



## FIELD NOTES FROM TRM RANCH

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# PUBLIC HUNTING ON TRM RANCH

## Exploring Alternatives for Maintaining an Impressive Record

Hunting on the Front has changed dramatically over the last one hundred years. At the turn of the century, hunting almost ceased to exist due to a shortage of game. This situation was a direct consequence of the era of market hunting; under intensive hunting pressure for decades, many wildlife species had declined to remnants of their once great abundance. Early in the twentieth century, however, the passion for hunting and a vision for a future rich with wildlife inspired conservation-minded individuals to bring a halt to this precipitous decline. In the decades following, the combination of enforced game laws, game preserves and scientifically-based management recovered many species to new historic highs. For many species, this recovery came from the brink of extinction.

Only through these remarkable efforts has it been possible to sustain regulated hunting of wildlife. Each autumn, many hunters pay tribute to these accomplishments by complying with game laws and by employing a fair chase ethic. However, despite this success

story, hunting on the Front is changing rapidly. Currently, access issues are changing the historic role hunting has played in the ranching and farming lifestyle on the Front. In the last few years, access to hunting grounds has declined, primarily to those located on private lands. To many people this phenomena comes as no surprise since it reflects the larger trend of rapidly changing landownership and the subsequent conversion of ranches and farms to alternative land uses such as subdivision developments. Unfortunately, with this conversion, hunting often loses its historic role, and, as a consequence, hunter access is limited.

On the Front, north of Teton River, the hunting heritage has been closely associated with mule deer. Here, private lands comprise most of the range used by deer during the hunting season, and traditionally, most of these lands have been open to public hunting. The easy availability and the possibility of

harvesting a trophy mule deer buck have given this region a renowned reputation among deer hunters. But even in this remote region of the Front where traditional lifestyles persist, perceptions on hunting are changing. Many private landowners are becoming increasingly reluctant to grant public access because of shifts in landownership and use patterns, undesirable hunter behavior, lack of incentives and change in social values.

Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Ranch on the Rocky Mountain Front is one of the exceptions. Owned by the Boone and Crockett Club since 1986, the family-operated ranch has provided hunting opportunities for hundreds of hunters as part of managing for multiple benefits. Each autumn, between 50 to 100 hunters are granted access to hunt deer and elk free of charge. The return rate is high, with as many as one hundred percent of hunters coming back in subsequent years. With 6,000 acres in the heart of mule deer and elk country, TRM Ranch provides tremendous hunting opportunities in a spectacular setting.

The Boone and Crockett Club's dual commitment to both wildlife conservation and Montana's heritage of public hunting requires a delicate balance between demand and supply. Accomplishing the task of balancing hunter access with a sustainable harvest has not always been easy. In many years of early winter weather, hunter access had to be restricted to allow animals secure use of needed habitats. Planning, which is both time-consuming and expensive has been instrumental in maintaining this balance. During the five week hunting season, hunter management consumes most of the ranch manager's time. Duties include surveying wildlife, maintaining parking areas and issuing permission slips to hunters. The commitment of the Boone and Crockett Club to high quality public hunting on TRM Ranch might be best secured by compensating ranch management for incurred expenses while managing hunters. The new landowner incentive program established with the passage of House Bill 195 in 1995 provides for this type of incentive.

The incentive program is in-

tended to financially compensate private landowners for keeping lands open to public hunting. Under this program, only landowners who are not already charging access fees are eligible for compensation by the state wildlife agency. Funds will be made available through fee increases for selected types of hunting licenses. Criteria for prioritizing the distribution of financial benefits are currently being discussed. These will be derived based on a number of components such as hunting opportunities, the history of public access to a property and the possibility of opening previously inaccessible public lands adjacent to private lands. Many of the controversial issues revolving around economic incentives still need to be resolved. Some of these include the tradeoffs between quality and quantity in optimizing hunter opportunity, the fair and equitable distribution of benefits and the task of generating and securing funds. Currently, Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks is working on formalizing a tentative set of guidelines for implementing this program, expected to be available by March of 1996.

In Montana, demand for hunting is high, especially in places as remote and scenically spectacular as the Rocky Mountain Front. Each autumn hunters, old and young, pursue the majestic elk, the rugged mule deer, and the elusive whitetail deer in this wild country. And each year, the many new hunting experiences add to Montana's long hunting heritage. Keeping this tradition alive will continue to require memorable experiences on wildlife, satisfied hunters, and good relationships between hunters and landowners. Ensuring a future rich with abundant wildlife and a continuation of Montana's hunting heritage will need innovative approaches to wildlife conservation. This will involve new approaches that integrate compatible land uses such as hunting and ranching. These approaches can only be accomplished through socially, politically and economically based solutions to concerns. Strengthening the recent efforts to provide economic incentives to private landowners is perhaps one of the best approaches currently available for securing public hunting on private lands.