

PRIVATE LANDS: OWNER SENTIMENT REGARDING ELK POPULATIONS SEASON OPTIONS, AND HUNTER ACCESS

Joe Weigand, Landowner/Sportsman Relations Unit, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, 1420 East Sixth Avenue, Helena, MT 59620

Montana's private landscape has undergone considerable ownership changes in recent years. During this same time, elk (*Cervus elaphus*) populations in the state have continued to increase despite relatively steady hunting pressure and harvest rates. We assessed private landowner opinions of current elk populations, untried season options, and elk hunter access. For the purpose of this study, large contiguous tracts of land (> 640 ac) were considered to provide the greatest opportunity for elk harvest, assuming that hunters have access to it. Therefore, 3310 landowners owning ≥ 640 ac were surveyed in 43 hunting districts. These hunting districts were selected because elk populations in these districts exceeded management objectives. Questionnaires were successfully delivered to a total of 3237 landowners, with 1737 responses resulting in a 54-percent response rate. Survey results indicated that while a considerable majority (80%) of the landowners with elk typically on their property during general elk season allowed some form of elk hunter access in 2006, their opinions regarding elk populations and hunter access varied widely. Additionally, resident and nonresident landowners not only statistically differed ($P < 0.05$) in almost all of their opinions, but also varied considerably within their groups depending on the topic. Agency big game managers and decision makers should recognize that private landowner sentiments toward elk populations, management, and hunter access are not always as straightforward as many believe.