

Taking aim at hunting revenues

Written by By Crystal R. Diamond, R-Dist. 35 N.M. Senator
Friday, 15 January 2021 04:35



Recently, a report was published by the Legislative Finance Council regarding a funding method utilized by New Mexico Department of Game and Fish to compensate landowners for conservation practices essential to maintaining critical habitat provided to wildlife on their private property. The report prompted Sen. Martin Heinrich to write a critical letter outlining his disapproval, as well as an article by the *Albuquerque Journal*. Designed with input from numerous stakeholders, the Elk Private Land Use System has taken the NMDGF decades to perfect and has been credited as a model system among other western hunting states.

EPLUS provides landowners with elk hunting authorizations through a system that determines the level of wildlife benefit their property is producing. The landowner must apply for EPLUS and NMDGF conduct a physical inspection of the property to ensure the wildlife benefit. Once the authorization is awarded the landowner is free to sell, or give, that permit to whomever they wish.

Contrary to what Senator Heinrich alleges, altering the current EPLUS program will have the most damaging impacts on small acreage properties. Approximately 38% of the current EPLUS recipients own land, 500 acres or less, and a large percentage of those are 100 acres or less. A great number of these property owners rely on revenue created from the sale of their EPLUS tags as part of their family's annual income. These permit sales can represent \$5,000 -\$10,000 or more of their annual earnings, depending on the property location and number of tags.

These are not wealthy absentee owners, they are hardworking rural families with great financial burdens, especially in the current COVID climate.

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Additionally, the impact to rural land values should be considered. Removing elk permits from a property is likely to reduce the market value of that land 40% - 50% based on current market conditions. That doesn't just impact the EPLUS landowner, but all of the properties in the rural areas around them as comparable prices tumble and all land values subsequently decrease. To put that in perspective, if legislation or regulations changes were presented to decreased property values in the metro areas by 40% - 50%, there would be substantial push back and the proposed changes would likely stall right from the start. Why should rural New Mexicans be subject to the likely financial ruin that urban New Mexicans are not?

Although rural economies will bear a greater weight, the state as a whole will suffer great loss in revenues generated through tourism, as hunting & fishing remains the highest grossing outdoor recreation tourism business in the state, an industry already on the brink of collapse as a result of the ongoing pandemic.

Speaking of revenue shortfalls, it's important to note that NMDGF does not receive any money from the state general fund. The agency's annual budget is funded through hunting and fishing license sales and excise tax dollars produced on the sale of hunting and fishing equipment. Wildlife conservation in New Mexico is entirely funded by hunters and anglers.

Criticism and potential ill-advised changes of the EPLUS system threatens a process that heavily benefits natural resource conservation efforts. It also benefits the annual budget of a self-funding state agency, in-state hunters, our crippled tourism industry, and our damaged state economy - specifically economies of our especially vulnerable rural communities. Furthermore, it highlights the disconnect between urban minded lawmakers and the reality of what is taking place in rural areas of our state. Allow me to narrow that divide by extending a bit of good advice and cowboy logic from those of us in rural and remote New Mexico – if it ain't broke, don't fix it.

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