

Change in big game security standard for Helena

National Forest worries some hunting advocates

- [TOM KUGLIN Independent Record](#)

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Elk numbers are trending upward across much of western Montana, but access remains difficult on private property.

Tom Bauer, for the Independent Record

The Helena National Forest is proposing changes to how it manages big game habitat in parts of the forest, and that has some hunting advocates concerned.

Years of travel planning for the Divide west of Helena and the Blackfoot near Lincoln have mainly focused on the contentious issues surrounding motorized

travel in the forest. In addition to travel plans, the Forest Service proposes altering the way it defines big game security with an amendment to the 1986 forest plan.

Under the current forest plan, big game security is defined using hiding cover standards based on the amount of cover dense enough to hide elk during hunting season. The problems with the standards, forest officials say, range from the ability to meet the standards to an expected decrease in hiding cover from beetle kill.

The amendment would change the standard from a hiding cover standard to security areas, defined as areas of a certain size free from roads where big game can seek refuge during hunting season.

“There’s always been a lot of research on elk and open roads are the biggest factor affecting elk during hunting season,” said Denise Pengeroth, Forest Service biologist. “We took that into consideration as a way to update the forest plan standard.”

The forest uses two hiding cover standards -- one focusing on total hiding cover and another related to hiding cover and road density, she said. The standards cover elk herd units, which divide up the forest. But the science behind cover standards was never meant for an area as large as a herd unit, she said.

“The intent or scale of what’s considered habitat analysis units are generally smaller than an elk herd unit, which is much larger and generally carries off of national forest to adjacent lands,” Pengeroth said.

Of the six herd units in the Divide, the road density cover standard is only met on half, Pengeroth said, although the forest has met the overall cover standard. Even if all roads within the Forest Service’s control were closed, the standard could still not be met in some units due to private and county roads, she added.

That left officials with the option of either asking for an exemption with the travel plan or changing the standard. Because travel plans usually last for decades, changing the standard was decided as the appropriate measure, Pengeroth said.

Forest managers also face an uncertainty of what the forest will look like as beetle killed trees increasingly fall over. Standing dead trees do provide hiding cover, but that decreases once they are on the ground, Pengeroth said.

Future analysis will look at the downed trees and whether regrowth of hiding cover can be accelerated by removing dead lodgepole, she said.

For the Divide, the amendment will include cover guidelines, and while not as binding as standards, will help manage future projects in the forest.

“We know there’s a big concern not having a cover component,” Pengeroth said. “A guideline does give us more flexibility, but it’s also then incumbent for the project biologist to articulate why it is not met, so it’s almost a little harder.”

Security areas as a standard were developed with input from Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, which has tentatively endorsed them contingent on implementation of the Divide Travel Plan reducing some motorized routes.

“(FWP) will continue to do aerial surveys and count elk and determine if they’re meeting objectives and also how well our travel plan is keeping elk on public land,” Pengeroth said.

Some hunting advocates take issue with the amendment and the lack of a hiding cover standard. Both retired wildlife biologist Gayle Joslin with Helena Hunters and Anglers and Montana Backcountry Hunters and Anglers Chairman Greg Munther filed formal objections to the amendment and testified against it at an August hearing before the Forest Service.

Forest Service officials are preparing a final decision on the Divide after taking objections to its draft plan.

“Guidelines are minimal, making this all optional,” Joslin said “They did have a good standard they consistently violated and now they’re making standards that can’t be challenged because guidelines don’t have any criteria involved.”

The science behind elk and road density assumes there will be vegetative cover, and the amendment sets up a theoretical scenario where an entire security area could be logged and still qualify as secure for big game, she said. Even if only half of the herd units are meeting the standard, that is still better than eliminating the standard completely, she added.

Many of the proposed security areas are at higher elevations with no connecting cover between them. Hunters will surely key in on those areas, adding pressure that will eventually force elk to seek refuge on private land, Joslin said.

Proposed projects in the area, including the Tenmile-South Helena and Telegraph projects, call for cutting beetle killed trees, which will at least temporarily reduce cover as trees regrow.

“Dead trees provide cover too but need to be left there. They’re part of the biomass and whole lifecycle for a whole host of species,” Joslin said. “I’m just in awe there is so little science and research being used.”

Joslin’s final criticism centered on the planning process. With motorized use such a hot button issue, the big game amendment flew under the radar. It deserved its own separate process as a way to encourage public involvement, she said.

Munther echoed many of Joslin's points. The former Forest Service district ranger said he too would have appreciated the flexibility of guidelines, but a standard "is really a contract with the public," he said.

"The amendment basically says they're not going to make it any worse than it already is," he said. "Why not fix what we ignored for 30 years? Why not take areas dissected with roads that are compromised and go into those areas and restore them?"

Munther said he understands the Forest Service deals with things outside of its control such as many of the roads. But coupling the amendment with proposed logging projects will mean easier access for hunters. Downfall is incredibly difficult for people to move through, but big game can negotiate it and find security, he said.

"If I was in their shoes I'd want a lot of flexibility too, but we're engaged because we simply feel this is so key to the future of quality elk hunting on public lands. Displacement to private lands is occurring everywhere," Munther said. "From our standpoint, our charge is to watch out for wildlife and wildlife needs."

The amendment, if finalized along with travel planning, will only impact the Divide and Blackfoot. That means a patchwork of different security standards across the forest. Officials will likely look to standardize security standards through the development of a new forest plan, Pengeroth said.

A new forest plan is being developed and currently in the development phase.