

Elk Summit



Written by Administrator

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I attended the Elk Summit on December 8th, 2007 in Bozeman. The summit was sponsored by the Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks, Montana Bow Hunters, Montana Outfitters and Guides, Montana Wildlife Federation, and the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation. The focus of the meeting was to address the over population of Elk in 64% of the 44 Elk Management Units (EMU) in Montana.

The numbers of elk in Montana are somewhere between 130 and 160 thousand animals. Time after time at the meeting the topic of access was brought up. The lack of access is being blamed for the over population of elk in the majority of EMUs in Montana. The lack of access to public land was not the issue but instead the meeting focused on lack of access to private land. These organizations along with the FWP are attempting to gain access and control over private property and this should concern every property owner in Montana.

The FWP has recommended that the Forest Service close additional motorized access to public land in every travel plan that is ongoing in Montana yet at this meeting they want additional hunter access to private lands. Quentin Kujala, FWP Wildlife Management Bureau Chief, commented that the lack of motorized access on public land was a concern. Motorized access is important for the older average population of hunters and the hunter numbers have decreased in recent years. Some of this may be due to the loss of motorized access.

The FWP sent out surveys this past year to land owners, hunters and outfitters. Many participants on the discussion panel found fault with the survey questions. The survey only offered 3 options that may help to reduce elk populations. The fact that the FWP could simply extend the hunting season until quotas were met was not presented in the survey. Chuck Ryan, a land owner in the East Crazies south of Big Timber and a member on the discussion panel mentioned that by simply extending the hunting season until the elk quota for the EMU was met would be a simple solution. This solution did not seem to be viable to the FWP as to me it seemed like the focus of this meeting was to find ways to take control and gain public access to private land.

A question on the land owner survey asked if "There is good public access to where elk are typically located in this hunting district". This question was only asked in the land owners survey and was not one of the questions on the hunter survey or the outfitter survey. It is very apparent to me that the surveys were poorly written and the summary results of these surveys presented to the attendees at this meeting were worthless. Copies of the surveys were not made available at this meeting and the people attending were not aware of the questions that were asked. I would think that the question about adequate access should have asked of those people that are looking for places to hunt such as the hunters and outfitters. Why was this question only asked of the property owners? Jim Brooks from FWP was the author of the survey forms.

When it became apparent that this meeting was focusing on gaining public access to private lands, many members on the discussion panel were quite disturbed. Senator Keith Bales, a member of the panel noted that he is witnessing the closing of access to public lands through the travel planning processes that the Forest Service and BLM are going through and he takes issue with the proposals of gaining access to private lands that are being presented at this meeting. He also stated that the FWP does not seem to be complying with the Montana law that requires the FWP to address the elk populations by 2009. If the FWP does not meet this deadline he stated that some hard questions will be asked of the FWP and some good answers had better be given at that time.

Russ Miller the general manager of the Turner Ranch in Gallatin County along with Chuck Ryan also raised concerns during the panel discussions about the FWP and other organizations trying to gain public access to private property. They felt that the lack of access to private land was not a major contributing factor to the over population of elk in many of the EMUs in Montana. Russ stated that the management plan on the Turner ranch has been accepted by the FWP and they have reduced their bison herd to accommodate elk and maintain a sustainable forage capacity. Chuck Ryan stated that outfitting supplements a rancher's income and has become an important part of a rancher's ability to stay in business.

The meeting was well attended by about 400 people but I believe the forum was not meant to gain information from the public. Question cards were available and over 400 were filled out but little time was given for these questions to be asked. Stan Meyer, a past board member of the Nature Conservancy, was the moderator of the meeting and he selected the questions that were asked of the discussion panel. I found the questions that were asked were not representative of many of the people that attended this meeting.

It should concern everyone that a state agency is out trying to garner support for taking control of private property. It should concern everyone that the FWP is not controlling the elk population in 64% of the 44 EMUs in Montana and is using the over population issue as a way to take away private property rights. The simple solution to the problem by extending the hunting season until the quota was discounted by the FWP and

the limited options put forth on the surveys shows a bias towards the taking of private property.

Dan Vermillion, FWP Commissioner appointed by Governor Schweitzer, presented an overview of the day's meeting and it was apparent that he supported gaining public access to private property. Governor Schweitzer has made no secret of the fact that he wants to take private property by eminent domain around Yellowstone Park for the expansion of the bison herd. The Governor will continue to appoint members to committees and commissions that promote and support his views and agenda. The FWP is moving in a direction that the Governor supports with little to no respect for the ownership of private property in Montana.

I am concerned about the future of hunting in Montana but even more than that I am concerned about the direction that the FWP is taking and the money that is being spent by this agency with little positive affect. Simple solutions to the elk over population like extending hunting seasons are being ignored by the FWP with a larger agenda in mind that will take away our private property. I believe that the legislature of Montana should and must get the FWP under control and not succumb to the wishes of Governor Schweitzer.

. The protection of our private property is guaranteed to every citizen of this country through the Constitution and these rights must be preserved. Private property rights are the basis for the greatness of our country. Any attempt by a federal or state agency to erode or diminish these rights must be rejected by the people. I will continue to fight to protect my property rights and I encourage everyone to do the same.

Kerry White