

LET'S HEAR IT

FWP is sometimes accused of not listening to the public. We're trying to change that. One way has been to improve our hunting season—setting procedure. We understand that hunting seasons are as much about the public's values, desires, and opinions as they are about biology. So we're making it easier for hunters and others to participate in the process and voice their preferences.

This past fall, for the first time, FWP solicited public comments and suggestions on hunting seasons before making recommendations to the FWP Commission. We received more than 300 comments, mostly from hunters. Some were specific: "Return to either-sex elk in the first week of areas 121, 122, and 123," wrote one hunter. Others were less precise: "How about some muzzleloader-only seasons?" asked another. Many hunters recommended that we keep things as they are ("OK," "Leave the same," and "I feel the current season is good" were common responses). One kind-hearted hunter went so far as to write, "Keep up the good work!"

We can't make everyone happy. But we can listen to what the public says and seriously consider their proposals and concerns.

Some themes emerged: A number of hunters asked that the general big game season open on Saturday rather than the traditional Sunday. Many wanted expanded archery seasons. And many requested that hunters who successfully draw a limited elk permit be required to wait a few years before reapplying (as is the case with moose,

bighorn sheep, and mountain goat permits).

What struck us most about the 300-plus comments was their overall sincerity. Most indicated that hunters thought carefully about their suggestions and weighed various options before making them. Changing a hunting season is serious business, and hunters responded accordingly.

In December the commission considered these and other com-



One popular request was to change the general big game season opener from Sunday to Saturday.

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ments, along with biennial hunting season recommendations from agency biologists, and tentatively adopted ones they deemed appropriate. FWP then conducted 46 public input meetings statewide and provided opportunities on the agency website to gather public comments on the commission's tentative regulations. Commission members then reviewed the second round of comments before making their final decisions in mid-February.

Listening more closely to public concerns and suggestions doesn't mean we can do what everyone asks. Some recommendations would not fly with the general hunting public, such as one asking that Montana allow harvest of hen pheasants. And consider our dilemma when one hunter asks FWP to allow more sheep hunting opportunities in the Missouri Breaks while another recommends we restrict sheep hunting there. Who do we listen to? That's where science comes in, along with the judgment of biologists and commission members.

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Fortunately, most hunters seem to know that FWP can't make every Montana hunting wish come true. One acknowledged as much with his comment on the bighorn sheep hunting season: "Would like to get drawn," he wrote.

Wouldn't we all.

—JOE MAURIER, *Director, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks*

NATURAL WONDERS ILLUSTRATION BY PETER GROSSHAUSER

Q. Do fish feel pain from being hooked?

A. Probably not. Fish are usually hooked in the mouth, which is composed of bone and skin with almost no nerve endings. But the main evidence against the pain theory is trout that have been hooked and released are often caught a few hours later on the same fly. That indicates the experience was likely not painful. However, measurements of elevated cortisol hormone levels in fish have shown that trout and other species experience physical stress when fighting for too long against an angler's line. That's why anglers who wish to release their fish should bring their catch to the net as quickly as possible.

