

## Hellgate Group's Event focuses on Access, Habitat

### Tester Calls for Better Oil & Gas Lease Process at Hunter & Angler Fundraiser

By Peter Metcalf, 3 02 08

Antelope jerky, duck jambalaya, elk liver pate, Mule deer pasties. These were just a small sample of the wild game appetizers from last fall's hunts featured at the Hellgate Hunters and Anglers second annual Wild Night for Wildlife fundraising event Saturday night.

But while the taste and stories of last fall's hunt lingered, the evening focused on current threats to wildlife habitat, public access and the need to protect Montana's hunting and fishing heritage for future generations.

In the evening's featured address, Senator Jon Tester, D Mont., said that a number of "big issues," including rampant oil and gas development, global climate change, and restricted public hunting and fishing access to private land all threaten Montana's hunting and fishing heritage.

He criticized the Bureau of Land Management for a lack of safeguards to protect wildlife species and their habitat in their procedures for leasing oil and gas development across the West.

"Irresponsible development is jeopardizing some of the most pristine areas of this nation," Tester said to loud applause from the nearly 200 people gathered at Fort Missoula's Heritage Hall.

"We owe it to our kids and our grandkids to make sure we are good stewards of this land," Tester said.

In a brief interview after his formal remarks, Tester said that the BLM needs to slow down the lease process to allow for greater transparency and public participation in the decisions that affect "land that belongs to all of us."

The evening carried a festive mood as a fairly balanced mix of young and old, men and women swapped hunting stories over wild game appetizers, entered a variety of raffles and silent auctions and tried to guess the number of real elk pellets crammed into a glass jar from Missoula's north hills elk herd.

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Commission Chairman Steve Doherty talked and answered questions about Montana's hunting regulations for the 2008 – 2009 biennium. The regulations include a wolf hunting season, the first of its kind in the nation. The wolf hunt can only occur if the removal of gray wolves in the northern Rocky Mountains is finalized. A group of eleven conservation groups sponsored by the legal organization Earthjustice has announced its intention to file suit to block the wolf's removal, a legal procedure that could delay the hunt for years.

The evening was intended to increase public awareness of the three and half year old organization, bring in new members and raise money to support the club's efforts to conserve wildlife habitat and public hunting and fishing access on private lands, said club board member Bethany Morris.

Conserving the habitat that supports Montana's exceptional wildlife populations is a key objective of the Hellgate Hunters and Anglers, said Tim Aldrich, club president.



Caption: Jon Tester was also in Missoula Friday holding an open house and several listening sessions before his appearance Saturday at the Hellgate Hunters and Angler's event. Here, he answers questions about the environment and sustainability during a listening session at the University of Montana Friday. Tester acknowledged Montana's transportation issues, saying he would like to see a move toward more environmentally friendly practices such as a reintroduction of the Hiawatha railroad route. Photo by Emily Haas.

“What’s more important than habitat?” Aldrich asked rhetorically. “If you don’t have habitat you’re not at go.”

That habitat has suffered in recent years from, amongst other things, widespread oil and gas development, rural residential subdivisions, and mismanagement of off road vehicles, Aldrich said.

The club works cooperatively with other hunter and angler organizations in eastern Montana to monitor and respond to threats posed to wildlife habitat from oil and gas development in the Powder River Basin, especially as it impacts sage grouse and mule deer, Morris said.

Closer to home, the club has opposed oil and gas leases on the Beaverhead River in southwest Montana, advised the Bitterroot National Forest in its latest travel plan, and spearheaded by board member Bert Lindler, provided substantial volunteer time as well as some funding to Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks on going efforts to study and manage the north hills elk herd in Missoula.

The club’s other major concern is the threat that the loss of public hunting and fishing access presents to Montana’s fair chase hunting and fishing heritage.

“Private lands have played such an important role in our hunting heritage,” Aldrich said.

That relationship has shown increasing signs of fracture in recent years. In western Montana, access to traditional hunting ground is being lost as Plum Creek Timber Company sells off its timber lands for private development and as rural ranches become subdivided. Throughout the state, an increasing number of both long time and new landowners bar public hunter access, opting instead to lease hunting rights or charge access fees, Aldrich said.

The Montana Wildlife Federation, with which Hellgate Hunters and Anglers is affiliated, is the lead organization fighting the commercialization of Montana’s public wildlife, federation president Chris Marchion, told the group. Both organizations seek to ensure all citizens continue to have equitable access to hunt public wildlife on private lands without having to pay fees for the right to do so.

“There is a real need today for a much improved discussion about how we manage public wildlife in the intermingling of public and private lands,” Aldrich said.

The main management tool Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks uses presently to secure public hunter access to private lands is Block Management. Landowners can choose to sign up with the state to allow public hunting on all or part of their estate. In exchange, landowners can receive up to \$12,000 dollars per year depending on the size of the property enrolled and the number of hunters permitted on their land daily. The state also provides limited liability insurance, reimbursement for injured cattle, a sportsmen’s license and some maps and other printed materials to assist the general public.

The program began in 1985 and is fully funded from the sale of resident and out of state licensing fees and federal excise taxes on the sale of munitions, firearms and fishing equipment.

Hellgate Hunters and Anglers was founded in 2004 to organize local hunters, anglers and wildlife viewers in efforts to preserve their heritage and pass it on their children, Morris said. Missoula lacked a rod and gun organization that focused on conservation issues and none of the other Missoula based conservation groups spoke specifically from the perspective of hunters and anglers.

“We’re unique,” Morris said. “We offer the perspective of people who get outside a lot and are really close to wild places and wildlife.”

Hellgate Hunters and Anglers brings together a diverse group of people across a wide range of social and political perspectives united in their love of Montana, of wild animals in wild places and their desire to see their hunting or fishing heritage passed on to future generations, Morris said.

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