



TRANSFERABLE LANDOWNER HUNTING PERMITS IN MONTANA

A Roadmap for the State

by Jack Smith

Montana faces the challenge of conserving big-game habitat, migration corridors, and winter range while addressing the needs of landowners who provide important habitat and of hunters and other stakeholders with their interests in harvest and access.

PERC's recent policy brief, "Conserving Wildlife Habitat with Landowner Hunting Permits," shows that transferable hunting permits can meet this challenge by encouraging voluntary conservation on private lands while benefiting landowners, hunters, wildlife, and the general public. Other western state programs offer lessons and guidance for how to structure such programs.

Montana should amend its Landowner Preference Program and Contractual Public Elk Hunting Access Agreements to allow the transfer of landowner permits when the landowner is actively conserving wildlife habitat. Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (FWP) would retain authority to set permit quotas, season dates, weapons restrictions, and other program details. Landowners would gain the ability to generate revenue that can offset the costs of living with wildlife and encourage activities that increase the conservation value of their land.

The following four recommendations could inform these changes and enable greater conservation through current landowner permit programs.



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SUMMARY

- ▶ Transferable landowner hunting permits can help Montana achieve state wildlife management goals and encourage voluntary conservation on private lands.
- ▶ Lessons from other western state programs should inform the design of Montana programs to address the state's unique needs and challenges.
- ▶ Montana has two existing landowner hunting permit programs that could be revised to allow transferability.
- ▶ Additional changes would also be needed, including updated limits on where permits can be used, improved eligibility requirements, and the inclusion of a guaranteed hunting license.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Update current landowner permit programs to make permits transferable

Montana landowners can currently receive non-transferable hunting permits through two programs. The Landowner Preference Program sets aside 15 percent of the permit quota for each hunting district into a lottery for qualifying landowners, which, if drawn, can also be used by a family member or employee. Landowners can also gain permits and/or hunting licenses through Contractual Public Elk Hunting Access Agreements, which grant one permit and/or license for every three public hunters a landowner allows to hunt their property. These programs should be updated to allow for all or a portion of the permits to be transferable. Such improvements would generate revenues for landowners, increase conservation incentives, and offset wildlife-related costs without affecting overall permit quotas in Montana.

2. Limit permit applicability to landowners' private property

Transferable landowner permits should be limited to use on the landowner's property. This is already stipulated for non-transferable permits in Contractual Public Elk Hunting Access Agreements, but permits drawn through the Landowner Preference Program are valid throughout the hunting district a landowner owns property in. Updating both programs to allow for transferable landowner permits that apply only to the recipient's property ensures that the value of the permit is driven solely by the quality of the hunting opportunity on that property. This creates an incentive for conservation and prevents landowners from capitalizing on the quality of hunting opportunity in areas they have no managerial control over.

3. Tie landowner permit eligibility to specific conservation benefits

Eligibility for a transferable landowner permit should be based on the conservation benefits the landowner provides for public wildlife. Currently, eligibility for the Landowner Preference Program is based primarily on acreage, land-use type, and use by elk as verified by Montana FWP. Eligibility for permits through Contractual Public Elk Hunting Access Agreements is based solely on public access. Instead, transferable landowner tag eligibility should be based on conserving wildlife habitat and/or bearing direct costs from the presence of big-game species. By focusing on habitat provision and cost compensation, FWP can increase benefits to hunters, wildlife, and the public while strengthening incentives for landowners to improve the conservation value of their lands.

4. Streamline licensing and permitting to increase conservation incentives for non-resident landowners

Contractual Public Elk Hunting Access Agreements can grant landowners a species-specific hunting license in addition to a permit. In contrast, landowners must already have a hunting license to participate in permit drawings through the Landowner Preference Program. This requirement does not affect resident landowners, who can buy a license over the counter, but it excludes non-resident landowners whose land qualifies for the program but who fail to draw a license. The Landowner Preference Program should be changed to include with each permit a non-resident license, where applicable, to allow all qualifying non-resident landowners to enter the draw and put in for an opportunity to hunt their land. This would extend conservation incentives to more landowners. In addition, if permits become transferable, the state should consider reserving a non-resident hunting license for each transferable permit buyer, which would broaden the market for transferable permits. Licenses should still be purchased from FWP to preserve oversight and ensure that the public receives fair value for the use of wildlife.

Read PERC's full report "Conserving Wildlife Habitat with Landowner Hunting Permits" at: perc.org/tags