



Elk Management Plan Initial Guidance Citizens Group

Background

The Elk Management Plan that currently guides elk management for Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (FWP) was adopted in 2005. Since adoption, elk population changes, detection of chronic wasting disease in free-ranging populations, increased prevalence and distribution of brucellosis in elk, increased information on elk migrations, changes in predator populations, changes in conflicts with humans, and several other considerations demand development of an updated plan. In April 2020, the Montana Fish and Wildlife Commission endorsed FWP beginning the process to develop a new Elk Management Plan. The first step was to assemble a citizens group to provide initial guidance to identify relevant issues and identify durable principles to be used in the plan development. The citizens group was to be diverse and independent yet represent multiple stakeholder perspectives.

Group Charter

The Elk Management Plan Initial Guidance Citizens Group will provide initial guidance for the revision of the Elk Management Plan drafted in 2005. Specifically, the group is tasked with identifying and articulating issues with current elk management and defining durable and overarching principles regarding the future of elk management in Montana.

Group Member Selection

FWP solicited applications for the Elk Management Plan Initial Guidance Citizens Group over a 30-day period and received 59 applications. FWP deliberated extensively before recommending a subset that could provide a diversity of perspectives including that of landowners, hunters, outfitters and guides, backcountry users, wildlife enthusiasts, and interested members of the public. Membership was selected from various regions across Montana with differing elk management challenges. Members were chosen to serve based on demonstrated ability to respectfully express an important perspective, to respectfully listen to and consider other perspectives, and to think independently. Of the 59 applicants, FWP Director Martha Williams selected the following 14 individuals to serve on the citizens group:

Karie Decker, Missoula
Ed Fryer, Melstone
Ren Gardner, Miles City
Casey Hackathorn, Missoula
Everett Headley, Stevensville
Druska Kinkie, Pray
Kevin Koss, Malta
Joel LaLiberty, Belgrade
Ali Morgan, Choteau

Patrick Roth, Rexburg
Justin Schaaf, Fort Peck
Mark Schwomeyer, Lewiston
Marcus Strange, Helena
Dan Vermillion, Livingston

Meetings

The group met using a virtual platform for five days (November 19, December 2, 3, 16, and 17). Meetings were facilitated by Mike Mitchell and Sarah Sells from the University of Montana. Members participated virtually during each day's 7-8 hours of discussion then worked independently after hours to develop and review products. Meetings were live streamed to the FWP webpage, and recordings were available on the FWP YouTube channel after the meetings. Based on the number of YouTube views, meetings were viewed by 100–300 people. Real-time public comment opportunities were offered during two meetings. FWP received three public comments during these opportunities.

The entire first meeting and the beginning of the second meeting were devoted to providing information regarding elk and elk management. Informational presentations included; Social Science Related to Elk in Montana (presented by Mike Lewis; FWP), Elk Harvest Surveys and Trends (presented by Kevin Podruzny; FWP), Elk Population Surveys and Trends (presented by Dave Messmer; FWP), Elk Competition with Mule Deer and Other Ungulates (presented by Chad Bishop; University of Montana), Brucellosis in Elk; Livestock Impacts (presented by Eric Liska; Montana Dept. of Livestock), Elk Habitat, Access and Distribution (presented by Kelly Proffitt; FWP), Carnivore Impacts on Elk and Integrated Carnivore-Elk Management (presented by Justin Gude; FWP), Elk Management in Idaho (presented by Rick Ward: Idaho Fish and Game), Elk Management in Wyoming (presented by Doug Brimeyer; Wyoming Game and Fish), Current Laws and Policies Influencing Elk Management in Montana (presented by Lindsey Parsons; FWP).

In subsequent meetings, the group used a structured, facilitated process to develop an Issue Statement *and* Guiding Principles regarding elk management.

FWP Staff Involved in Meetings

Staff that provided technical advice to the group included; Justin Gude, Lindsey Parsons, Ken McDonald, and Brian Wakeling. Occasionally, Director Martha Williams and Chief of Staff Quentin Kujala attended meetings. Administrative assistants that helped with taking public comment and recording breakout sessions included; Kammi McClain and Emily Moran. Technology support was provided by Pat Lucchetti and Missy Erving.

Structured Process

The structured process began by identifying and defining problems with current elk management. Specifically, the group was asked to consider what about these issues makes it difficult to manage elk. The group spent most of their time incorporating the identified issues into an Issue Statement (see **Products: Issue Statement**).

Next, the group developed Guiding Principles. Each Guiding Principle states how a single problem in the Issue Statement can be successfully addressed or resolved. In other words, each Guiding Principle states what success would look like if the issue was resolved perfectly. The group developed 19 Guiding Principles to address the six categories of issues from the Issue Statement (see **Products: Guiding Principles**). Additionally, the group identified several overarching principles categorized as Strategic Principles. These principles do not refer to any individual elk management issue, but rather refer to “things that FWP should do, no matter what.” These overarching Strategic Principles can be found at the end of the Guiding Principles document.

Products: Issue Statement

Elk are an iconic species that are part of Montana’s cultural history which are managed by the FWP as a Public Trust for the benefit of all Montanans. FWP is accountable to all Montanans for responsibly managing sustainable elk populations and maintaining Montana’s hunting heritage.

The Montana Elk Management Plan has not been updated since 2005. Given the changes that have occurred in Montana since then, updating the plan is necessary to provide a framework for FWP to effectively manage elk populations on a changing landscape. Management challenges are different throughout the state and the plan needs to provide the flexibility for wildlife managers to address site specific challenges.

To succeed in developing and implementing the Montana Elk Management Plan, FWP must collaborate with the diverse stakeholders of elk management in Montana. There are many commonalities among stakeholders regarding:

- The value of elk somewhere on the landscape
- The need to work across landownerships (federal, state, tribal, and private)
- The recognition that elk are a natural resource held in public trust
- The need to update the management plan regularly to adapt to changing conditions on the landscape
- The emotions elk can incite
- The concerns about disease, including CWD, bovine TB, and brucellosis

There are conflicts among stakeholders regarding management prescriptions to sustainably manage elk on Montana’s landscape, including:

1. Disagreement about population objectives and how they are set and implemented
2. Conflict concentrations, distributions, and behavior of elk, such as:
 - a) Separation from livestock during the critical abortive time period
 - b) Poor distribution of elk on public lands
 - c) Elk impact on agricultural production
 - d) Inaccessible elk to hunters (elk on private land without public access, and on landlocked public lands)
 - e) Role commercial use potentially plays in elk distribution
 - f) Differing landowner interests regarding distributions and concentrations of elk
 - g) Disagreement about how predators are managed with respect to elk populations

3. Implementing measures to mitigate disease risk between wildlife, livestock, and people, including:
 - a) CWD and its impact on the health of hunters and wildlife herds
 - b) Brucellosis and its impact on the health of people, livestock, and wildlife herds
 - c) Others, including bovine TB, elk hoof rot, and anthrax
4. Season length and structure (tradeoffs between hunting opportunity and quality):
 - a) Widespread opportunities to hunt
 - b) Quality hunts (trophy bulls, number of encounters, lack of crowding, etc.)
 - c) Use of shoulder seasons and resulting stress on elk from long hunting seasons
 - d) Impacts of changing technology available to hunters
5. Recognizing landowners for providing elk habitat, such as:
 - a) The potential for private sale of landowner tags
 - b) The potential for direct compensation
6. Hunter behaviors (good or bad) have a significant impact on the effectiveness of FWP elk management on the landscape.

Stakeholders are eager to work with MFWP on addressing these challenges.

Products: Guiding Principles

Each Guiding Principle states how a single problem in the Issue Statement can be successfully addressed or resolved. In other words, each Guiding Principle states what success would look like if the issue was resolved perfectly. Guiding Principles are structured with the issue listed, followed by successful resolutions.

Guiding principles:

- #1: Disagreement about population objectives and how they are set and implemented
 - Maximize public input in setting elk objectives
 - Maximize local grassroot input
- #2: Conflicts in concentrations, distributions, and behavior of elk
 - Maintain hunting as a primary tool for elk population management
 - Maximize partnerships between private landowners, land management agencies, and FWP
 - Maximize hunter access to elk
 - Maximize satisfaction with elk distribution in Montana for:
 - Hunters
 - Landowners
 - Wildlife enthusiasts
 - Outfitters
 - Agricultural producers
 - Minimize prevalence and spread of CWD in Montana
- # 3: Impact on agriculture
 - Minimize impacts on agricultural production, private rangeland, and infrastructure
 - Minimize transmission of brucellosis to livestock
- #4: Season Length and Structure (tradeoffs between hunting opportunity and quality)

- Maintain over-the-counter opportunity to hunt elk
- Minimize impacts of crowding on hunter experience
- Maintain limited-draw permit areas for hunting mature bulls
- Maximize the use of the general rifle season as a primary management tool, reducing the need for additional hunts
- Maintain the availability of a variety of hunting tools for addressing elk conflicts

#5: Recognizing landowners for providing elk habitat

- Incentivize collaboration among stakeholders
- Maximize landowner-hunter cooperation with elements of the Elk Management Plan
- Maximize opportunity for FWP to improve hunter-landowner relations

#6: Hunter behaviors (good or bad) have a significant impact on the effectiveness of MFWP elk management on the landscape

- Maximize internal and external programs that promote ethical hunter behaviors
- Maintain the fair chase principles in the management of hunting and regulation of hunting technology

Strategic principles: not in reference to any individual elk management issue, but rather to “things that FWP should do, no matter what.”

- Maximize collaborative opportunities for stakeholders to be involved in the decision-making process both in transparently formulating and implementing the Elk Management Plan
- Maximize the integration of the best available peer-reviewed scientific data into the elk management decision-making processes
- Maximize coordination between predator and elk management plans
- Maintain public trust management of elk
- Maintain FWP’s primary role in the management of elk
- Ensure regular review and update of management and population objectives