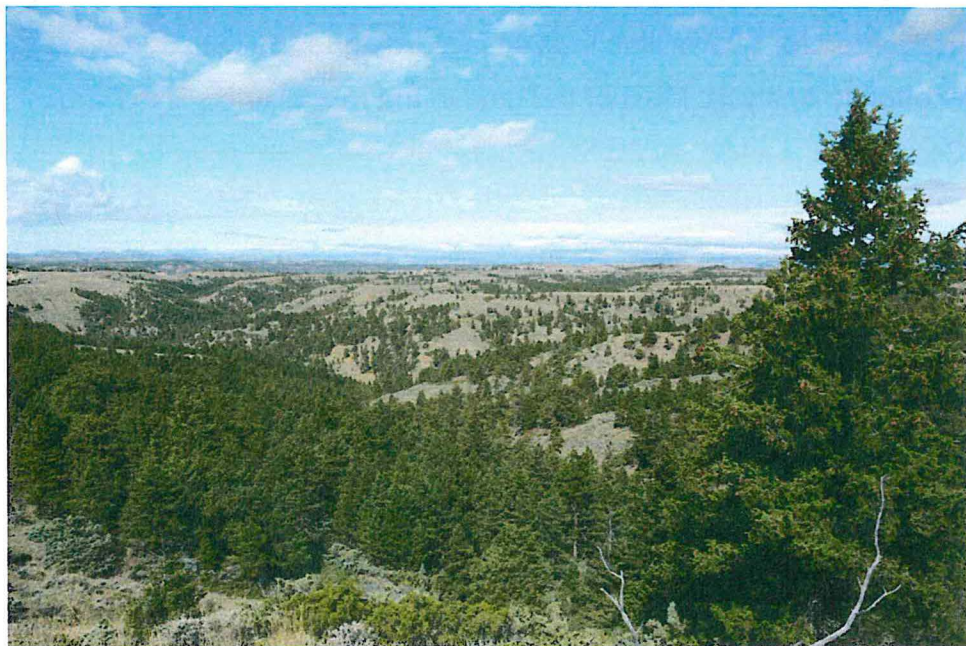


MONTANA ON THE GROUND

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**Hunters to BLM: Protect the habitat, protect
the economy**

SEPTEMBER 19, 2016 BY LAURA LUNDQUIST

It's no secret that public-land opportunities attract millions of in- and out-of-state visitors and dollars to Montana. Now, [a new study](#) shows that a subset of users – hunters – are critical to preserving businesses in sparsely populated parts of the state where few others stray. But they'll keep coming back only if public wildlands are preserved.

On Monday, Bozeman-based [Headwaters Economics](#) released an economic analysis showing that deer and elk hunters in four districts north of Lewistown spent almost \$4 million in the local area in 2015. Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks calculated the spending total for the four hunting districts – 410, 412, 417 and 426 - that sit just south of the Missouri River in Fergus and Petroleum counties.

Headwaters Economics compared that to other economic factors in Fergus County and found that hunting brought in more money annually than even the Real Estate, Rental and Leasing sector, which accounted for \$3.7 million in 2014, according to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis. Most of the land in the four districts is in Fergus County.

Hunting district 410 contains the portion of the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge that lies on the south side of the river, along with other large regions of remote habitat that nurture healthy herds of elk and deer. So it's not surprising that, compared to the other districts, it accounted for the biggest chunk of change by far: \$2.3 million split almost equally between resident and nonresident hunters, even though nonresident hunters account for just 7 percent of the hunter days. The other three districts brought in between \$300,000 and \$600,000 each in 2015.

The four districts have consistently registered about 25,000 hunter-days each year, so the county gets the same economic boost every fall, according to the analysis. Many business owners have come to

depend on that influx as Lewistown has declined somewhat in the years after the CR Kendall Mine closed,

“Hunters are filling up at our gas stations, eating in our restaurants, staying in our hotels, and they’re buying guns, ammunition and gear from my store,” said Charlie Pfau, owner of Don’s Store, a sporting goods store in Lewistown. “Like many businesses in town, a large part of our income depends on public land and public hunting. We have some of the best elk hunting in the U.S. right in our backyard.”

The Headwaters Economics analysis arrives as the Bureau of Land Management’s Lewistown Field Office is preparing its new [resource management plan](#) to guide agency decisions for the next 20 years. As part of that, the BLM will identify areas where resource extraction is allowed and those that should receive more protection.

The Lewistown Office has already identified three areas in the four hunting districts that qualify as Areas of Critical Environmental Concern, which the BLM manages to “protect and prevent irreparable damage to important historic, cultural, or scenic values; (or protect) fish and wildlife resources or other natural systems or processes...” They include the Judith Mountains, the Acid Shale Pine Forest and Collar Gulch.

But hunters business owners, and conservationists are asking the BLM to retain the wild character of additional lands by prohibiting development, road proliferation, and resource extraction. In HD410, they want to set aside land along the Chain Buttes, Horse Camp Trail and Dovetail Creek. In other areas, they want to preserve the land around Blood Creek, Arrow Creek, and Carter Coulee.

“These areas represent some of the most productive ungulate habitat anywhere in North America, and that’s because these areas are largely roadless and undeveloped,” said Bill Berg, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service employee and former deputy project leader of

the CMR. “If we want to continue having big game populations that are this healthy, we need intact ecosystems.”

Montana Wildlife Federation area spokesman Doug Krings said the BLM doesn’t give wildlife a high enough priority when making decisions that can affect hunters, birders and other wildlife enthusiasts.

“I feel like they’re 90 percent centered around grazing and that’s it. They need to evaluate wildlife equally with Fish, Wildlife and Parks, looking at wintering grounds and other things, not only just for hunting but also the wildlife sanctuaries,” Krings said.

The Lewistown BLM Office, in particular, has struggled with land proposals that roused hunter opposition. With rich landowners such as the Wilks Brothers aggressively pursuing land swaps in the area that could sequester elk and deer herds from the public, hunters need to push for protections in the resource management plan to nip such swaps in the bud, Krings said.

“This is a trend-setting wave of the future,” Krings said. “It’s frightening. I hope hunters organize. I see it in other states, and I see this land becoming sought after. Federal land agencies need to do a better job of evaluating land exchanges from the get-go. We don’t want to get sold down the river.”

Headwaters Economics has published a number of studies demonstrating the economic boon Montana receives from its public lands and recreational opportunities. Its most recent report looked at the jobs and income generated by visitor spending in national parks.