

Four years later

With the election of a new Montana governor, Fish, Wildlife & Parks will soon be led by a new director. This transition provides me with an opportunity to look back at the past four years and summarize the challenges and achievements I have been part of during that time.

Maybe the biggest challenge any FWP director faces is the sheer volume of public interest in the fish, wildlife, and parks we manage. With that passion come strong personal opinions—both outside this department and within—about how we manage wolves, elk, trout, state parks, fishing, hunting, and other natural and cultural resources. Those strong opinions are valuable. They have helped Montana build nationally known elk populations and trout fisheries. But I'd be lying if I said some of the most adamant viewpoints didn't make my job extremely difficult at times, especially when they clashed with department positions or policies.

Also challenging has been the rancor surrounding the role and value of nonresident hunters and anglers in Montana. I understand the frustration that comes from seeing out-of-staters anchored in your favorite fishing spot. Or learning that private land once open to public hunting is now closed except to paying customers, in many cases not from Montana. But nonresidents are as passionate about hunting and fishing as Montanans are. They care about conservation, too. If we are concerned about the declining public interest in hunting and fishing and the resulting loss of conservation advocates—which we should be—then we should not disparage those who come to Montana from elsewhere to hunt and fish.

Also, nonresidents pay most of the freight around here. About two-thirds of the license revenue going to our Division of Fish and Wildlife—for things like biologists' salaries, money for public access and habitat acquisition, and funding for fish and wildlife population monitoring—comes from nonresidents.

The attitude by many people toward landowners also troubles me. I recognize the

important fact that Montana's wildlife is held by the state in the public trust. Still, a large proportion of our elk, deer, pheasants, and other wildlife live on private land. Many private landowners protect and even enhance fish and wildlife habitat. We should appreciate and encourage those actions, just as Aldo Leopold did when he wrote, in 1934, "Conservation will ultimately boil down to rewarding the private landowner who conserves the public interest."

Fortunately, that is happening throughout Montana, with various state and federal conservation programs. Most significant is Block Management, which opens up 8 million acres of private land to public hunting. We need to do even more to both improve that program and find other ways to increase access to wildlife.

Despite these and other challenges, this department has made great headway in the last four years. Among the achievements I'm most proud of are our permanent land acquisitions, totaling more than 100,000 acres, including Marshall Creek, Fish Creek, Yellowstone, Marias, North Shore (Flathead Lake), and Spotted Dog Wildlife Management Areas, along with many conservation easements and new fishing access sites.

I also think we've made significant progress in establishing FWP's Parks Division as an independent entity and positioning it to market and manage Bannack, Lewis and Clark Caverns, Makoshika, Chief Plenty Coups, and the rest of our remarkable state parks.

Especially rewarding has been my role in helping create the Montana Wild Conservation Education Center in Helena. Whenever I visit that restored foundry, now filled with kids and their parents learning about wildlife, fish, and Montana's long-standing tradition of citizen involvement in conservation, I feel great about this state. Many Montanans can take credit for making that facility possible, and it has been my honor to help them.

I love to be outdoors, to take in the intoxicating sights and smells and sounds of the natural resources this department is entrusted to conserve and manage. I suspect that years from now, as I drive past Montana Wild and think of its role in getting young people as committed to the outdoors as I am, my role in helping create that facility will provide my greatest sense of professional accomplishment.

—Joe Maurier, Montana FWP Director



GRAND OPENING A ribbon-cutting ceremony was held in September to inaugurate Montana Wild. From left to right: Vince Yannone (FWP retired), Kelly Kuntz and Cindy Utterback (Foundation for Animals), Chris Smith (FWP retired), First Lady Nancy Schweitzer, Thomas Baumeister (FWP), and Joe Maurier.

MIKE GURNETT/FWP