



SUMMARY REPORT  
2022 Elk Management Symposium

BOZEMAN, MONTANA | AUGUST 13, 2022

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# Executive Summary



The Montana Citizens Elk Management Coalition (MCECM) hosted a day-long symposium to discuss elk management in Montana on August 13, 2022, in Bozeman, Montana.

The purpose of the symposium was to “*Further the conversation about shared values, seek long-lasting solutions, and encourage better relationships between all who care about elk management in Montana.*”

George Bettas, Ravalli County Fish and Wildlife Association & Coalition Leadership Council member served as Emcee. The full-day symposium consisted of opening remarks by Fish and Wildlife Commissioner, Pat Byorth, followed by four robust discussion panels. Over 150 individuals registered to attend the symposium in person and several hundred more tuned in to a livestream broadcast. The symposium was staffed by the Montana Wildlife Federation and the Ravalli County Fish and Wildlife Association, and supported by Yeti, Stone Glacier, and OnXHunt.

The panel moderators and 16 panelists included a mix of scientists and experts on elk management from Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, New Mexico, and Nevada, sitting state legislators, landowners, outfitters, and hunters. Panel member biographies are provided at the end of the document. Panel topics covered shared values, the science of elk management, lessons from other states, and possible solutions to address the challenges of elk management in Montana.

During the full-day workshop, participants found strong consensus with the following principles:

- Elk are both magnificent and abundant in Montana.
- Many things have changed in Montana that are impacting elk health and distribution including access, habitat, opportunity, land ownership and use, and predators, among others.
- Montana has simply not kept up with those changes which is why the status of elk management is in dire need of an update.
- Moving forward, solutions must fit within the context of respect for private property rights and be informed by science.
- Landowners, hunters, and outfitters must work together because our success is based off a mutually symbiotic relationship.
- There is no single silver-bullet fix. Rather, a wide-ranging toolbox of programs and options are needed to encourage solution-oriented groups and individuals to work at the local level.

The 2022 Montana Elk Management Symposium represents a step forward in the conversation over elk management. The discussions at this year’s symposium have catalyzed additional conversations and helped the Montana Citizens Elk Management Coalition prioritize several preliminary tools the State should explore to improve the status-quo.

*To further the conversation about shared values, seek long-lasting solutions, and encourage better relationships.*

# Key Recommendations

**D**uring the symposium, panelists and moderators explored several new ideas and approaches that could lead to more successful elk management in the future. But for our work to be successful, we must remove the politics from the policy of wildlife management. Only by working together, listening with purpose and acting in good faith, can landowners, hunters, and outfitters build off the successes of the past and construct the solutions for the future.

Toward that end, the Montana Citizens Elk Management Coalition will seek to refine and explore three primary recommendations that were identified at the 2022 Montana Elk Management Symposium:

- 1. Update landowner incentive programs.** Montana needs to reexamine the toolbox of incentives intended to encourage more landowner participation in hunting access programs. This means updating successful programs like Block Management as well as seeking new, innovative programs that can create publicly equitable hunting opportunities and help landowners address problematic concentrations of wildlife. Participating landowners should also be incentivized to remain enrolled in programs like Block Management.
- 2. Revise season structures.** Current hunting seasons are driving elk concentration onto private land refuges and causing distribution issues across Montana. To alleviate this, some changes to how Montanans take to the field should occur. Creative policies are needed to reduce hunter pressure, reduce the overall time required to harvest animals, and increase success rates on public land. This may be helped by reexamining laws that are currently preventing Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks from being able to fully address this distribution and harvest problem.

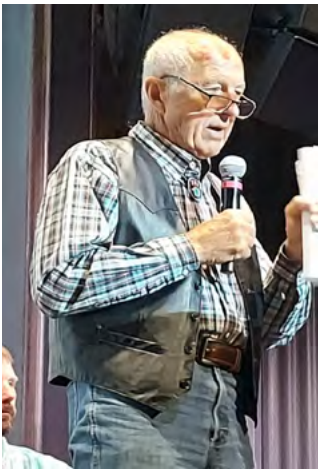
- 3. Explore funding models to restore habitat.** The science shows that wildlife habitat quality is a predicting factor for elk survival though winter months. Montana is suffering from reduced habitat quality on public lands. This is particularly true in the Northwest part of the state, which has suffered elk population declines, increased predation on elk, and a lack of habitat diversity. A new habitat funding program, based off a successful model in Wyoming, could improve this situation through highly targeted habitat restoration and stewardship work.



# Symposium Highlights & Summary

## Welcoming Remarks

**GEORGE BETTAS**  
RAVALII COUNTY



George Bettas, Ravalli County Fish and Wildlife Association, delivers the welcome

*“We care about elk, and we care about each other. It’s time for a change away from hard positions and lack of communication to cooperation and collaboration.*

*Elk are not where they were and there are more hunters now. We have choices moving forward. The status quo is no longer working. We need to work together to set the stage for new directions and further*

*the conversation about elk management in Montana.*

*Today’s symposium is to further the conversation about shared values, seek long-lasting solutions, and encourage better relationships between all who care about elk management in Montana.”*

*Elk are not where they were and there are more hunters now. We have choices moving forward.*

*The status quo is no longer working. We need to work together to set the stage for new directions and further the conversation about elk management in Montana.*

## The State of Elk in Montana

**PATRICK BYORTH**  
FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSIONER

Commissioner Byorth explained the status of elk in Montana is generally good. The first records of wildlife in Montana likened Montana to a Garden of Eden for all species. Legislating fish and wildlife management goes back to the state’s territorial days. By statehood, there were growing concerns over the abundance of wildlife.

Elk were subsequently distributed across the state from Yellowstone National Park by conservation interests and landowners working together. Scientific management followed with trained managers supported by federal funding. The basic pillars of management are science, public trust, and public participation.

While elk populations are abundant now, elk management is at a crossroads. There are many changes affecting elk and access to elk—including grazing practices, weather and climate, land ownership, and more. Commissioner Byorth urged participants not to take this situation for granted and remain involved in decision making.

# Shared Elk and Shared Values Panel

**MODERATOR: RANDY NEWBERG**

**PANELISTS: REPRESENTATIVE DENLEY LOGE, KATHY HADLEY, SCOTT HIBBARD, DAN VERMILLION**



Former F&W Commission Chair, Dan Vermillion speaks to Shared Values

*Hunting is a privilege, access is a privilege. Every privilege comes with responsibility. It's up to us to keep what we have and welcome new people.*



Moderator Newberg posed the question to the panelists “How do we value elk?” The following responses were offered by the panelists.

- Hunting heritage
- A rich wildlife resource
- Private property rights
- Responsible hunters
- Elk’s majesty
- A richer experience on the land
- Food source
- Recreation
- A mode to build community
- Asset to capture revenue
- Burden to private landowners
- Disease vector
- Aesthetics
- Expectation of experience
- Results of taking an elk

The panel then discussed who owns, manages, and/or bears the burden of elk? The panelists concurred that elk are owned by all--consistent with the public trust. And if they are owned by all, then in some respects they are owned by no one. “Managing elk should reflect the shared ownership,” said landowner, Scott Hibbard. “Hunters need the opportunity that the private landowners provide.”

The discussion concluded that access and opportunity are key considerations and the expectation that to be successful, landowners and hunters need to work together. This takes work and coordination. Elk distribution is a big problem. Panelist Hadley stated, “We need new ideas, new approaches to solve these problems. We just don’t have enough tools in the toolbox.”

Representative Denly Loge also noted “Elk shouldn’t be managed by the legislature. It’s a lot more science than we get into.”

“Hunting is a privilege; access is a privilege. Every privilege comes with responsibility. Montana has a lot of what the world wants. It’s up to us to keep what we have and welcome new people,” said former Fish and Wildlife Commission Chair, Dan Vermillion.

Moderator Newberg closed out the panel stating, “If we don’t work with each other, we lose the ability to solve problems together.”

*Habitat manipulation may be a place where science can help improve elk distribution and survival rates.*

## What the Science Tells Us Panel

**MODERATOR: DR. CHRIS SERVHEEN**

**PANELISTS: DR. BRENT RACE, CRAIG JOURDONNAIS, KEN HAMLIN, JON HORNE**



Panelists Race, Horne, and Hamlin

Craig Jourdonnais presented information on the MPG Ranch. The ranch, owned by non-hunting non-residents is managed for conservation and research. The ranch offers free public hunting chaperoned by ranch employees. Forty to 45 elk are harvested each

year on the ranch. The priority is to manage the ranch for wildlife health. Craig has noticed that hunters are needing a significant amount of help. Craig's recommendations: hunters need more opportunities for advancement courses, hunters need to practice like you play, the hunt season structure needs to be more strategic, the elk plan needs elk distribution as a trigger, and there should be landscape scale habitat improvement on public land.

"What is wildlife science?" posed Dr. Jon Horne. Science is less trusted now and under a critical eye he cautioned. While science can't tell you what to manage for, it can help you move towards a management goal. Science is tentative and slow and should be approached with skepticism. Science has bias. Ecology is messy. Each individual study is likened to a spitball shot at a supertanker. Many studies together with

consensus can begin to influence the direction of the tanker. Dr. Horn presented information on an elk calf mortality study in Idaho. The study found that calf size, snow depth, and wolf pack size were the key determinants in calf mortality.

"Deer are poor at social distancing and elk are just as bad," cautioned Brent Race (DVM) in his talk on the spread of chronic wasting disease (CWD). Dr. Race explained that CWD is a prion disease in cervids with no known cure. CWD is spread between animals and by humans transporting carcasses. Studies have shown that with few exceptions, it is not transmissible to other species. He recommended testing meat and avoiding consumption of CWD positive meat. Positive herds need to be intensely managed to prevent spread.

"Elk restoration in Montana has been successful," explained panelist Ken Hamlin, but cautioned that it may have been too successful for some rancher's tolerance. We have all contributed to the current elk problem which has historical roots and is impacted by factors such as elk movements, predators, habitat, and weather. Since the 1990's hunter harvest and success rates have plateaued, and access is one of the most critical conditions for successful management. Data shows the percentage of elk that are unavailable to hunters has a direct correlation on the population objective levels in hunting districts. He said habitat manipulation may be a place where science can help improve elk distribution and survival rates.



# Lessons from Other States Panel

**MODERATOR: ANDREW MCKEAN**

**PANELISTS: JESS JOHNSON, CODY MCKEE,  
JEREMY VESBACH, GARRETT VISSER**

*“This coalition is really neighborly and that is where the solutions will come from,”* said Moderator, Andrew McKean as he introduced the panel members. Panelists from Idaho, Wyoming, New Mexico, and Nevada dove into a discussion on the mechanics of season setting in their various states. Highlights included:

- Nevada manages for hunter experience while also managing game. The process is adaptable and relies on county advisory boards. Nevada has local sub-plans and a statewide elk management plan.
- New Mexico is on a four-year season setting cycle. This allows managers to see the results of certain decisions over time. They set seasons under a process in their Administrative Procedures Act which provides ample time for public input.
- Idaho sets seasons every other year. Idaho has 28 elk management zones. There is flexibility to adjust tags in these individual management zones.
- Wyoming sets seasons annually based on State established herd unit management objectives. The season structure incorporates elk movements and timing. Public comments weigh heavily in final decisions—at times more heavily than science. The department produces a report after each season on what happened during the season.

Opportunity is the biggest problem in New Mexico, explained panelist, Jeremy Vesbach. Hunting has been privatized in N.M. more so than in other states. Ranch by ranch licenses are resalable. This pay-to-play situation is resulting in difficulty recruiting new hunters. The state is now moving away from privatization, but a market has now been created for licenses.



Wyoming’s seasons are not standard, explained panelist, Jess Johnson. There are different license seasons on what you can take, where and when, and the goals of the management. The regulations are complex. Wyoming tries to balance opportunity and strategic management. Idaho residents choose the hunting experience they want to participate in.

Panelists offered a variety of answers in response to a question about the relative success of management approached in their states. Success is measured in habitat, elk numbers, research, and addressing transportation issues. A success story from Wyoming is the collaboration between the Departments of Transportation and Game and Fish to identify 42 wildlife crossings they will be working together to address.

The different states also offer a variety of tools for private landowners that include landowner tags, payments for crop damage, controlled hunts as part of a landowner appreciation program, and in Nevada two programs—one to discourage elk from private lands and another to encourage tolerance of elk on native range. Nevada also offers landowners a transferable tag.

Nevada, New Mexico, and Idaho have mandatory reporting. Reporting is voluntary in Wyoming.

*“This coalition is really neighborly and that is where the solutions will come from.”*



*Wildlife issues shouldn't be politicized. If we can think about how to make this a win-win-win than it no longer becomes a zero-sum game.*

## Exploring Solutions Panel

**MODERATOR:** MARCIA BROWNLEE

**PANELISTS:** ERIC ALBUS, SENATOR TOM JACOBSON, JESSI JOHNSON, GERALD MARTIN, SENATOR JEFF WELBORN

Moderator, Brownlee kicked off the panel discussion encouraging a focus on durable solutions that Montana could possibly advance. Panelists agreed the priority needs to be to manage the health of the elk resource. They agreed Montana should be focused on desired outcomes and clear goals.

*“Wildlife issues shouldn't be politicized,”* said Senator Jacobson, *“If we can think about how to make this a win-win-win than it no longer becomes a zero-sum game.”* He said, once people agree on the overarching management goal, people can identify and work towards overcoming barriers. Policy is a means to an end, the end being the goal.



Moderator Marcia Brownlee and panelist Gerald Martin

Panelists stressed there was no single silver bullet policy that would solve elk management. They said good policy comes from the people, removes the politics from the policy, and encourages stronger relationships and more citizen-collaboratives and stakeholder groups like the Devil's Kitchen Working Group.

Panelists emphasized several challenges the elk coalition should seek to immediately resolve during the upcoming 2022/23 legislative session:

**Lack of hunter pressure on inaccessible private land contributes to problematic concentrations of wildlife**

*“The landowner is the guy who literally holds the key to the whole thing,”* said panelist Eric Albus. We need to agree on how we want to manage the resource first, and then properly incentivize the landowner so that everything else can fall into place.

Senator Jeff Welborn said respect for property rights is paramount, but those rights come with responsibilities. *“Your property right is only as good as how you treat the guy on the other side of the fence,”* he said and added that hunter and landowner relationships are critical for the future success of elk management. Senator Jacobsen agreed and said the state should also incentivize stronger stewardship education for hunters who gain access to private lands.

**House Bill 42, which mandates FWP to manage elk populations at or below objective, ties the hands of managers.**

*“We need to be asking whether the tools we are using are moving us towards our shared goals,”* said panelist, Gerald Martin. He said a real solution would prioritize managing

*The landowner is the guy who literally holds the key to the whole thing . Your property right is only as good as how you treat the guy on the other side of the fence.*

*Without good habitat you don't get the reproduction, you don't get the survivability, you don't get the growth back to replace the prior harvest season.*



Moderator Chris Servheen speaks during the science panel

for better elk distribution over population because current population-based objectives have failed to provide relief to landowners. Senator Jeff Wellborn agreed and said that while law was well-intended it ties the hands of science and should be revisited. *"It's a crying shame that Montana has the habitat we do, the elk population we do, but the least amount of success to harvest a bull elk on public lands,"* said Senator Wellborn.

**Too much hunter pressure is partly to blame for low success and poor elk distribution on public lands.**

*"The problem is elk are concentrated where they can't be hunted,"* said panelist Eric Albus. He said Montana needs to redistribute pressure. That is done he explained by putting more hunting pressure on private land through landowner incentives and by decreasing hunter pressure on more easily accessed public lands. *"The current path of our hunting opportunity is unsustainable,"* agreed panelist Gerald



Martin. He said hunters may need to consider less overall opportunity through season-setting in exchange for higher-quality opportunity and better success rates in the field.

Panelists agreed that season setting refinements are an important tool toward this goal, but changes need to be creative and driven by data. *"We have to be creative about how we get people to the elk when the elk are actually there,"* said Senator Wellborn.

**Habitat quality is one of the predominate factors in elk survivability, but Montana lacks adequate resources to improve habitat quality.**

It's just not the hunting pressure that is a factor in elk management it's the health of the habitat as well, said Senator Wellborn referring to several presentations during the science panel. *"Without good habitat you don't get the reproduction, you don't get the survivability, you don't get the growth back to replace the prior harvest season."*

*We need to be asking whether the tools we are using are moving us towards our shared goals.*

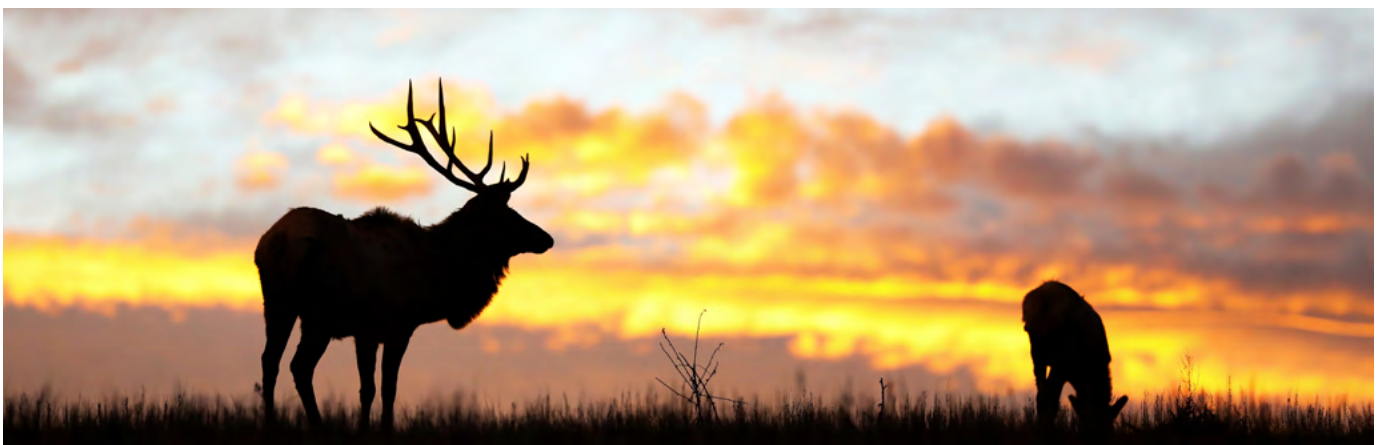
# Conclusion & About the Coalition

**The Montana Citizen's Elk Management Coalition (MCEMC)** is a diverse group of Montanans who have recognized that elk management in Montana is at crossroads. We hosted the 2002 Montana Elk Management Symposium to identify a more fruitful process to improve relations with landowners, outfitters, and 'do-it-yourself' hunters while ensuring that wildlife remains in the public trust and management remains equitable.

By all accounts, the symposium was a success. It showcased a growing demand by residents to participate in fixing the status-quo. The symposium illustrated that Montanans are willing to address several challenges plaguing elk management including problematic wildlife concentrations in central and eastern Montana, fiscal impacts on family farmers and ranchers, habitat degradation of our land and water, and low hunter success rates on public lands.

Unfortunately, there are no easy answers to the complex issue of elk management. Only by working together can Montanans solve these problems in a piece-meal fashion. We consider the policy recommendations resulting from the symposium to be important first steps that will begin solving some of these systemic and long-imbedded problems.

Our coalition was founded to do the hard work and listen to all sides of the issue. Toward that end, we look forward to further exploring those recommendations and refining them into pragmatic policy. Montanans do best when we take the politics out of the policy of wildlife management. Our shared history shows that, and we believe our future success must walk that same path.



# List of Panelists and Contributors



## **George Bettas:** **Symposium emcee**

George is a well-respected figure in the hunting and conservation community. He is a founder and past President of the Mule Deer Foundation, served as Chair of the Board for the Rocky

Mountain Elk Foundation, became a Regular Member of Boone and Crockett Club in 1989, and recently retired as Executive Director of Boone and Crockett Club.



## **Barb Beck:** **Symposium facilitator**

Barb recently left Montana's Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks after five years as regional supervisor and one year with the director's office during which she received two

Governor's awards for leadership. She is also President of Beck Consulting, which provides services in facilitation, team building, conflict management, land use and resource planning, strategic planning, and organizational transition.



## **Pat Byorth: Montana Fish Wildlife and Park Commission**

Pat currently serves on the Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks Commission. Pat is also the Montana Water Director for Trout Unlimited's Western Water

and Habitat Project. His work at Trout Unlimited has focused on restoration of instream flows and habitats to benefit native and wild fishes through community-based efforts, water transactions, and water policy reform.



## **Randy Newberg:** **Shared elk and shared values moderator**

As the host of Fresh Tracks with Randy Newberg, Randy has become the voice of the public land hunter in America. What many might not know is that Randy has

been active in bringing landowners and hunters together to deal with tough issues for decades. His work on the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee and on other state-level coalitions and programs has helped him create a shared understanding between many different interests. Randy lives just outside of Bozeman, Montana.



**Kathy Hadley, Shared elk and shared values panelist**

Kathy is a rancher in the Deer Lodge Valley and has been a leader in the Montana conservation world since the 1980's where she helped draft the original Block

Management and Habitat Montana Legislation. Kathy's work has also included being the Executive Director of the National Center for Appropriate Technology and a Board Chair of the National Wildlife Federation.



**Denley Loge, Shared elk and shared values panelist**

Denley is a Republican Legislator out of St. Regis, MT where he also raises livestock and deals with elk and wolf conflict on a daily basis. Representative Loge is

a member of the House Fish, Wildlife and Parks Committee and is a former member of the Private Lands/Public Wildlife Committee and is a Block Management Cooperator.



**Scott Hibbard, Shared elk and shared values panelist**

Scott is a landowner, author and member of the Devil's Kitchen Working Group that has led the way in reducing conflict between landowners, outfitters and

hunters. He was also instrumental in helping set up the Master Hunter program from One Montana. He lives outside of Helena, Montana.



**Dan Vermillion, Shared elk and shared values panelist**

Dan is a fishing outfitter and former chair of the Montana Fish & Wildlife Commission. For over 14 years, Dan served on the commission, crafting compromise solutions on elk

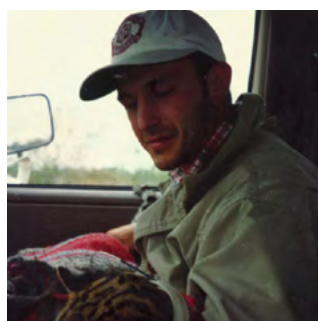
archery issues, brucellosis management and a host of other contentious issues. He lives in Livingston, Montana.



**Dr. Chris Servheen, Science moderator**

Chris is the former US Fish & Wildlife Service Grizzly Bear Recovery Coordinator and the current president of the Montana Wildlife Federation. Dr. Servheen is a world-renowned expert

on large carnivores and continues to work as an adjunct research associate professor at the University of Montana. He currently lives in Missoula, Montana.



**Jon Horne, Science panelist**

Jon is a senior wildlife research biologist at the Idaho Department of Game & Fish, where his work focuses on large carnivore interactions with ungulates and the habitat systems

needed to ensure viable populations of wildlife. His work has led to a greater understanding of the impacts of wolf predation as well as the role that functioning habitat plays on survivability of ungulates in predator heavy areas. He lives in Moscow Idaho.

**Dr. Brent Race, Science panelist**

Brent is a staff scientist at the National Institute of Health and is focusing his work on Chronic Wasting Disease and how it can impact human health. He has also served on the Fish, Wildlife and Parks Citizen’s Elk Advisory Board and is an avid houndsman. He lives in Hamilton, Montana.



**Craig Jourdonnais, Science panelist**

Craig is a 30-year veteran biologist with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks with an impressive track record in both research & management. Craig’s work in the Madison Valley

and the Bitterroot Valleys were instrumental in achieving meaningful management prescriptions and he now serves as the Big Game Researcher for the MPG Ranch outside of Missoula, Montana.

**Ken Hamlin, Science panelist**

Ken is a retired FWP Research Biologist and the primary author of the 2006 Montana Elk Management Plan. Known as Dr. Wapiti to his colleagues, few public employees have the breadth and depth of elk management experience as Ken. He lives outside of Bozeman, Montana.

**Cody McKee, Lessons from other States panelist**

Cody is the Elk & Moose Specialist for the Nevada Department of Wildlife and as such, oversees their landowner tag program as well as elk management prescriptions in general. He lives in Reno, Nevada.



**Andrew McKean, Lessons from other States moderator**

Andrew is the Hunting and Conservation Editor of Outdoor Life magazine, as well as a livestock producer outside of Glasgow, Montana. Andrew also

served briefly as a Montana Fish & Wildlife Commissioner and is a well known figure in the hunting world, having spent his entire career hunting across the globe. He lives in Glasgow Montana, where he also helps coach the Glasgow Scotties Track team.



**Jessi Johnson, Lessons from other States panelist**

Jessi is the Government Affairs Director for the Wyoming Wildlife Federation and has been an advocate for wildlife and hunting for over 6 years.

She lives in Lander, Wyoming.



**Garret Visser, Lessons from other States panelist**

Garret is the Conservation Program Coordinator for the Idaho Wildlife Federation. He has extensive experience working with landowners and wildlife managers to

help conserve migration corridors as well as tackle thorny issues with a sense of empathy for all involved. He lives in Boise, Idaho.



**Jeremy Vesbach,  
Lessons from other  
States panelist**

Jeremy is a Montana native, growing up along the Big Horn River in Southeastern Montana. He is also a former New Mexico Game and Fish Commissioner

and former executive director of the New Mexico Wildlife Federation. He lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico.



**Senator Tom  
Jacobson, Solutions  
panelist**

Tom represents Senate District 11 in Great Falls. He is an avid hunter and angler as well as a ranking member of the Senate Fish & Game Committee and a leader on

collaborative legislation to improve wildlife management in the Legislature. He lives in Great Falls, Montana.



**Marcia Brownlee,  
Solutions panel  
moderator**

Marcia is the program manager for the National Wildlife Federation's Artemis Sportswomen initiative, where she focuses on creating a community of

powerful, informed sportswomen who will foster positive change and defend and secure the future of our public lands, waters, and wildlife.



**Gerald Martin (left),  
Solutions panelist**

Gerald is a housing contractor and avid outdoorsman and mentor to many. Like many Montanans, Gerald spends significant time volunteering on wildlife issues and

advocating for better management of all wildlife. He lives outside of Bozeman, Montana.



**Senator Jeff Welborn,  
Solutions panelist**

Jeff represents Senate District 36 in Beaverhead County. His work has led to better outcomes for landowners, outfitters and hunters. He is the current chair of the Senate Natural

Resources Committee and his family has been in livestock production in Beaverhead County for generations. He lives in Dillon, MT.



**Eric Albus - Solutions  
panelist (tentative)**

Eric is a 4th generation rancher & outfitter outside of Malta, Montana. He currently serves on the Private Land/Public Wildlife Committee and is the vice-president of the Montana

Outfitters and Guides Association. .

