

PERFORMANCE AUDIT

Game Damage Program

Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks

MAY 2015

14P-06

REPORT SUMMARY

Providing game damage assistance to private landowners is a priority for the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks, but the Game Damage program faces significant management challenges. The program needs to address a lack of accountability and consistency in decision making when responding to game damage complaints. This includes improving program information, increasing management oversight and clarifying the level of public hunting access landowners need to allow to qualify for game damage assistance.

## Context

The Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks (department) defines game damage as damage caused by big game animals to real property and cultivated agricultural crops on private land. It is estimated that game damage in Montana may cost private landowners in Montana millions of dollars annually in lost crops and property damage. Department policy describes the Game Damage program as a collaborative approach between landowners, hunters, and the department to provide equitable, consistent, and cost-effective assistance to landowners to minimize damage caused by game animals. Game damage assistance can range from providing landowners with temporary fencing to implementing damage hunts and management seasons to address problem animals. Staff located in the department's seven regions respond to landowner game damage complaints. The department has spent approximately \$1.5 million over the last four years addressing game damage issues throughout the state.

State law requires the department to respond to all game damage complaints submitted by landowners. Landowners are eligible for game damage assistance if they allow public hunting during established hunting seasons or they do not significantly reduce public hunting through imposed restrictions. To receive any kind of game damage assistance

landowners must allow public hunting during the five week general hunting season. Regional staff conducts landowner eligibility reviews to determine if landowners qualify for game damage assistance. These reviews evaluate the level of public access landowners allow. This includes reviewing access restrictions, such as species or sex of animals that can be hunted, access to all or parts of the property, or if fees are charged to hunt on the property.

Game damage has been incorporated into department wildlife plans and programs, and the department considers addressing game damage issues a priority. However, audit work found the Game Damage program lacks consistency and accountability of its activities. We reviewed 586 game damage complaints registered with the department in calendar years 2010 through summer 2014. These were all the documented complaints during this time frame.

We found the program lacks consistency in how game damage issues are addressed not only between regions but also within regions. Overall, program activities were poorly documented, and the program generally relies on subjective decisions to determine if landowners meet eligibility criteria to receive assistance. We identified significant weaknesses in how the department evaluates landowner

eligibility for game damage assistance, problems with how game damage hunts and management seasons are implemented, and a general lack of management controls related to program administration.

## Results

Audit work found the department needs to improve both the accountability and consistency of game damage assistance. Recommendations relate to:

- ◆ Clarifying policy for documenting game damage complaints including landowner eligibility.
- ◆ Defining the role of regional supervisors, wildlife managers, and warden captains regarding supervisory oversight of game damage complaints.
- ◆ Providing landowners with written decisions, including landowner appeal rights, when game damage is denied.
- ◆ Establishing a clear definition of public hunting requirements landowners need to meet to qualify for game damage assistance.
- ◆ Ending the use of supplemental game damage licenses in conjunction with game damage hunts and management seasons to address game damage issues.
- ◆ Prioritizing and implementing a management information system to better track, monitor, and improve accountability of the department's game damage program.
- ◆ Updating administrative rules and game damage policies regarding the use and issuance of cracker shells and ammunition when responding to game damage complaints.

- ◆ Implementing policy for monitoring contracts for purchasing game damage materials.
- ◆ Developing inventory controls to track inventory of game damage materials from acquisition to issuance to landowners.

| Recommendation Concurrence                                     |    |
|--|----|
| Concur   | 10 |
| Partially Concur   | 1  |
| Do Not Concur  | 0  |
| <b>Source: Agency audit response included in final report.</b> |    |

For a complete copy of the report (14P-06) or for further information, contact the Legislative Audit Division at 406-444-3122; e-mail to [lad@mt.gov](mailto:lad@mt.gov); or check the web site at <http://leg.mt.gov/audit>  
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