

An examination of preference and bonus point systems for the Kentucky elk quota hunt

Demand greatly exceeds supply for Kentucky elk permits. In fact, KDFWR received over 70,000 applications for 910 elk permits during the 2015 elk permit quota drawing. Due to the difficult odds of drawing a permit, some applicants have occasionally expressed interest in instituting a loyalty point system. There are two broad categories of loyalty systems used by wildlife agencies: preference point systems and bonus point systems.

Preference point systems

Preference point systems reward application loyalty by allocating most or all permits to the applicants who have unsuccessfully applied for the greatest length of time. Preference point systems can be likened to a ladder: people with the greatest number of applications occupy the top rung of the ladder, and new applicants occupy the lowest rung. However, since most permits go to the top rungs of the ladder, this system places all future applicants at a severe disadvantage.

This can be demonstrated using the application numbers from the 2015 elk hunting season application. For example, the 2015 bull firearm quota hunt attracted 18,500 resident applications for 150 available bull firearm permits. Since nonresident hunters can receive up to 10% of available elk permits, there were in fact 135 permits available to Kentucky applicants. Given these numbers from the most recent elk drawing, there were 137 Kentucky applicants for each available bull firearm permit. Put another way, if KDFWR instituted a preference point system from the 2015 applicant pool, it would take 137 years to provide a bull firearm permit to every Kentucky applicant in the 2015 cohort. Obviously, this is an impossible task. However, hunters entering in later cohorts would be faced with an even less palatable option: they would be forced to apply each year with no hope of acquiring a permit until significant numbers of previous cohorts had received a permit or quit applying. New applicants may have to spend 30-40 years “climbing the ladder” before even becoming eligible to draw a permit.

The large demand for relatively few elk permits means that a preference point system is not a good fit for the Kentucky elk drawing. It is likely that much of the interest in preference point systems arises from Kentucky hunter’s familiarity with KDFWR’s preference point-driven deer quota hunts. Preference points within the deer quota hunt system essentially guarantees that an applicant will receive the permit of their choice within a few years of applying due to the much lower demand

for deer quota hunt permits. For example, in 2014 the deer quota hunt system received 7,819 applications for 4,073 permits, meaning that there were 1.9 applicants for every available deer quota permit. While a preference point system does well in providing opportunity when there are 1.9 applicants for each permit (as in the deer quota hunt drawing), the same system would perform very poorly when there are 193 applicants for each permit (as in the bull firearm elk drawing).

Bonus point systems

Bonus point systems operate by providing each unlucky applicant with a point for each year that they unsuccessfully apply for a permit; in subsequent years, the applicant receives an additional entry in the drawing for each bonus point they have accrued. This system is analogous to placing names in a hat. For each bonus point an applicant receives, their name goes into the hat one more time. Since it is a random drawing, even first time applicants can be chosen without any bonus points. However, the large number of applications for relatively few elk permits means that the same challenge noted for the preference point system – the people on the ground floor receive a very small benefit, but all later applicants are placed at a distinct disadvantage – is also observed with the bonus point system. This occurs because the “names in a hat” accumulate faster than they are drawn down. This phenomenon is known as point creep.

Some states have also introduced modified bonus point systems, in which bonus points are not given every year, but at defined intervals. One suggestion has been that applicants receive one bonus point after applying for five consecutive years, another bonus point at eight years, and another bonus point after applying for ten consecutive years. This modified bonus point system does not harm future applicants as much as a pure bonus point system, but it still places future applicants at a severe disadvantage while providing very little benefit for the current applicants.

This becomes more clear when we actually use the application numbers from the 2015 elk drawing as an example:

	Pure bonus point system		Modified bonus point system	
	Current applicants	New applicants	Current applicants	New applicants
Odds for a KY resident to draw a bull firearm permit in the first year of a bonus point system	1:136	n/a	1:136	n/a
Odds for a KY resident to draw a bull firearm permit after 10 years of a bonus point system	1:125	1:1,387	1:128	1:515

While this table demonstrates the detrimental effect that bonus point systems could have on future applicants, the true situation is likely worse than suggested, since this example assumed that no new applicants would join the pool between the first and tenth years, and that folks who successfully drew a permit would never re-enter the elk drawing. If either of these situations occurred, it would further decrease the odds for future applicants to draw a bull firearm permit.

Conclusion

KDFWR currently uses a straight drawing system to award elk permits. This random drawing process does not reward loyalty, but it also does not handicap future hunters. Due to the large demand for a relatively small number of elk permits, however, institution of any points system would provide insignificant benefits to early adopters but would severely handicap future applicants. It is important to remember that any system designed to provide additional opportunity to one category of applicants will have to steal opportunity from another class of applicants. In this way, the Kentucky elk drawing can be compared to a pie. If return applicants get a bigger slice of the pie, new applicants will necessarily receive a smaller slice of pie. Due to point creep, however, current elk applicants would get a bit larger piece of the pie, while future applicants would only get crumbs. It is our belief that adoption of any point system would lead to severe public discontent within 2-4 years when the inherent flaws of the system became apparent.

This fear of public discontent has precedent. A Google search of “big game point creep” uncovers a plethora of disgruntled sportsmen and sportswomen who assert that their public servants should be held accountable for creating a system that discriminates against new and future applicants. Given the outsized negative impact that a points system would have on the Kentucky elk drawing, we feel that this criticism would likely arise relatively soon after such a system was implemented. A prominent example of where this situation is currently occurring can be found in Colorado.

Colorado has the largest elk herd in the United States, but demand for permits in some management units still far outpaces the supply. Colorado implemented a point system to reward application loyalty, but this decision resulted in severe point creep. In Game Management Unit 201, for instance, successful applicants needed 16 points to draw a firearm bull permit in 2003, but by 2014 successful applicants needed 24 points to secure a permit. The public outcry regarding point creep recently became so rancorous that Colorado Parks and Wildlife instituted a “hybrid drawing” in which a certain number of permits were allocated for a completely random drawing outside of the point system. To provide this hybrid drawing opportunity, however, Colorado Parks and Wildlife had to decrease the number of permits available to applicants with preference points, thus making it even more difficult for hunters within the point system to draw a permit. This, of course, led to widespread protest from applicants who had multiple years vested within the points system. The final result was a situation that provided very little hunter satisfaction while destroying grassroots support for all involved officials.