



January 15, 2021

Dear Ms. Romero,

Thank you for taking the time to write to me about the Elk Private Lands Use System (EPLUS) in New Mexico. I appreciate knowing your thoughts and concerns about this important issue.

As you likely know, in New Mexico, the Department of Game and Fish distributes some elk hunting licenses through a highly competitive public lottery system, where the state legislature has set a preference for resident hunters. The EPLUS system, on the other hand, grants hunting vouchers to private landowners participating in the program, who can then use the vouchers or sell them in the private market to other hunters, including nonresidents of New Mexico. While this system can reward good stewardship by private landowners for the benefits their land provides to elk, requirements for enrollment are more permissive than similar programs in certain other Western states. New Mexico also allocates a much larger proportion of its license quota to private landowners, decreasing the licenses available to the public through the public draw. In addition, out-of-state hunters use the private system at far greater rates than New Mexico hunters.

I believe that the current system has created a situation where wealthy out-of-state hunters have easier access to elk hunting opportunities in New Mexico than many residents. The damage this situation is causing to the hunting tradition in New Mexico is a very serious problem. That's why last December I wrote to the Director of the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish (NMDGF) and the Chair of the New Mexico State Game Commission to urge them to work with a diverse set of stakeholders to reform the EPLUS system. The New Mexico Legislative Finance Committee also issued a report last year which stated that the EPLUS program favors landowners and nonresidents, and recommended that the NMDGF consider reforming EPLUS. Many New Mexicans depend on the opportunity to hunt on public lands to experience and pass on the hunting tradition, and enjoy our shared natural resources. Using a highest-bidder system to allocate hunting tags puts everyday New Mexican hunters at a serious and unfair disadvantage. Additionally, in an economy where outdoor recreation is increasingly important, ensuring fair outdoor opportunity for residents is an important part of competing to bring businesses to New Mexico.

Access to publicly allocated hunting opportunities in our state must be based on a fair, transparent process, not on personal wealth or privilege. I will continue to work with state officials and everyday New Mexicans to prioritize a fair hunting system in New Mexico.

Thank you again for contacting me. I hope you will continue to keep me informed of the issues important to you.

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Sincerely,

MARTIN HEINRICH
United States Senator