when the bulls are bunching up. Hunters and Landowners have expressed concern for an increase in bull permits because more access would be lost more elk would be protected on inaccessible private lands, to later cause damage issues on publicly accessible private lands.

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

Removing ES permits in HD 700 would completely wipe out the bull population and would not contribute to overall population management. It would cause severe overcrowding on publicly accessible land. It would cause landowners to reduce access, either to protect elk, reduce hunter crowding on their property, or encourage charging a fee for access. The reduction in access would reduce access to cow elk, encouraging large population growth, and would result in more game damage issues. Reduction in access causes heartburn with neighboring landowners who allow access to mitigate damage issues but drastically limits the effect of those efforts. Landowners and hunters would not tolerate increased hunters in the district. The CMR Refuge has its own management goals and has the authority to limit hunting access on the refuge lands. Likely, the CMR would put a limit or a moratorium on elk harvest on CMR lands, which would drastically reduce the publicly accessible land and encourage population growth.

HDs 702, 704 & 705:

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 current Elk Management Plan lists an objective for the Custer Elk Management Unit (EMU) of 500 elk with a sex ratio of 30-40 bulls:100 cows.

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

The most recent survey observed a minimum count of 2,019 elk with a bull:cow ratio of 39 bulls:100 cows. Limited permits are needed to maintain this objective. Bull harvest interest exceeds supply, as the number of 1st choice applicants for the either-sex permits is over 7 times the number of estimated bulls in this population. Access to private land is a primary limiting factor to managing the elk population, and the current hunting structure allows for hunters to hold two easily obtained licenses that are valid on 100% of private land in the EMU.

While the respective drawing odds are different, the current system of limited permits promotes an equitable harvest of bull elk between archery and rifle hunters. In general, hunters and landowners support limited entry permits for the archery and general season for the EMU.

Antlerless elk harvest is the main driver of the elk population trend in the Custer Forest EMU. The general elk license is valid for antlerless elk and spike bulls across 92% of the region (not valid on the Custer National Forest). The 007-00 B-license, which has 100% draw odds for 1st choice residents, is valid across 92% of the region as well. The 799-00 B-license (63% of 1st choice resident drawing success) is valid for antlerless elk across the entire EMU and is used to obtain a managed level of harvest on the Custer National Forest. Hunting access is the limiting factor for managing the population and distribution of hunters across the EMU (only 24% of the EMU is public land). The current managed level of opportunity/harvest helps ensure that elk are distributed across public and private land.

Harvest from archery (15% harvest success) and rifle (58% harvest success) permit holders has remained comparable in the EMU.

- 21 bull elk were harvested with rifle in 2000 and 159 were harvested in 2020.
- 19 bull elk were harvested with archery in 2000 and 132 were harvested in 2020.

Because of difference in success rates, more archery permits are allocated than rifle permits.

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

Eliminating the limited archery permit would favor archery hunters over rifle hunters in terms of amount of opportunity and harvest. For the upcoming biennial season-setting process, FWP has recommended to eliminate the 900-20 archery-only permit and to create a new archery-only, either-sex permit that is valid in HDs 702, 704 and 705. This recommendation would allow FWP to better assess archery effort and harvest in this area.

As part of the 2016-17 biennial season setting process, FWP staff held a public meeting in Colstrip. During that meeting staff presented the concept of increasing the either-sex elk permit ("rifle permit") from 175 to 225. There were no positive comments for the proposal, and the root of the aversion to the proposed increase was 'we don't have a place to hunt so why give out more tags.' Additionally, conversations with members of the Montana Bowhunters Association indicate that the group would strongly oppose eliminating the limited entry system used in the EMU.