

MONTANA STATEWIDE ELK MANAGEMENT PLAN

2004

Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks

Wildlife Division

1420 East Sixth Avenue
Helena, Montana 59620

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AB –Antlered Bull
AHM – Adaptive Harvest Management
ATV – All-Terrain Vehicle
BAB – branch-antlered bull
BLM – Bureau of Land Management
BM – Block Management
BTB – Brow-Tined Bull
CV – coefficient of variation
CWD – Chronic Wasting Disease
DNRC—Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation
EMU – Elk Management Unit
ES – Either Sex
FWP – Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
FY – Fiscal year
GYA – Greater Yellowstone Area
GYIBC – Greater Yellowstone Interagency Brucellosis Committee
HB – House Bill
HD – Hunting District
LE – Limited Entry
MBO – Montana Board of Outfitters
MCA – Montana Codes Annotated
MRB – Missouri River Breaks
MOGA – Montana Outfitters and Guides Association
NPS – National Park Service
ORV – Off-Road Vehicle
PL/PW – Private Land/Public Wildlife
SD – Standard deviation
USFS – United States Forest Service
USFWS – United States Fish and Wildlife Service
WMA – Wildlife Management Area
YNP – Yellowstone National Park

INTRODUCTION

Managing Montana's elk populations at levels compatible with other land uses and meeting the current and future demand for hunting and other recreation has become increasingly complex, demanding increased comprehensive planning. FWP has operated under some form of elk plan since 1978. In 1992, Montana adopted a new, comprehensive elk plan. The process for formulating this plan was initiated in 1988 and differed from previous plans in 3 important ways: 1.) 35 elk management units (EMUs) were established based on similar ecological characteristics and each generally encompassed the yearlong range of a major elk population, 2.) statewide and EMU elk population objectives were established, and 3.) there was much greater public involvement in the planning process than for previous plans. The 1992 elk plan included statewide goals, objectives, management strategies and management guidelines. Under this broad "umbrella", each of the 35 EMU plans had management objectives and strategies specific to local habitat, elk population and landownership characteristics.

FWP intended the plan to provide guidance to wildlife and land managers for planning and policy decisions. It was also intended to help FWP personnel prioritize field activities, manage time and budgets, make elk management recommendations and coordinate management with other state and federal agencies and private landowners. The plan was to remain current through annual updating.

After 10 years and increasing problems in some phases of elk management, a need for substantial revision of the 1992 elk plan became apparent. For example, despite increases in numbers of antlerless elk permits issued and somewhat more liberal hunting seasons, 21 (or nearly 60%) of Montana's 35 EMUs exceeded objectives for numbers of elk counted in 2002. Game damage complaints were increasing in some areas that frustrated private landowners. Conversely, number of elk counted in some areas, primarily in northwestern Montana, were below objectives.

After internal scoping for important issues relative to elk management in Montana, on 19 November 2002, FWP issued a call to the public to inform us of elk management issues important to them. In addition to issues raised internally, elk management issues and concerns raised by the public are important to successfully address elk management challenges and determine if new issues have surfaced. FWP announced that they would take public comment through 30 December. Although any issues relative to elk management were solicited, to stimulate comments, FWP listed examples of issues that arose through internal scoping. Examples of these issues were:

- Some federal lands have different elk population and hunter access objectives than Montana's elk plan.

- Lack of hunting pressure on private lands compared to adjacent public lands is creating “refuges” and growing elk populations that, in turn, create damage problems for adjacent landowners who allow hunting.
- It is unfair for some hunters to have sole access to hunt bull elk on private lands when the general public is provided access only to hunt antlerless elk on the same lands.
- Mild weather conditions during the fall can hinder adequate harvest of elk during the general hunting season, even on public lands.
- The lack of good forage conditions on public lands in some areas causes elk to use private lands more frequently during winter and spring.
- FWP’s road management policies that provide security for bull elk in conjunction with state and federal road management programs may be resulting in a reduction in antlerless elk harvest.

Within the overall revision, FWP and the FWP Commission decided to address the harvest management aspect of the overall elk management program by incorporating Adaptive Harvest Management (AHM) concepts into the hunting regulation setting process. This part of the elk plan will be similar to the AHM plan for mule deer (Wildlife Division, FWP, 2001). There are 4 major components in the AHM system: population objectives, a monitoring program, hunting regulation alternatives and modeling. The first and foremost is establishment of population objectives. These objectives must be measurable via a strong monitoring program, the second component. The third element is to select hunting regulation alternatives that can be implemented when the monitoring program detects significant changes in population status (Wildlife Division, FWP, 2001). The fourth element, modeling the dynamics of elk populations to predict future changes in numbers will not be implemented at this time due to budget, personnel and time constraints. AHM is a dynamic, learning as you go process. In that vein, there will be need to adjust population objectives, monitoring parameters and guidelines, and hunting regulation packages as results of the initial plan are determined through monitoring. Therefore, the public should realize that “the elk plan” is not set in stone, but will evolve as learning takes place through the AHM process. Further, although the elk plan will serve as a source of information and guidance to the FWP Commission, it does not preempt Commission authority to formulate annual rules, set hunting seasons and regulations or implement emergency actions in response to unexpected events or circumstances.

INITIAL PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

FWP received 408 responses from the public to the call for scoping for issues. Respondents were from 94 different Montana towns and 15 other states. Fourteen of the total responses were from groups/agencies. Additionally, to identify issues important to the public we used internal scoping, issues raised by the Private Land/Public Wildlife Advisory Council Report and Recommendations, the Legislative Audit Divisions performance audit of the Big Game Inventory and Survey Process, and issues underlying more than 20 bills introduced into the 58th Montana Legislature that were related to elk management.

Issues raised by the public fell into 8 broad categories:

- Elk population numbers
- Access to lands for elk hunting
- Hunting seasons/Strategies
- Equity of opportunity
- Economic issues
- Biological/Ecological issues (including wolves and predation)
- Habitat issues
- Information/Data issues

There were a variety of sub-issues and some of these related to several broad categories. These sub-issues are listed below in no particular order and include items for which FWP has no legal authority.

- o How is “too many elk” defined and what is the basis for setting numerical objectives for elk populations?
- o Hunter access to elk and availability of elk for harvest.
- o Wolf predation on elk/effects of other predators on elk.
- o Regulating/changing the hunter outfitting industry.
- o Fee hunting/leased hunting on private lands and purchases of “hunting ranches”.
- o Effects of high elk numbers on elk habitat, the health of elk populations, agricultural landowners livelihoods and private land habitat.
- o Demographics of the hunter population – the “aging hunter syndrome” and motorized game retrieval opportunities.
- o Effectiveness of Block Management and other hunter access programs.
- o The effects/potential effects of various hunting season types/strategies.
- o Trophy hunting/bigger/older bulls.
- o The effects of weather on harvest success.
- o Competition for elk, especially bull elk, among various hunter weapon user groups, residency status and economic status category.
- o Costs of elk damage to private and public lands.
- o Costs of improved surveys of elk numbers, harvest and habitat monitoring.
- o Chronic Wasting Disease/Brucellosis.
- o Management of State Wildlife Management Areas.
- o Accuracy and reliability of estimates of elk numbers and harvest.
- o Providing more and more timely information to the public via the FWP website and by other methods.
- o Property/real estate tax law changes for private lands with fee/leased hunting or “hunting ranches”.
- o Regulation of ATVs and motorized access.
- o Land management (including access) by Federal agencies, Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) and private landowners.