

LEGISLATIVE AUDIT DIVISION

Scott A. Seacat, Legislative Auditor
John W. Northey, Legal Counsel



Deputy Legislative Auditors:
Jim Pellegrini, Performance Audit
Tori Hunthausen, IS Audit & Operations
James Gillett, Financial-Compliance Audit

MEMORANDUM

TO: Legislative Audit Committee Members
FROM: Jim Pellegrini, Deputy Legislative Auditor, Performance Audits
DATE: September 2003
RE: Follow-up Performance Audit:
Block Management Program (97P-10)
Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks

INTRODUCTION

We presented our performance audit of the Block Management Program within the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) to the Legislative Audit Committee in December 1999. The scope of the audit was to look at hunter access, impact to private land, wildlife management, and landowner/hunter relations. The report contains fourteen recommendations with eighteen specific recommended changes. The focus of the recommendations is establishing measurable goals and criteria, coordinating access with similar programs, improving the compensation component, creating documentation procedures, program information dissemination, and ensuring hunter access.

We requested and received information from FWP personnel regarding progress toward implementation of the recommended changes. Audit staff then interviewed FWP personnel and reviewed recent documents to verify implementation status in each area.

SUMMARY OF FOLLOW-UP RESULTS

The following table shows the status of the recommendations made in the audit.

<u>Recommendation Status</u>	
Implemented	14
Being Implemented	1
Partially Implemented	3
Not Implemented	0

As the table illustrates, most of the recommendations have been fully implemented. The four recommended changes that have not been fully implemented do not raise concerns from an audit perspective. The *partially implemented* recommendations involve situations in which improvements have been made, but where the process is ongoing; or involve a situation in which information regarding program processes became available after the audit report. A summary of each individual recommendation follows and provides details of our review.

BACKGROUND

FWP formally started the Block Management Program in 1985 to address concerns relating to hunters on private land, land damage, and hunter/landowner relations. There was a concern that too much property would be closed to hunting, creating a negative effect on wildlife management strategies. The intent of the program was to help landowners control hunter activity on their lands. The program was enhanced by the 1995 Legislature to provide tangible benefits to landowners to encourage public access to their land. Funding is provided from outfitter-sponsored non-resident deer or elk combination big game licenses.

Audit Findings

The following summarizes the implementation status from the audit report's fourteen recommendations.

Recommendation #1

We recommend the department:

- A. Create specific objectives that relate to the purpose and mission of the program.
- B. Establish measurable criteria which relate directly to the goals and objectives, and develop strategies to allow for attaining desired results or outcomes.

Status:

A. Implemented

The department established specific objectives that relate to the purpose and mission of the program. These are published and advertised, and include improved relations between and among landowners/hunters/FWP, reduction of impact on private land, increased access, and coordination to meet overall wildlife management goals.

B. Implemented

Specific goals are created in each of the seven Block Management regions and submitted each year to the Landowner Sportsman Coordinator, who serves as the administrator of the program. The administrator reviews these goals to ensure they fall within the general program criteria. The criteria include:

- newly enrolled properties
- re-enrolled properties
- increased access to private and public land
- herd management of specific species.

Recommendation #2

We recommend the department develop methods to:

- A. Coordinate access provided under the Block Management Program, the Upland Game Bird Habitat Enhancement Program, and Habitat Montana.
- B. Publicize and monitor hunting on conservation easements and the Upland Game Bird Habitat Enhancement Program projects.

Status:

A. Implemented

The department modified its publications so that the Upland Game Bird Habitat Enhancement Program, Habitat Montana and the Block Management Program all cross reference each program where appropriate. The information on FWP's website also reflects this change. FWP has indicated program administrators are continuing to meet to discuss areas for further collaboration.

B. Implemented

Hunting opportunities on conservation easements and Upland Game Bird projects are advertised in Block Management materials in each of the regions. The monitoring function on conservation easements is done by a private contractor coordinated by FWP. Departmental biologists monitor lands associated with the Upland Game Bird Program.

Recommendation #3

We recommend the department establish an access coordination function.

Status: Implemented

The department created a new position in 2000, the Land Access Coordinator, to report directly to the Landowner Sportsman Coordinator. This position is to work on a wide range of access issues, including coordination between private and public lands. This responsibility is not limited to state lands. It is not uncommon for enrollment of a tract of private land in Block Management to create access to a tract of public land with wildlife management needs. At the regional level, access is coordinated by seasonal employees, titled Hunting Access Technicians, who do much of the groundwork involved in signage and direct hunter assistance.

Recommendation #4

We recommend the department re-evaluate the current base payment system used to compensate landowners enrolled in the Block Management Program.

Status: Implemented

The Block Management Working Group recommended the program consider implementing a multi-year contract and payment system in the 2001 season. The department followed the advice of the Working Group and currently takes information from previous years to establish an average number of hunter days in specific regions/properties. Contracts are signed for the year based on these averages. The landowners are not paid, however, until the completion of the season.

Recommendation #5

We recommend department officials explore options for the Block Management Program to provide benefits to landowners other than money and a single resident sportsman license or non-resident big game combination license.

Status: Implemented

The Block Management Working Group's minutes and correlating departmental documents indicate program officials considered and implemented non-monetary benefits to landowners. These tangible components included repairs to and installation of fence, cattleguards, and related real property improvements. After a trial period, a department evaluation found there was a greater cost associated with purchasing procedures, storage, and increased staff time beyond a simple processing of payment to landowners. The department has subsequently abandoned the idea, and this option is no longer available to landowners.

The department and the Private Land/Public Wildlife Council are considering seeking legislation to allow block management operators to transfer the single resident sportsmen license they receive. This would increase the value and benefit of this block management incentive.

Recommendation #6

We recommend the department develop a system where contracts can be established for terms of more than one year.

Status: Implemented

Beginning with the 2000 season, the department began implementing three-year contracts for certain Block Management Areas (BMA). According to program managers, 15 percent of contracts in block management extend beyond one year.

Recommendation #7

We recommend the department develop a compensation system that rewards landowners for entering into an aggregate Block Management Area.

Status: Being Implemented

Currently the department has implemented trial systems in different regions, including offering cash bonuses, basing compensation on game population figures, and flat rate payments. The Landowner Sportsmen Coordinator will be reviewing the success of these trial systems to develop a program-wide policy.

Recommendation #8

We recommend the department ensure Block Management Coordinators justify and document the enrollment of new landowners or the re-enrollment of current landowners in the Block Management Program.

Status: Implemented

The department uses a scoring sheet to rate all properties for re-enrollment purposes. Scoring categories include wildlife management goals, hunter opportunity, landowner relations, and administrative accountability. Specific scoring criteria are defined for certain categories. For example, a property of 641 to 1,000 acres receives 4 points under the size category, while 2,001 to 5,000 acres receives 8 points. Other categories are more subjective, however multiple department staff score properties and then average the numbers for the final score. The program administrator oversees the entire scoring process.

Recommendation #9

We recommend the department/regions initiate a process to review tabloid and map information to make information more consistent/standard and easier to understand.

Status: Implemented

Prior to the audit, maps were developed at the regional level, creating inconsistencies between regions, and in some cases between different properties within the same region. A review of the current maps shows this problem has been corrected, with all maps now having a similar look, common legends, and common criteria, including recognizable landmarks such as towns or major intersections. A review of the tabloids also showed an improvement in the general quality.

Recommendation #10

We recommend the department ensure the directions on the Block Management Area maps can be followed and the areas are properly signed prior to the hunting season.

Status: Partially Implemented

The status of this recommendation is probably best described as being an *ongoing* phase of implementation. During the audit, we discovered areas where a hunter could experience difficulties in finding a BMA. Department personnel maintain that improvements have been made in signage, including more permanent (metal) signs, an overall increase in the number of signs, and newly created signs showing when someone has left a BMA. In addition, the program administrator cites improvements associated with a directive that Regional Coordinators constantly review signage. The newly created Hunting Access Technicians are also responsible for installing signs. However, the department admits that problems associated with specific properties are typically brought to the department's attention through hunter comment cards, which are not available until after the hunting season.

As mentioned under Recommendation #9, map formats have been standardized. Directions are now included on the back of maps. Based on our review of several examples, it appears improvements have been made in clarifying directions.

Recommendation #11

We recommend the department help promote landowner/sportsman partnerships by developing a process to easily and broadly explain the Block Management Program and how it works in each region.

Status: Implemented

The department developed a brochure designed to promote the Block Management Program to hunters and landowners who know very little or nothing at all about the program. The department printed 10,000 brochures for distribution at retail and public outlets where hunting licenses are sold.

Recommendation #12

We recommend the Block Management Coordinator in each region be responsible for contract administration and sign installation for the Block Management Program.

Status: Implemented

The department indicated and demonstrated through the job classification that the primary responsibility for contract administration rests with the Regional Coordinators. While wardens and biologist may at times assist in the development of the contract, negotiations with landowners, etc., the Regional Coordinators must review and sign off on all contracts for the region. (See comments under Recommendation #10 for information on sign installation.)

Recommendation #13

We recommend the department increase coordination among the regions by:

- A. Establishing a process that ensures Block Management Coordinators review other region's annual reports and documentation.
- B. Establishing a forum to discuss the various methods for completing the same or similar block management tasks.

Status:

A. and B. Implemented

The Landowner Sportsmen Coordinator sends out annual regional reports to all regions so Regional Coordinators can review one another's reports. In connection with this effort, the Regional Coordinators and the Landowner Sportsmen Coordinator meet twice a year, at season start and season end, to discuss best practices and related operational components within each of the seven regions.

Recommendation #14

We recommend the Block Management Coordinators and Helena staff:

- A. Use the same software for contract and permission slip/roster information.
- B. Develop a common format for contract and permission slip/roster information so information only needs to be input once and can be used by all the regions and Helena.

Status:

A. and B. Partially Implemented

An Access database was developed by the department for the purpose of standardizing contract information program-wide. Computer hardware and software was updated in each of the regions. We reviewed the operational training manual which provided background information on software and related contract procedures.

Permission slip/roster information is currently not used by program management on a statewide basis. Regional personnel use this information differently than contract information. The program administrator indicated permission slip/roster information does not need to be centralized with Helena staff. While this does not meet the intent of the recommendation, the program has addressed the issue of inputting information more than once. Since the program administrator does not need the information for analysis purposes, personnel in Helena are not duplicating the input procedure in this area.