

FWP leery of some new wildlife rules

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HELENA — Battles over a proposed bison hunt and private game farms may have grabbed headlines during the 2003 Legislature, but the state's top wildlife official says other measures for managing wild game have him concerned as well.

Fish, Wildlife and Parks Director Jeff Hagener said two measures lawmakers passed suggest some believe the agency needs to do a better job of addressing landowners' concerns about game populations.

One measure directs the department to publish a detailed annual estimate of all game animals in the state and show how it arrived at those numbers.

A second law also requires the agency to calculate every two years how much land is available as deer, elk and antelope habitat around the state.

Additionally, the department is required to set new limits for those animals based on habitat, and keep populations at or below those numbers.

That's similar to the formula livestock owners use to manage their animals, but Hagener said the idea may not translate well.

"You can't do it as simple as is done with livestock. Wildlife don't know boundaries," Hagener said.

Larry Copenhaver with the Montana Wildlife Federation agrees.

"That is exactly one of the problems because wildlife is not an exact science. When it comes to wildlife numbers, at best,

they're estimates," Copenhaver said.

Currently, the department compiles estimates of wildlife numbers, but doesn't do so every year or publish the results. The agency also doesn't normally list an estimate of game habitat statewide, Wildlife Division Administrator Don Childress said.

Hagener said the legislation revisits long-running arguments about wildlife that graze on private land, sometimes damaging fences and other property.

Hagener said the agency doesn't object to reducing game populations. He just wonders if the law gives him enough time to do it properly.

The new rules direct the agency to begin holding deer, elk and antelope numbers at or below the new targets by the beginning of 2009.

Hagener said he doesn't like the notion of game wardens or hunters charged with killing large numbers of animals to make sure the department meets the limits.

"I don't think that's acceptable to anybody. But if the language was that hard, I might have to do that," Hagener said.

Copenhaver said the legislation dilutes the department's ability to manage wildlife.

But he said another bill aimed at controlling wildlife seemed like it was meant to punish the agency.

The law allows local governments, with Fish, Wildlife and Parks' approval, to enact plans to remove or restrict game animals inside city or town limits.