# A bill to combine access efforts

When the 2027 Montana Legislature meets in January, one bill I'm really hoping will gain momentum is FWP's proposal to consolidate our five programs that help facilitate public access across private land to inaccessible public land.

FWP has worked for decades to create access to landlocked state, U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and other public parcels for hunting. This has also been a priority for the Montana Legislature for many years. In fact, the five programs in question all began as directives from separate legislative sessions since 2009.

The names of these programs reflect their common objective. Unlocking Public Lands provides a $750 tax credit to private landowners who grant access to national forest tracts or other public parcels. The other four programs—Public Access Land Agreements, Block Management Access Corridors, Access Public Lands, and Access Easements—provide payments to private landowners who open passageways to landlocked public parcels. Funding comes from a variety of sources, including hunting license sales and preference point proceeds.



An FWP proposal headed to the Montana Legislature would combine five programs for opening access to landlocked public land.

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It's worth noting that, unlike traditional Block Management and other FWP hunter access efforts, these programs do not grant recreational access on enrolled private land but rather passage across that land to reach landlocked public parcels.

So why combine them?

A legislative audit in 2024 recommended that FWP build a comprehensive plan to combine the programs under one umbrella in time for the 2027 Montana Legislature. That move was also backed by the Private Land/Public Wildlife Advisory Committee—aka PL/PW—the citizen advisory group charged with reviewing access programs. PL/PW found ample evidence that a merger would make it easier for landowners to understand their options, thus making them more likely to enroll.

The proposed bill would also provide FWP more flexibility to complete access projects so landowners aren't waiting for months for a signed agreement. We would no longer be required to run certain projects through PL/PW for their recommendation—a change that group members themselves suggested—nor would we have to send projects through the Montana Fish and Wildlife Commission. At FWP, we are confident these changes would help ensure that staff can fast-track approvals when new access opportunities arise.

Each of the current programs has aspects that work well—and things that don't, despite their good intentions. Following the recommendations from the audit and PL/PW, this proposal seeks to preserve the best parts of each program that have proved their worth over time.

"Merging them into one program will make it easier for landowners to understand their options while also making it easier for us to administer," says Jason Kool, FWP's access program manager. "We believe this could lead to an increase in landowners enrolling in these public access options."

To date these five programs have helped to open more than 530,000 acres for public hunting. By keeping the best elements of each, FWP is confident we can add to that total.

Montanans care deeply about our wildlife, our public lands, and our ranching and farming heritage. This bill offers a genuine win-win: giving landowners greater incentives to create access to public lands, and a cleaner, faster way to do so, while also giving the public more outstanding places to hunt.

—**Christy Clark,** *Director, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks*