



Montana Elk Damage Assessment

*Survey results from Montana landowners with elk
in counties with limited-entry permit hunting.*

A report by the Rural Montana Foundation
March 2023

**Rural
Montana
Foundation**

Introduction & Survey Results

In December 2022, the Rural Montana Foundation surveyed 431 landowners with elk on their property in the 18 counties for which the Fish & Wildlife Commission has imposed limited-entry permits for elk hunting. These areas are highly correlated with chronically over-objective elk populations.

+/- 4.5%. N = 431

Q1. With what frequency do you tend to have elk on your property?

| | |
|---|-----|
| Occasionally, but more often during hunting season | 9% |
| Occasionally, but more often outside hunting season | 25% |
| Frequently throughout the year | 66% |

Q2. Would you say the number of elk on your property has increased or decreased over the last decade?

| | |
|----------------|-----|
| Increased | 82% |
| Decreased | 5% |
| About the same | 13% |

Q3. Would you say the frequency of elk on your property has increased or decreased over the last decade?

| | |
|----------------|-----|
| Increased | 79% |
| Decreased | 4% |
| About the same | 17% |

Q4. In your area, would you say that elk populations are:

| | |
|--------------------------------------|-----|
| Far greater than they should be | 51% |
| Slightly greater than they should be | 22% |
| About right | 21% |
| Slightly less than they should be | 4% |
| Far less than they should be | 2% |

Q5. In terms of financial expenditure, do you think that the impact of elk has:

| | |
|--|-----|
| A large and unsustainable financial burden on your operation | 38% |
| A small and manageable financial burden on your operation | 45% |
| No discernible effect | 15% |
| A net positive effect on your operation | 3% |

Q6. How much money do you estimate you lose each year due to elk damage to crops (including hay)?

| | |
|----------------------|-----|
| Less than \$1,000 | 33% |
| \$1,000 to \$10,000 | 46% |
| \$10,000 to \$50,000 | 17% |
| More than \$50,000 | 4% |

Q7. How much money do you estimate you lose each year due to elk damage to forage?

| | |
|----------------------|-----|
| Less than \$1,000 | 31% |
| \$1,000 to \$10,000 | 46% |
| \$10,000 to \$50,000 | 19% |
| More than \$50,000 | 4% |

Q8. How much money do you estimate you lose each year due to elk damage to physical structures (i.e. fences, gates, or panels)?

| | |
|----------------------|-----|
| Less than \$1,000 | 39% |
| \$1,000 to \$10,000 | 55% |
| \$10,000 to \$50,000 | 6% |
| More than \$50,000 | 0% |

Q9. How many more livestock could your operation support if elk numbers were at their population objective?

| | |
|-----------------------|-----|
| No discernible effect | 32% |
| Less than 10% more | 28% |
| 10% to 20% more | 32% |
| More than 20% | 8% |

Q11. Which statement most describes your view of FWP's current use of game damage assistance?

Game damage assistance has been effective mitigating damage caused by elk. FWP's current game damage assistance policies are 10% effective and should not be changed.

Game damage assistance from FWP is of little importance as part of an elk management plan. 27%

Game damage assistance can be an effective management tool, but FWP's policies are too restrictive. FWP should expand the 63% availability of game damage assistance.

Q12. Should FWP reimburse landowners for damages to crops, forage, and fences?

Yes 82%

No 18%

Q13. Which statement regarding reimbursement to landowners for forage & crop damage do you most agree with?

Landowners should be eligible for reimbursement in all cases. 54%

Landowners should only be eligible for reimbursement if their property is in a hunting district where elk populations are above 34% objective.

Landowners should only be eligible for reimbursement if they 13% allow FWP to control hunting access to their property.

Q14. Landowners who don't participate in Block Management, but instead use other lease arrangements for hunting, are excluded from FWP game damage assistance. Do you agree or disagree with this policy?

Agree 31%

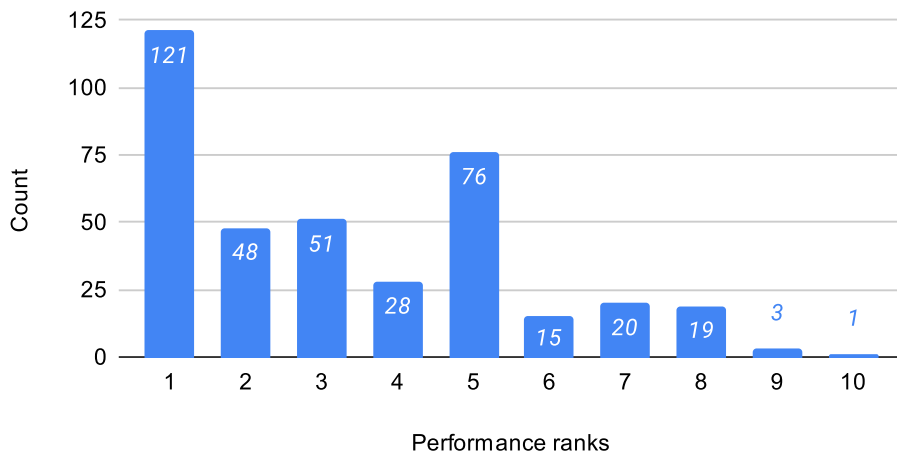
Disagree 69%

Q15. Current FWP policy stipulates that for landowners to be eligible for assistance, they must provide “free public elk hunting” on their property. The term public hunting is not defined, but is generally taken to mean to give FWP control over hunting access to the property. Do you agree or disagree that FWP should have this discretion when deciding who is eligible for game damage assistance?

| | |
|----------|-----|
| Agree | 19% |
| Disagree | 81% |

Q16. Overall how would you rate the performance of FWP related to elk management, with 1 being poor and 10 being excellent?

Average score: 3.2



Q17. Is FWP responsive to the concerns of landowners with elk?

| | |
|-----|-----|
| Yes | 32% |
| No | 68% |

Q18. FWP has set management policies in some areas to emphasize trophy opportunity and hunt quality, while adopting more liberal management policies in other areas. Which statement regarding hunt quality and trophy opportunity do you most agree with?

| | |
|---|-----|
| Hunt quality and trophy opportunity are important considerations for FWP and should remain unchanged. | 12% |
| Hunt quality and trophy opportunity should only be considered after population objectives are met. | 47% |
| Using hunt quality and trophy opportunity lead to inequitable elk management policies. These criteria should not be considered. | 41% |

Selected Open-Ended Responses

"In the past year, Elk have eaten 100-200 acres of fall grazing to the ground. They have actually caused alfalfa to die out over the winter! In prior years, we have planted cover crops, which we have planned to use as grazing for our cows and calves from preconditioning to shipping. The elk have moved in and eaten the cover crop to the ground. We have not been able to utilize this for grazing. We have had to abandon this practice. The fence next to these crops in travel conditions gets destroyed.

"We have 30% more fence damage where the elk are. They walk through and bed down in our wheat + hay fields. They ate the heads off a 300 yard by 200 yard barley field, it looked like 100 heads walked through it about 5 times side by side and just ate the heads off. We can't raise oats or corn because they destroy too much. Last year they were eating on the hay bales before and after they were in the stock. Our neighbors have a hay field about a mile from the mountain. The elk came down after dark, ate his second cutting that he was going to graze on hay and leave before daylight. At least 200 to 300 head come down and clean it up in about 10 ways."

"The elk would come into the area we use in the fall before we sell our calves. They would eat 75% of the forage that our cattle could have eaten. There were many times there would be approximately 1500 elk in this area. This is a private area. We also started vaccinating our cows in both the spring and fall to avoid getting leptospirosis in our herd. We lost some calves one spring. We took the dead calves to the vet. The death was caused from leptospirosis that our cows got from the elk. I told the FWP about this but they did nothing."

"From May-August we experience extensive forage, grain, and grazing losses due to high concentration of elk herds. Fencing is a major problem as well. Numbers of elk herds on our property have grown from ~20 head to well over 300 head in the last 10 years with no changes in FWP management strategy despite being Block Management co-operations the whole time. Game damage hunts with 4-8 tags issued at a time have been ineffective in reducing population. Hazing with FWP permission results in additional damage to forage, crops and fences."

"With game damage assistance eligibility tied to public access during the regular hunting season, we would have to forego the income we receive from a private outfitter. This income amounts to about half the estimated damage caused by the elk. Allowing more public access on our individual ranch will not significantly reduce the size of the elk herd in our area so the assistance from the FWP would have to be significantly higher than current programs allow in order to be financially effective for us. We are not trying to profit from the elk or profit from blocking public access. We are simply attempting to lessen the financial, and HR burden caused by the presence of elk on our ranch."

"Regardless of a landowner's location, this is our livelihood. Elk damage should not be a burden we have to carry. It's hard enough to make a living farming/ranching today without the damage, added cost, and extra work they create."

"Just let the landowners have a chance at shooting a bull every year and most would be happy. We have learned to live with wildlife on our ranches. It would just help our moods if we could harvest more of them. The FWP makes a lot of money selling tags every year, I just think the Ranchers should have the choice to have a tag to be able to sell it and make money like the FWP. That's the least we should be able to do after feeding them and fixing all the fence year after year."