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Montana House Fish, Wildlife and Parks Committee
1301 E. Sixth Avenue
Room 172
Helena, MT 59601

Chair Fitzgerald and Committee Members:

My name is Walker Conyngham and I am testifying on behalf of Hellgate Hunters & Anglers, a Western Montana-based, all volunteer rod and gun club that represents over 400 members. We unequivocally oppose House Bill 505, as we have all previous attempts by Rep. Galt to legislate reckless elk management laws that would contradict decades of Department policy, the will of Montana voters and the interests of thousands of hunters in our state.

Montana's elk herds are not and should not be the exclusive property of any demographic in our state. While this bill operates under the guise of incentivizing landowners to bring elk herds to objective, the inevitable result of this legislation is a severe decline in public elk hunting opportunities. Large landowners, outfitters like Rep. Galt, and nonresidents with means and connections will benefit, but Montana's hunters will be left in the lurch. This bill does the opposite of its stated intent; the ten sponsored tags and additional bonus points provided will incentivize large ranches to keep elk on their properties year-round in order to maximize trophy quality and hunting opportunities for out-of-state "dudes" coming to Montana to hunt our elk.

We've already seen this happen in Central Montana, where landowners and outfitters herd elk with vehicles and helicopters and then fence them in during hunting season to keep them off of public lands. This practice is a disgrace to our hunting culture. Montana's elk herds are a public trust resource that provide untold benefits for hunters, families and communities across our state. They should not be pawned off to line the wallets of a select few. What do you tell resident hunters who see elk corralled on ranches so tourists can come take their pick of our trophy bulls? What do you tell a young hunter without access to private land, who will have to spend decades building bonus points to hunt districts that a wealthy nonresident could draw in three years under this bill? The fact is, public elk hunting opportunities are shrinking, and this bill would exacerbate the reasons for that decline. Montana already gives out 17,000 tags to nonresidents each year, and our elk herds are clearly feeling the pressure.

Hellgate Hunters & Anglers has been deeply involved in collaborative elk management discussions over the years, and we are deeply disappointed to see the legislature consider a bill that would bypass public input and disregard the priorities of Montana hunters in favor of nonresidents. While we agree that a change is needed in our elk management paradigms, this is clearly not the way to go about it. The outpouring of opposition from Montana residents since this bill was introduced demonstrates that the hunting community will not accept any bill that privileges nonresidents, outfitters and large landowners over Montana hunters.

I ask that you oppose this bill and any other legislation that corrupts Montana's public-trust wildlife management doctrines.

Walker Conyngham
President
Hellgate Hunters & Anglers