

Appreciating landowners

Earlier this year I visited Havre and Malta to attend Block Management “cooperator appreciation” dinners. Each spring, FWP holds these events across Montana to thank landowners for participating in the program, which opens millions of acres of private property to public hunting.

As always at these dinners, I met many wonderful people and heard funny and heart-warming stories about ranching and farming life. On the drive home, I started thinking about “appreciation,” and how it applies not only to Block Management cooperators but to all Montana landowners who share their land with wildlife.

As noted in my previous Director’s Messages, a defining characteristic of the United States is that we view wildlife as part of commonly shared resources known as the public trust. The framework of laws and guiding principles that came out of the public trust concept—including the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, Endangered Species Act, and North American Model of Wildlife Conservation—have led to remarkable recoveries of elk, pronghorn, bighorn sheep, Canada geese, bald eagles, wolves, grizzly bears, and more.

While we celebrate those success stories and treasure the public trust concept that led to them, we also need to recognize the strain that expanding wildlife populations sometimes put on Montana’s ranchers, farmers, and rural communities.

Deer ravage hay bales and vegetable gardens. Elk consume crops, trample fences, and carry brucellosis that could infect cattle. Geese descend on crop fields. Wolves prey on sheep and cattle, or, at a minimum, cause stress that reduces livestock weight and disease tolerance.

Then there’s Montana’s growing number of grizzly bears. Yes, these are magnificent animals, symbols of wildness and rugged independence. But some are also troublemakers that raid beehives and orchards, break into outbuildings, harass or even kill livestock, and wander too close to where people work and live.

Add to all this the ramifications of hunters pursuing Montana’s restored game populations on private property: litter in parking areas, gates left open, trucks that chew up muddy roads and drive across “walk-in-only” areas, shot-up signs and farm equipment, phone calls and knocks on the front door that start before dawn and last all day. All while landowners and their families are trying to steward their land or livestock.

I want to make clear to all Montana landowners that we appreciate you, and we appreciate how hard it can sometimes be to have wildlife on your property. We appreciate that your land serves as vital habitat for wildlife and native plants. We appreciate the responsibilities you shoulder as stewards of your land.

Many of us in FWP grew up on farms or ranches. We understand your concerns about wildlife depredation, property rights, and trespass. We know many of you appreciate Montana’s wildlife—even grizzly bears—just as everyone else does, but that you have to balance that admiration with earning a living and protecting your family’s safety.

It’s a given that the public trust concept requires landowners to tolerate a certain level of crop loss or inconvenience from wildlife. But if the public trust concept asks this of landowners, then we must not take their tolerance for granted. We need to recognize that landowners are a vital part of the public trust equation.

Acknowledging this in no way subverts the public trust or the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation, as some people claim. If anything, it strengthens both.

We cannot sustain the wildlife populations we’ve so long enjoyed without farmers and ranchers. We need their help maintaining wildlife connectivity and protecting habitat on their property. We need their support at the state capitol for wildlife-friendly policies and programs. We need their generosity to provide places to hunt for the majority of people who don’t own land.

I constantly meet landowners who understand that wildlife



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diversity, including predators, is an essential element of the Montana landscape and a large part of what makes this state unique. They take pride in helping steward that wildlife. They recognize that hunting is part of our rich Montana heritage and accept the responsibility of allowing some access to the wildlife on their property.

FWP is charged with the stewardship of Montana’s wildlife. We and the wildlife conservation community regularly ask landowners to listen to our concerns, and we’ll continue to do so. But the road runs both ways. If we want ranchers and farmers to respect our perspective, we need to respect theirs in turn by putting ourselves in their boots and seeing the world—especially burgeoning wildlife populations—through their eyes.

—**Martha Williams**, Director, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks