

We have to Manage Elk Where They Are Not

Intent: Restore historic elk numbers in northwest Montana to alleviate the excessive elk hunting pressure that is experienced in the rest of the state. This proposal is also intended to strategically redistribute hunters, improve quality access to harvest and encourage better data collection by the department.

Justification: It's been stated many times by FWP that we have to "manage elk where they're at" but that's only half the story. We also need to manage elk where they're not. There are vast areas in northwest Montana where there used to have prolific elk and big game populations that are now a fraction of what they once were. The decline in elk populations have not only diminished the quality of the hunting experience in the northwest but, lack of elk has forced the majority of elk hunters from the northwest to pursue elk in other parts of the state, leading to the overcrowding and excessive pressure that push elk off of public ground and onto private property resulting in landowner complaints.

Description:

- The department must conduct current elk counts in Region 1. The Montana 2021 Elk Counts available on the FWP website for Region 1 do not contain any elk counts from 2021. The numbers reported are at least from 2019 and in two districts 100 & 124 the department is reporting numbers from 2009 and 2008 respectively.
- Elk Objectives for the northwest must be revisited particularly for Region 1. As documented above, the four units that make up the Bob Marshall Elk Management Unit and surrounding area was commonly home to 4,000 - 6,000 elk. The elk objective for all 17 districts in Region 1 is 2,388-3,712 or approximately half of the past population for these four districts. Objectives in districts where there is no risk of crop depredation should be set within the range of historic elk populations and based off range capacity, not a 5 year average of past game counts.
- Habitat enhancement projects must become a priority of the department to restore elk populations below objective.
- The Department and FWP Commission must continue to take their predation issue seriously.
- A large sweeping look at predation impacts needs to be analyzed in the northwest. The department needs to monitor the ratio between predators and ungulates on the landscape. If you look at wolves and mountain lions alone, there is much documentation stating they on average consume one deer or elk per week. Fish and Wildlife needs to reassess the quotas on predator populations they are authorized to manage.
- Hunting of wolves year-round should be considered for areas where the predator to ungulate ratios are out of balance or elk are below objective.
- The USFS should be petitioned by FWP to open roads to motorized travel by trappers on road segments that were closed during the winter to protect deer and elk winter range (Note: these road closures were originally established under the direction of FWP to protect winter range, but now it is having the opposite effect).
- Trappers need to be able to sign roads (in zones that have minimal to no winter recreation) that they are trapping on and if they do so the 150' setback on trap placement from the edge of road needs to be removed.
- Aerial harvest of wolves needs to be considered as a legal method of take in elk areas under objective.
- The Department should research and explore if black bear hunting with hounds can be expanded particularly in northwest Montana.
- Extend black bear season to June 15th in Region 1 and 2
- FWP needs to devote additional resources to create a clear roadmap towards ensuring wolves are not delisted and grizzlies can be delisted
- FWP should consider opening up data collection to a credible third-party if they are not collecting the data in that area

People/Organizations:

- Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (FWP)
- Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks Commission
- U.S. Forest Service (USFS)
- Hunters
- Montana Sportsman Organizations

Timeline:

ASAP

FWP Authority to Take Action:

Yes, it is within FWP's authority to take steps towards sound elk management to restore areas under objective.

Feasibility of Implementation:

What's in this proposal is nothing new, active forestry and predator management has been implemented for years.

Limitations/Unintended Consequences:

This proposal has many recommendations centered around temporarily increasing the take of predators to restore balance. These recommendations will be unpopular with the non-consumptive public.