Hase Hibbard is nearing the end of his rope. “We don’t mind being hosts to elk,” says Hibbard, whose family owns a large ranch in Cascade County. “But we now have a herd of 300 to 500 coming down in late summer feeding on our irrigated alfalfa fields. We’ve run out of control options, and it’s come to a point where elk are taking money out of our pocket.” The Hibbards aren’t the only landowners frustrated by fast-growing elk herds. In areas across Montana, the overabundant ungulates are knocking down fences and consuming haystacks and pasture meant for livestock. Elk populations have grown too high in 80 of Montana’s 138 elk management areas that have population objectives, say state wildlife officials. In some areas, elk numbers are now five to even ten times greater than what the land can support and landowners will tolerate. Concentrated elk also increase the risk of brucellosis spreading to cattle in areas where the disease is present, like the Paradise Valley. More than half the elk in a portion of the valley last year tested positive for exposure to the disease. “It’s a huge concern in these areas whenever elk come into contact with cattle,” says Quentin Kujala, a senior wildlife official with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks.

Feeling pressure from landowners and lawmakers to increase elk harvest in some hunting districts, FWP has proposed a new option that adds additional seasons to firearms elk seasons. The department would use these “shoulder seasons” to pare down overabundant elk herds by giving hunters additional days afield. “We heard loud and clear from the legislature that getting these populations down to objectives is a top priority, and this proposal is meant to do that,” says McDonald.

For years Montana has struggled to lower elk numbers in many areas to reach population “objectives,” levels determined through a public process and based on the biological carrying capacity of the land, landowner tolerance, and hunter interests. During the 1990s and 2000s, Montana held a five-week regular firearms elk season plus, in areas where that wasn’t sufficient to reduce elk numbers, “late-season” cow elk hunts in December or January. FWP also offered special “game damage” hunts to disperse herds on individual properties that allowed general season public hunting but were still having severe depredation problems.

Unfortunately, those management tools didn’t always control populations, and elk numbers kept climbing. What’s more, some public hunters complained that landowners who leased their property for paid bull elk hunts were profiting from the public’s trophy elk during the regular season, then using nonpaying hunters for population “clean-up” during the late-season cow or antlerless hunts. (Harvesting female elk is a more effective way to lower populations because they produce new calves each year.)

In 2006, hoping to encourage more landowners to allow public hunting, FWP went to a five-week-only season statewide and ended late-season hunts (while maintaining game damage hunts and “manage...
managers needed to find a better way to ing during late seasons closed their gates in legislative pressure growing, FWP wildlife had been happy to shoot a cow elk lost addi -

One way to boost elk harvest would be for A NEW PROPOSAL.

A landowner, Kujala, says, “At the same time, Montana has consistently resisted giving landowners elks permits they can then give or sell to others, as some other Western states have done.”

Another way to harvest more elk is to increase hunter success. That’s what FWP believes could happen with its new proposed shoulder seasons. In certain hunting dis-

The department will require that a certain number of cow and bull elk are harvested during the regular archery and firearms sea-

Unlike game damage hunts and manage-

More elk opportunities

Under FWP’s new proposal, firearms elk hunting in some hunting districts could begin as early as mid-August and run as late as mid-February.