

Speak up now, Missouri Breaks elk hunters

Oct 23, 2015



Gene Fischer

The elk forecast for Montana hunters is very favorable in terms of large populations, the problem tends to be that many of those elk are on private land.

Montanans who hunt the Missouri Breaks north of the river, including Hunting District 410, should understand one very important fact: For more than a year now, the Bureau of Land Management has been writing a Resource Management Plan that will outline what happens on these lands for the next 20 years.

This landscape is pure central Montana elk country. It is the big rugged coulees of Crooked Creek, Blood Creek, and the Chain Buttes. It's the Arrow Creek Breaks, or the spectacular sprawl of Ponderosa ridges north and south of the Dunn's Ridge Road. This is the home of Montana's second largest elk herd, and one of the greatest examples of public land hunting left on this planet.

So far, most Montana elk and mule deer hunters have chosen not to inform the BLM of their concerns, or to participate in the process, in any way.

Those who don't participate don't get what they want, and they tend to lose what they have.

In the current draft of the Resource Management Plan written by the Lewistown Field Office of the BLM, there are no new plans or new mandates for conservation of these hunting lands. No concrete plans to retain the backcountry nature of even the most isolated and intact landscapes. No recognition of the fact that this is some of the world's best publicly accessible elk hunting. In fact, in this RMP, hunting and other backcountry recreation has no recognition at all.

Missouri Breaks hunters should know that conserving the habitat of the sage grouse is given a very high priority in the Lewistown RMP. The sage grouse has a large, loud and diverse coalition of advocates (including many hunters), and they have been very successful in making the bird a priority for the BLM.

The effort to recover and restore the sage grouse is critical. It is welcome, and the good people working on it will be successful. But that critical effort is being used by the BLM to claim that no further conservation measures are needed in the Lewistown RMP.

As any serious elk or mule deer hunter knows, the hundreds of thousands of acres of elk and mule deer country on the Lewistown BLM lands are a ponderosa coulee landscape, not a sagebrush steppe.

If you believe that the backcountry big game hunting in the Missouri Breaks is important enough to hold onto, now is the time to tell the Lewistown BLM. In 20 years, when and if a new Resource Management Plan is being drafted, it may well be too late. We'll have nobody but ourselves to blame.

Hal Herring lives in Augusta.