



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

April 30, 2012

Contact: Mac Minard, Executive Director
406 449-3578 (office)
406 439-2059 (cell)
moga@mt.net

**Big Game Licenses fail to sell for Second Year
I-161 and Limited Permits to Blame**

The budget problems facing Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks just worsened with the announcement by FWP officials that nearly 3,000 non-resident big game combination licenses remain unsold. This will cause a financial shortfall of nearly two million in license revenues.

This marks the second year in a row that non-residents, who account for nearly 70 percent of Department revenues, have snubbed Montana and placed the Department in a fiscal crisis. In 2011, there was an 80% decline in non-resident interest in Montana hunting. Prior to 2011, non-resident demand always outstripped the limited supply of Montana licenses allocated for non-resident hunters. There was even a waiting list. So what happened?

Some claim the economy, some point to wolves, and others will claim both. Although both have contributed to the problem, adjoining western states of Idaho and Wyoming show only modest (about 10%) reduction in non-resident hunter interest. In Montana, the most significant change was the passage of I-161.

Citizens Initiative 161 was a bill of goods sold to the Montana public as a purported means to increase revenue for the Montana FWP. It was touted to better fund the popular Block Management program, and provide "equity" for non-residents hunting in Montana. Additionally, proponents claimed I-161 would open more access to private land for public hunting. Kurt Kephart, a contractor from Billings, Montana, was the architect of I-161. It was also supported heavily by the Montana Wildlife Federation. To achieve the promised results, Kephart sought to eliminate the Outfitter Sponsored license category, a highly successful and proven funding mechanism for the Department and Block Management. He chose to replace it by an enormous (60%) increase in the price of non-resident deer licenses and a 30% increase in the price of a non-resident, elk license. The cost of these licenses is required to increase annually by the language in I-161, based on an economic barometer that has nothing to do with hunting; the urban cost of living index. The cost

of a non-resident big game combination license is now \$944. The Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks actually issued a flawed fiscal note in 2011 suggesting I-161 to be revenue positive. Kephart and the Department analysts were completely wrong.

Ballot Initiatives have a way of not turning out as the proponents sell them. Initiatives related to fish and wildlife often pit urban residents against rural residents by removing the representative form of government and replacing it with a simple majority vote. There is a stark and dangerous history in other western states where trapping, mountain lion hunting and spring black bear hunting have been eliminated through the initiative process. Big outside money from anti-hunting groups jump at the opportunity, and traditional and sustainable opportunity is eliminated.

Also contributing to the short sale are the limited archery permit requirements applied to nearly 30 percent of the state and instituted by the Commission in 2007. Under these rules elk archery permits were significantly restricted and non-resident participation plummeted. Now a non-resident must acquire a non-resident big game license and put in for the archery permit. If unsuccessful in the permit draw they forfeit nearly \$200 in administrative fees for just having applied.

The Commission did attempt to rectify this situation prior to the 2012 draw however it appears that once the Genie was out of the bottle it is no longer controllable. What should have been a balancing of non-resident and resident opportunity resulted in a horrific under-subscription by non-residents resulting in a significant backlash of non-resident opinion toward the process and Montana as a hunting destination.

Although elk populations exceed population objectives in the Hunting Districts involved the fact remains that hundreds of elk licenses will go unused by non-residents for a second year.

The economic impact is equally stunning. Since the inception of the limited archery elk licenses economic losses totaled \$22,687,651, that is assuming that everyone had applied for the permit and did not draw would have hunted. Even if only 85% would have hunted that is still a \$19,284,503 economic hit to the eastern half of the state. This crushing blow comes at a time when the rural portions of the state, not involved with the oil industry, is struggling. The consequence is lost tourism related jobs.

Now, as a direct result of I-161, and a seemingly uncontrollable permit system, the Department faces one of the greatest fiscal challenges in its history. Resident hunters will surely be asked to make up the Kephart shortfall by increased license fees at a time when most Montanans can least afford it. The legacy of the Schweitzer administration's responsibility to Montana's fish and wildlife is a struggling Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks, shattered landowner/hunter relations and an overall loss in acreage available for public hunting.

I-161 a big success...yeah right.

##END##