

Private Land Management Decisions and Elk

NOTE: This narrative by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) was requested by the Montana Department of Livestock (DoL). Targeting private land owners, managers, and livestock/agricultural producers wanting to limit or reduce elk-related impacts on private lands, it identifies elk-related considerations in land management decisions. While DoL focus is minimizing brucellosis transmission risk from elk to cattle, other elk-related considerations are also addressed here.

Introduction

Elk populations have grown from the early 1900s with over 150,000 elk now in Montana. This confirms the reproductive and colonizing potential of elk that are knowingly or perhaps unknowingly managed for population growth. The potential for elk damage to private property and disease transmission from elk to livestock can grow as elk numbers or densities increase. Impacts to vegetation, habitats, and other species may also occur. Elk are highly mobile and can move miles across properties day or night with ease. These circumstances are important to consider in private land management decisions.

Elk-related Considerations for Private Land Owners, Managers, and Livestock/Ag Producers

The following suggestions are offered to private land owners, managers, and livestock/ag producers wanting to reduce elk impacts, prevent establishment of resident elk, manage elk numbers and distribution to limit game damage, minimize disease transmission risk, and improve neighbor relations.

- Human presence is one of the most effective tools to disperse elk. Elk quickly recognize and use advantageous situations including forage items and quiet areas where they are rarely disturbed. Human presence sufficient to disturb elk can override these attractants.
- Interrupt unwanted elk presence or behavior on private land early and often. Don't wait. Elk adapt quickly and their new behavior can be easier to disrupt than established behavior.
- Utilize hunting to disperse elk or to harvest enough elk to cap or reduce population growth. Unless harvest is sufficient to limit population growth, elk that are not dispersed may quickly increase beyond tolerance for their impacts. Elk tolerated during the hunting season may cause unwanted impacts at other times of the year for you and your neighbors.
- Don't give up. Elk can be persistent. If elk are not consistently moved off your property you may not be disturbing them enough. Disrupting established elk presence may take as long as or longer than it took to establish. Different levels of disturbance ranging from noise makers to ground-based human presence to FWP-authorized harvest may be necessary to disperse elk.
- Consider the types of crops planted. Many different crops are attractive to elk. Be diligent and prepared to immediately disperse elk if they start using the crop. This may help prevent the situation from developing into a game damage problem requiring more aggressive management.
- Feel free to contact local FWP staff about elk-dispersal options or possible assistance.