



Constructive Cooperation

Developing good relationships with hunters can prove beneficial for landowners.

by Heather Smith Thomas

Most of the wildlife habitat in the United States is on private lands. Even in western states where much of the land is federally owned, many game birds and big game animals spend most of their time on private land feeding on farmers' and ranchers' crops and pastures. A good relationship between hunters and landowners can be mutually beneficial but is sometimes lacking.

Bill Hoyt, a rancher in southwestern Oregon, sits on the Oregon Cattlemen's Association legislative committee and is also on a predator board with board members from a hunters' group and is familiar with their issues.

"I was also on a committee a few years ago to develop rules for landowner preference tags — given to landowners for elk," Hoyt says. "The ranching community feels the landowners are owed special consideration by fish and wildlife departments around the western states because studies have shown that 70% of the wildlife resides on private land or spends most of its time on private land. We are feeding all these elk, deer, etc. and feel we should have some consideration in terms of harvest opportunities."

Hunters have always felt their number one priority is access, according to Hoyt. From a funding standpoint, most of the budget for the fish and wildlife departments comes from state sales of hunting licenses, tags, etc.

"So, hunters feel they have a huge stake in this. Here in Oregon they don't always appreciate the fact that the rancher gets to have a landowner preference tag or extra tags at no cost, when hunters are funding the department and want the access to hunt on private land," Hoyt says.

Efforts to bring these two parties together are important for a mutually beneficial solution. Yet this is not always easy to do. Some ranchers do allow hunters access, and this trend will grow if the ranchers can see some benefit.

"Right now, I know of ranchers who are allowing hunting either for money or to help reduce wildlife impact on their property. It can work out to be beneficial for hunters and landowners, with a bit of effort on both sides," he says.

Liability lessons

Hoyt says there is an interstate that runs through the middle of his ranch and urban neighbors



Mule deer on the Roaring Springs Ranch.

on the perimeter. He cannot allow rifle hunting from the liability standpoint, but he does allow bow hunting.

Liability issues should be given consideration before allowing hunter access.

"If a hunter was injured because of something I had done, such as if I hadn't cleaned up some old wire and they tripped on it and hurt themselves, or a bull chased them, then I might be liable," he explains. "It's probably best to have a form they sign before hunting, accepting liability for any injury that might occur while they are on the property. If someone is trespassing, without your knowledge, you wouldn't be liable."

Ranchers appreciate the hunters who ask permission and are more likely to allow them on the place again. "We don't

mind hunters if we can let them know where they can have access, how they hunt, etc. There needs to be some communication.

Some of the ranchers who do it commercially charge hunters by what they harvest — paying a certain fee for a bull elk, cow elk, deer, etc. I don't charge them, but I do appreciate respect."

With ranchers and hunters facing many issues, Hoyt says it's important for them to be on the same page as allies.

"It takes communication, however, to make it work, and willingness to have dialogue on how to accomplish this," he says. "There would be more cooperation between the ranching community and hunters if there were more communication."

Hoyt describes a time when he lived in Montana and had

hunters break fences and even shoot a cow.

“Some ranchers have a few bad experiences like this and don’t allow hunting, but if they get to know the hunter and have some trust and respect it works out better,” he says.

Advantages of a good relationship

Bill Wilber, Oregon rancher and chairman of the wildlife committee of the Oregon Cattlemen’s Association, says there are a number of advantages to having hunters on the land, assuming they are responsible people who respect the property. Hunters should always ask permission and should talk with the owner about where and how to hunt. Some fields and pastures may be off limits because of livestock or their proximity to ranch buildings.

“One advantage to the landowner is that in a discussion with hunters prior to hunting you can ask them to be observant regarding livestock they see — such as their condition, illness or injury,” Wilber says. “You can also ask them to shut gates they find open.” Hunters can also observe water facilities and let cattlemen know if something is wrong.

“There can be advantages, if you have the right kind of hunters,” Wilber says. Allowing hunting can be a win-win situation, especially if landowners have a chance to meet and screen hunters. Fee hunting creates an even closer relationship. The hunter knows there will be good hunting, and the landowner knows the hunter will respect private property.

Fostering cooperation

Some states are more proactive than others in fostering good hunter-landowner relationships through access programs and fee hunting to enable the landowner to recover some of the out-of-pocket costs of feeding and providing habitat for wildlife. Fee hunting is often the only way there is some reimbursement for crop loss or damage repair costs when big game go through and damage fences.

In Montana two innovative programs are helping foster better relationships. Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) has the Hunter-Landowner Stewardship Project that began in 2009 and evolved into a voluntary web-delivered information system that allows landowners and hunters to participate in a self-paced interactive program.

“Participants who complete the course can obtain lifetime certification in the Montana automated licensing system,” says



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Alan Charles of the Montana FWP. “Some landowners now request that hunters who want permission to hunt on their place show proof of completing this stewardship program by providing a copy of the certificate.”

The Montana FWP also has a block management cooperative program in which contracts are negotiated annually between private landowners and the FWP. Charles says this program has been in place for more than 20 years.

“On a typical year about 1,230 landowners voluntarily enroll about 7.6 million acres, providing more than 400,000 hunter days of recreation on private land. We have individual contracts with the landowners, regarding how to manage this regarding where they will allow hunters, and how they want them to hunt,” he says.

The Montana FWP works with landowners to determine how they would like to issue permission. Many want to issue the permission themselves, meet the hunters and give them the permission slip and a map. Some landowners don’t want to deal with the hunters because they are too busy, so they ask the FWP to implement another kind of system to provide accountability.

Charles says this program has worked out very well and is appreciated by both parties. Some landowners are eligible for benefits under the program, and landowners are paid to help offset the potential effects of inviting the public onto their land. This compensation may help fix roads, control noxious weeds, fix fences or may offset the cost of time the landowner has to spend dealing with hunters.

“Often the landowner prefers to have hunters park outside the property and walk in to help reduce the impacts of noxious weeds, potential fire or road

damage,” Charles says. “We also realize that one of the best ways to improve hunter behavior is to get them out of their vehicle. Every step they take away from the vehicle, the more their behavior improves and the less problems you have. When people are just road hunting, driving around, drinking a six-pack and shooting from the windows, there are more problems.”

Serious hunters are usually the ones who will get out and hike and are not just road hunting.

A big plus for landowners is that they are protected under the state’s liability. “This is similar to the states’ recreational liability coverage,” Charles says. “It basically says that if the landowner does not charge a fee or accept anything in remuneration from the hunter, the landowner is not obliged to provide for the safety of the hunter. Unless the property owner intentionally creates a hazard, he is basically protected from liability. Someone might still sue the owner but the legal

precedent and the courts have said that if you are not operating a business and collecting fees, you are not liable.”

In Montana 64% of the state is in private ownership. “Much of that is the best wildlife habitat, so we have to find ways to keep good relationships,” Charles says. “The landowners need the hunters to keep game populations down to reasonable numbers in fields and pastures. Hunters and landowners share a lot of common ground and care about the wildlife, but that gets lost in some of the issues. So our programs like block management or the stewardship program are designed to help the relationship.”

Bill Wilber found out about this program while talking to a pheasant hunter who told him how easy it was to access private land in Montana.

“He said the rules are very clear; the responsibility of the hunter was spelled out, and the program is well accepted. Landowners like it because they get some income from what they are producing where ordinarily they get nothing,” says Wilber.

There are a number of positive factors when ranchers allow hunters on their property. “The ranchers can demonstrate good stewardship, showing hunters how we take care of the land and the wildlife, improving habitat,” Wilber says. “Many people love wildlife and hunting, but they don’t understand or appreciate the responsibility the landowners have to take care of the land.”

There is an opportunity to demonstrate rancher stewardship and all the things that ranchers do that benefit wildlife. **HW**



Elk can be a bother for ranchers by competing with cattle for forage and even hay in the winter, but are also one of the most highly sought after big game animals for hunters.