

Published: Thursday, December 3rd, 2020 at 10:51pm

Updated: Friday, December 4th, 2020 at 12:05am

Copyright © 2020 Albuquerque Journal

Hunting elk in the fall is an annual tradition for many New Mexicans. Now, some hunters' groups and U.S. Sen. Martin Heinrich, D-N.M., are pointing to a Legislative Finance Committee review of the Department of Game and Fish to revive concerns about elk hunting licenses allocated to private landowners. New Mexico landowners must prove that their property benefits elk in order to enroll in the Elk Private Land Use System, or EPLUS. Game and Fish data shows more than 4,000 New Mexico properties enrolled in the program in 2019. Those enrolled landowners can use or sell their elk hunting vouchers. Remaining licenses enter a public lottery, which favors residents and provides New Mexicans with cheaper tags. The LFC report said the EPLUS program limits the "already highly competitive lottery" and "overwhelmingly benefits out-of-state hunters" compared to programs in other states. Joel Gay, chairman of the New Mexico Chapter of Backcountry Hunters and Anglers, said the current Game Commission has been open to hearing hunters' perspectives on the EPLUS program. "People are trying to fill their freezers here," Gay told the Journal Thursday. "A big bull provides a lot of meat ... to feed my family and my neighbor's family." The system's unit-wide licenses allow private landowner licenses to extend to public land, Gay said, limiting resident hunting opportunities. Last year, about 78,000 hunters applied for 22,000 New Mexico elk licenses. "While I understand people's concern about a private land system, the Legislature does direct us to have one," Game and Fish Director Michael Sloane said. "There's some sort of balance that needs to occur there." The Game Commission last updated the program in 2018. Commissioner Gail Cramer said the restructuring was based on science and resident input. "Some of those non-residents' tags, in fact a good portion, are donated by landowners to nonprofits to be auctioned so that those nonprofits can function," Cramer said. Any major changes to the department's big game hunts would occur during the next rulemaking cycle in 2022. Heinrich echoed concerns about the program in a Dec. 2 letter to Sloane and State Game Commission Chair Sharon Salazar Hickey. The New Mexico Democrat said elk licenses are sold to the "highest bidder or passed on to a well-connected few." "The opportunity to hunt on public lands should be allocated fairly, and those able to pay \$10,000 or more for a hunt should not get to buy their way to the front of the line to hunt on public lands," Heinrich wrote. "It is wrong, it is killing the hunting tradition in New Mexico and it is high time to reform a system that effectively allows a wealthy few to outbid an average hunter's opportunity to hunt on public lands."