



## **2009 MONTANA LEGISLATURE CONVENES: THE VALUE OF WILDLIFE, HUNTERS, ANGLERS AND COMMUNICATION**

The 61st Montana Legislative Session will convene January 5, 2009. One-hundred (100) members of the House of Representatives and fifty (50) members of the Montana Senate will represent the interests of approximately 945,000 Montanans – a daunting task. The 2007 session experienced 2,581 bill requests and already there have been 1,106 place holders for the 2009 session.

Montanans take our legislative sessions seriously. Hunters, anglers, wildlife and outdoor enthusiasts consider the outcomes exceedingly serious. Montana is a state of diverse natural wealth: diverse landscapes, diverse wildlife, diverse waters, diverse fisheries, and diverse outdoor recreation opportunities. Our natural wealth is what makes Montana – Montana. Sustaining it in the Public Trust is a vital and time-honored part of Montana's historic cultural foundation. Montana's natural wealth provides us a quality of life and this is why many call Montana home.

So how will legislators respond to measures that influence the future of an economic and cultural powerhouse - wildlife, hunting, fishing and outdoor recreation?

Legislators carry a heavy burden considering that more than 230,000 residents and around 160,000 nonresidents' fish, and nearly 190,000 residents and 44,000 nonresidents hunt. Montana is first in the Nation for the number of hunters per capita and number three for anglers. Combined with wildlife enthusiasts, hunters and anglers spend more than \$1 billion in Montana every year. Reinvesting in Montana with dollars that flow through FWP hunters and anglers provide \$5 million annually to private landowners enrolled in the Block Management Program, \$750,000 annually is spent on stream restoration on private and public lands, \$455,700 annually goes to 38 counties in payments in lieu of taxes, and an annual average of \$390,000 is spent on private landowner game damage assistance to name a few of the programs. Fish and wildlife, hunting and fishing is big business in Montana but it is far more.

"The Legislature is the branch of state government responsible for making the laws needed to maintain public order and ensure the basic security of state" and it is also the branch that can ensure our wildlife, hunting, fishing future is not commercialized or privatized. Fish and wildlife management, public land management, hunter and angler programs and public access are not partisan issues but with Republicans the majority party in the Senate and a split House of Representatives (50 Republicans and 50 Democrats) reaching agreement on measures will, again, be difficult.

So, what can hunters, anglers and outdoor enthusiasts do to ensure that legislators truly represent our interests?

### **Monitoring, Communication and Engagement**

Monitoring bills and voting by legislators, engaging the discussions on legislative measures and communicating your points of view on a regular basis are the most effective tools available to the public. Writing to the editors of local newspapers may also influence the direction of legislation and it really only takes a few minutes. The standing committees of most significance to hunters and anglers are the Senate Fish and Game, and Natural Resources committees and the House Fish, Wildlife and Parks and Natural Resources committees.

It is important for hunters and anglers to communicate with the chairs for the respective committees:

**Senate Fish and Game- Chair:**Gregory Barkus (R-Kalispell),

**Senate Natural Resources - Chair:** Kelly Gebhardt (R-Roundup)

**House Fish, Wildlife and Parks – Chair:** Kendall Van Dyk (D-Billings)

**House Natural Resources - Chair:** Mike Milburn (R-Cascade)

You can monitor and track legislation using a free, online Legislative Branch Website service at: **<http://leg.mt.gov/css/default.asp>** On the site you can explore current and past legislation, find out who is a bill sponsor and how legislators vote, find out who is on a committee and when the committee will hear a bill, read the text of a bill and track its progress, monitor the legislative calendar, find the latest contact information for legislators and much more.

Montana Wildlife Federation will again actively engage the Montana Legislature through staff, volunteers, affiliate club outreach and alerts, and a lobbyist. MWF's website will soon have a Montana Legislature page complete with legislator contact information, alerts on bills of concern, and hearing information at: **[www.montanawildlife.org](http://www.montanawildlife.org)**

MWF efforts during this session will focus on the passage of a new Bridge Access bill, addressing the harboring of big game and the impacts on population management, game damage, and the potential spread of disease through a Wildlife Damage Mitigation Act, expanding public access opportunities and affiliate club efforts to expand funding for habitats. We encourage our membership to call us if you have a question concerning legislation or our efforts.

Hunters, anglers and outdoor enthusiasts – please – become engaged with the Montana legislative process. Your involvement and communication with legislators can mean the difference between a bills passage and failure.

Please consider signing up for MWF's Sportsmen Activist Network by emailing Larry Copenhaver at: [lcopenhaver@mtwf.org](mailto:lcopenhaver@mtwf.org).