

Senate Bill 405
February 15, 2005
Presented by Larry Peterman
Senate Fish and Game Committee

Mr. Chairman and committee members, for the record I am Larry Peterman, Chief of Field Operations for Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP).

I am here in opposition to SB 405 which proposes to utilize wildlife habitat funding to lease hunting access, or for the hunting access enhancement program, unless elk and deer population targets are met in 80% of all hunting districts in the state.

The basis for diverting the funding is that wildlife population objectives are not being met. The 58th Legislature passed HB 42 that provides for the establishment of population objectives. Population objectives must be met by January 31, 2009 as specified in 87-1-323 (3)(a). Mule deer are rebounding from declines in the late 1990's but are below or at objective in 147 of the 157 districts.

The recently completed elk plan identified those hunting districts in which access to elk was an important issue. Most of the Elk Management Units (20) that are over objective have elk that are unavailable to general elk hunters. They are associated with land that is either closed or leased for fee-based hunting. If the estimated 34,000 elk that are unavailable were removed from the management objective we would be at or below the target objective in most districts. The department has repeatedly attempted to work with the landowners in these situations but has had very limited success. In all cases where we are over management objective we have liberal hunting seasons in place. In some locations, a hunter can hunt from early September through February and harvest two elk.

The bill makes the inference that populations are above objective and that additional access is the solution. Lack of public access is probably the most important factor. However, that lack of access can be for many reasons. Some landowners simply don't allow hunting for a variety of reasons. Others have the land leased for fee-based hunting but restrict the numbers of hunters to such an extent that the harvest of animals is not sufficient to achieve management objectives.

This bill inappropriately uses funding for wildlife habitat to fund the hunting access programs. The PL/PW Council addressed the funding question in its deliberations during the past two years. They rejected the idea of increasing access funding by using habitat funds. Their recommendations to the Governor supported re-authorization of the Habitat Montana Program and proposed other mechanisms to fund additional access opportunities.

The sportsmen of Montana are strong supporters of habitat programs. They are equally interested in having access to the wildlife but are not willing to trade one for the other. The 2003 resident survey of hunters on hunting related management actions provides insight into their preferences. Their response indicated a 60 - 70% support for increased spending for both habitat and access.