

Integrating social science into big game habitat conservation program implementation and evaluation

Hilary Byerly Flint

In 2022 the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), in partnership with the State of Wyoming, established a Big Game Partnership Pilot to conserve elk, mule deer, and pronghorn migration corridors and habitat. The Pilot incentivizes private landowners in “priority areas” to participate in temporary (10- to 15-year) habitat leases through the Grasslands Conservation Reserve Program and provides additional assistance with conservation program recruitment and enrollment. As the USDA plans to scale these offerings to other states, it is important to know whether and the Pilot affects landowners and—ultimately—big game habitat conservation.

Using a quasi-experimental design, we are evaluating the impact of the USDA-Wyoming Big Game Partnership Pilot on landowner attitudes, intentions, and conservation behavior. In the first phase of this research, we established baseline sentiments and behaviors among private landowners within priority areas and in similar regions where big game range (“control”). We mailed 4,514 surveys to landowners in Wyoming, Colorado, Idaho, and Montana. The survey asked landowners about their experiences and attitudes towards big game on their land, their land management actions and intentions, and their views on conservation programs.

We received 1,131 responses (25% response rate). Respondents report that big game is common on their lands, and so are conflicts. Attitudes towards big game are largely positive, and many are taking actions on their land that benefit big game. We do find, however, differences in perspectives and behaviors between producers (farmers and ranchers) and non-working landowners. Baseline conditions are similar across landowners in priority areas and those in our control sample. The goal of this research effort is to integrate science and learning into practice, enabling program managers and policymakers to understand how their efforts affect landowner experiences and habitat conservation on private lands.