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December 2, 2020

Michael Sloane  
Director  
New Mexico Department of Game and Fish  
1 Wildlife Way  
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Sharon Salazar Hickey  
Chair  
New Mexico State Game Commission  
PO Box 25112  
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Director Sloane & Chair Salazar Hickey:

Recently, a report from New Mexico's Legislative Finance Committee confirmed a very serious problem that has been brought to me by constituents across New Mexico. From Silver City to Crownpoint to Taos and all corners of the state over my time serving in office, I have heard from local hunters who rely on hunting for food and tradition about a serious problem: the Department of Game and Fish's system of allocating elk hunting on public lands is fundamentally flawed and tilted against resident hunters when compared to other Western states.

Each year, the so-called "EPLUS" program takes thousands of opportunities to hunt elk on our public lands away from average hunters and instead gives these public land hunting opportunities to the wealthiest few. While this may benefit the Department of Game and Fish financially through higher license fees for non-residents, 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. 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.

One of the reasons I worked so hard to bring new management to the Valles Caldera National Preserve was to give average hunters a fair chance at hunting on their own land. Under the old experimental management system, before passage of the Valles Caldera Protection Act, even though the Valles Caldera was publicly owned, hunts were allocated to the highest bidder for \$10,000 or more, shutting average people out from the opportunity to use their own public lands for food and hunting traditions. I am glad we were able to bring back a one-person-one-chance system for allocating limited hunting opportunity in the Valles Caldera where the wealthiest few in the country were no longer able to buy their way to the front of the line, and instead all hunts are allocated via a transparent system in the public lottery drawing.

I suggest that you also take action to end New Mexico Game and Fish's system of highest-bidder hunting on public lands. It's a long-standing source of conflict and strife and a black eye on our state. In addition to the tradition and food source that is so important to generations of hunters in New Mexico, ensuring fair outdoor opportunity for residents helps us compete to bring businesses to New Mexico. In choosing where to locate and bring jobs, outdoor recreation is increasingly important to attract new business to New Mexico. Ensuring fair opportunity for resident hunting on public lands is an important component of the outdoor recreation economy and a critical part of competing with other states to bring in new businesses and jobs in the future.

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Our state's rich network of public lands is important for food, for culture and for tradition to people from across the state of New Mexico. Elk hunting is a tradition that unites us across political considerations, across cultures and across regions. However, where other Western state wildlife agencies have determined that it is critical to protect hunting opportunities for their own residents, New Mexico's Department of Game and Fish has implemented a system through the EPLUS system that effectively takes public land elk hunting opportunity away from the public lottery drawing where the state legislature, by law, has set a preference for resident hunters. Instead, due to the Department's EPLUS system, thousands of average New Mexico residents are denied an opportunity to get outside with their families, denied an opportunity to pass on the hunting tradition, denied an opportunity to enjoy our public lands and denied an opportunity to potentially bring home healthy wild game for their friends and family, because those hunting opportunities were sold to the highest bidder or passed on to a well-connected few.

We worked hard, with the strong support of average hunters eager to pass on the tradition, to end the experiment of highest bidder hunting on the Valles Caldera National Preserve. I encourage you to work with a diverse set of interests to reform the EPLUS system and replace it with a system that is fair to all parties, honors the critical importance of private landowners to our wildlife species, and upholds the important principle that access to public lands must be equal and not based on personal wealth or privilege. Currently, the EPLUS system tilts public land hunting toward the wealthy or connected few, who might pay \$10,000 or more to hunt public lands without having to wait for an opportunity through the public lottery drawing. The hunting tradition will not survive if public land opportunity is sold out to the highest bidder. Please take this moment to take action on behalf of average people living in our diverse and wonderful state and enable our communities to pass on the hunting tradition.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Martin Heinrich', with a stylized, cursive script.

MARTIN HEINRICH  
United States Senator

cc: Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham  
New Mexico State Game Commission  
Senate Majority Leader Peter Wirth  
Senate Minority Leader Greg Baca  
Senate Conservation Committee Chair Liz Stefanics  
Senate Conservation Committee Vice Chair Antoinette Sedillo Lopez  
House Speaker Brian Egolf  
House Minority Leader James Townsend  
Matthew McQueen, Chair, House Energy, Environment & Natural Resources  
Angelica Rubio, Vice-Chair House Energy, Environment & Natural Resources