



Block Management Evolution

Block Management has served the state of Montana well for *more than 25 years*. Landowners and hunters alike give the program high marks for its ability to facilitate opportunities to hunt and for the management of hunters on private land. As situations on the ground change relative to wildlife and hunter distribution, economics and changing stewardship values, Block Management is at a critical crossroad, primed for reflection and reformation.

Current state of the program:

- 1.) Type I: One of the most popular hunting experiences in Montana is the Type 1 Block Management Area. These arrangements, which enroll ____ acres and ____ cooperators this year, enable hunters to sign in daily to gain permission to hunt the majority of available in-season species. Upon signing in, hunters can simply walk on and hunt. This type of Block Management works well for landowners who do not want to spend time answering their doors or phones from hunters seeking permission and would prefer a simpler, non-interactive way to accommodate hunters, and they are preferred by hunters who don't want to take the time and make prior arrangements to meet directly with landowners. Typically, Type I cooperators are interested in providing maximum opportunity for hunters, have fewer concerns with impacts to wildlife and/or are seeking the maximum payment based on hunter days provided. Type I properties focus more on hunter access than providing quality hunting experiences that come with more limited or controlled hunter opportunities. Many acres of land enrolled in Type I BMAs have little habitat security relative to the hunting pressure they receive.
- 2.) Type II: Montana's Type II BMA requires hunters to make advance arrangements, generally through limited reservations, to hunt enrolled land. The benefit of Type II BMAs shouldn't be understated, however, as it provides a more controlled, quality hunt experience with the likelihood of increased success over open public land or Type 1 BMAs. The Type II option is in need of reformation relative to how hunters are selected to ensure a more centralized and equitable method of selecting hunters, similar to how Wyoming selects hunters for their Access programs (computer-generated selection process). It is imperative that the Type II Block Management Program be managed by FWP via an online computer reservation program as soon as possible.

- 3.) Block Management payments are capped at \$25,000 per landowner and in some instances cannot be layered with some other payments such as PAL easements, etc. This payment cap was recently increased after decades of stagnation and was widely supported by all involved. However, the impact payments are still below market value for private land leasing rates. While Block Management is intended to pay for impacts, the reality of leasing prices show that continues to be choices made around economic issues rather than the generous act of opening land to public hunting. We encourage FWP and the legislature to continue to examine the payment structure for Block Management as well as looking at ways to make other programs work in conjunction with Block Management.
- 4.) There are [currently around 7 million acres](#) of private land enrolled in Block Management. That number fluctuates annually, but recent transactions that have made former timber land publicly accessible, or have been conserved with Habitat Montana dollars, has reduced the current enrollment by around 1 million acres. Additionally, some landowners have withdrawn their participation in the program for a variety of other reasons, with changing ownership continuing to be the most common reason for dropping out of the program. The program is funded by portions of various license fees, including the resident and nonresident Base Hunting License fee, nonresident upland game bird license, nonresident deer, elk, and combination deer/elk licenses and Super Tag license revenue. Funding for this program is strong, stable and has remarkable support among various stakeholders, increasing its longevity and popularity as we consistently see the B10 & B11 licenses sell out, with a growing interest in hunting in Montana.

Block Management Reform

For years, discussions have taken place about the effectiveness of Block Management relative to hunter success, hunter behavior, hunter perceptions of a “quality” experience, and how to achieve better harvest results rather than simply throwing gates open and letting people go hunt. We encourage ___ to consider the following:

- 1.) Type I: Instead of considering every enrolled acre of Type I property equal to every other acre, we encourage FWP to implement a rating scale, based on habitat quality, hunter-day carrying capacity, a hunter favorability index (which can be derived by assessing responses from BMA comment cards). This scale can then be used to assess entry into the program and provide higher payments to cooperators with the highest scores.
- 2.) Type II Reformation: Landowners who enter into Type II Block Management do so for a variety of reasons, but chiefly, the desire to know and control who is hunting on their land remains the primary motivator. Because the reservation system is not adequately randomized, access is sometimes granted to those hunters who are known to the landowner, creating the appearance of special dispensation for who gets to hunt at the expense of all sportsmen’s’ dollars. By moving to a digitized draw based upon applicants, the agency can retain its role in assigning hunters to Type II properties, thereby relieving landowners of managing hunters, while limiting participation and

ensuring quality hunting experiences. As cooperators will still wish to achieve certain harvest metrics, the need for hunter management by the department, including vetting relative to hunter education or enhanced hunter education administered by the department could be used as a compounding factor in weighting who gets to utilize Type II BMAs,

- 3.) Type III: Focusing on effective herd management through community planning. Currently, Block Management provides payment based on hunter-use days (*not entirely true: it provides a base payment plus additional payments based on hunter days*). By enacting a third type of Block Management Area, focus can shift to herd management across larger landscapes. Elk tend to occupy large expanses of territory, across multiple ranches, farms and public lands. A new approach to Block Management could recognize this, and enable local decisions relative to hunter pressure, harvest objectives and problematic concentrations of wildlife. This kind of effort would require the participation of a majority of landowners within a specified area that includes an elk herd's range in order to achieve the herd management goals, elk distribution and increased hunter success. Landowners routinely talk about their desire to have effective hunters utilize their properties, rather than simply throwing open the gates. The need to harvest surplus animals can conflict with the recreational aspect of hunting, but it still remains an integral part of the overall management model.

By creating an EMU-specific Block Management area that enrolls multiple landowners, FWP will be able to design a hunting plan that helps disperse hunting pressure, increase elk distribution and increase hunter success rates. This Type III Block Management should also be flexible enough to ensure that as elk change their behaviors, the hunting strategy can similarly adapt.

By bringing together BMA cooperators to help develop hunting strategies, landowner concerns about hunter pressure, problematic concentrations and hunter success can be worked on holistically, as landowners, local hunters and FWP field staff can work together to find better options than simply opening or closing block management areas.

By involving local hunters in the design process for specific Type III block management areas, you can improve hunter satisfaction and eliminate the competition between residents and non-residents in order to achieve herd management goals, rather than selecting individual animals based on antler-size. These agreements must include both bull and cow hunters, with an eye towards meeting management objectives without requiring that public hunters are only allowed to harvest cow elk.

If an Elk Herd BMA is created, then landowners may be eligible for the maximum payment under Block Management, but also be eligible for other incentives that might otherwise be unavailable to them.

4.) Block Management Payments: Currently, payment is based around hunter impacts to private property caused by allowing people to hunt. The theory was: more hunting opportunity is better in order to spread people out and help ensure that management goals were being achieved while landowners were compensated for issues that arose while hunters were on their land relative to gates, fencing, noxious weeds, etc. That model has worked well for close to 25 years, but like all things, revisiting and developing new concepts and t. While there are no simple solutions relative to increasing landowner payments for access, there must be an effort undertaken to understand what the current cost of having elk on private property is, and how deficient the state is in terms of financial incentives relative to access payments. Montana has steadfastly opposed paying for access to private property, and Block Management is the compromise for that kind of access, and to help ensure that landowners are not unduly impacted by hunters. Given inflation, growing pressures of landowners, the increased real estate market, higher costs of doing business and many other factors, we recommend that the legislature once again look at increasing payments for Block Management Cooperators, while also looking at ways to improve the Block Management Programs.