



Big Hole Watershed Committee
Wildlife Working Group Minutes
Tuesday, January 13, 2009 – 6:00 pm
Beaverhead County 4-H Building

In Attendance: Jeff Klein, John Scully, J. Darrell Johnson, Steve Jennings, Katie Benzel, Rusty Talbot, Russ Riebe, Eric Wyatt, Darren Olsen, Craig Fager, Hans Humbert, Perce Loden, Brad Borst, Corky Logan, Kurt Alt, Vanna Boccadori, Harold Peterson, Mark Kambich, Jim Hagenbarth, George Trischman, Jami Murdoch

Purpose of the Wildlife Committee Meeting: Give interested community members an opportunity to reflect on decisions from the previous meeting. The group agreed there is interest in moving forward. While wolves are a species of concern, the group decided to focus on elk management.

Madison Valley Elk Management: Presented by John Scully, Coordinator and Jeff Klein, Manager, Jumping Horse Ranch.

John Scully and Jeff Klein shared the process the Madison Valley Elk Management Group went through to create a community organization, beginning with meetings of interested parties using collaborative processes. Those participants who gathered included local hunters, FWP, landowners, and eventually, a professional mediator. A great deal of time was spent gathering accurate information on elk numbers and developing plans that dealt with agency cooperation, access to private land, herd movement and management and predator impact on herd movement. The interest based group developed a shared, unified goal and built a plan for hunter access and herd management. Over time relationships have developed, shifted, and improved, resulting in more hunter days, successful hunts, and additional beneficial elk distribution. Brucellosis infection of the elk herd is an upcoming management issue. (refer to MADISON VALLEY ELK ISSUES WORKING GROUP RECOMMENDATIONS – attached)

Initial report on Blood Sample of Kit: Craig Fager, Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Preliminary results from test kits given out this hunting season were –1000 kits out of 8000 were received, 631 were suitable for testing. At the time of this meeting, of the 631 useable kits, 333 samples have been completed with 15 reactors which will be sent on to Texas for further testing. FW&P will contact private landowners regarding the point-of-origin.

Elk Dispersion Study: Kurt Alt, Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Kurt Alt, Regional Wildlife Manager with FWP, presented the Madison Valley Elk Dispersion Study that collared and GPS tracked elk for 1 year in the Madison Valley with complimentary studies being completed for Yellowstone National Park and the Paradise Valley. Comparing data from the 70's & 80's where elk had spread out more, the study presented this evening used more sophisticated technology and viewers are able to receive location data much more accurately. The study shows elk coming into winter range much earlier than historical data supports, elk interaction on the Madison River benches, the movement of Madison Valley elk into YNP during the summer, the change in grazing habits/movement from the 70's & 80's and that the wolves appear to move with the elk herds. In 05-06 forty-three cow elk and one alpha wolf were collared by helio-darting. Two of the collared cow elk tested positive for brucellosis and were destroyed.

Purpose of the meeting: To hear from similar groups regarding community based wildlife management efforts, discuss the nuts and bolts of their programs, analyze this model for the BHWC Wildlife Group consideration and learn more about elk and wolf interactions in the Madison/Yellowstone Area. A group decision was made to meet only when necessary.

Wildlife Working Group Action Plan: Jim Hagenbarth

- Consider the available information and determine how we would we like to proceed.
- What would we like to accomplish?
- Focus primarily on elk management and habitat.
- Invite interested, active hunters and sportsman organizations to participate.
- Ask each group you represent what they are interested in and how they want to move forward.

Thank you for your participation.

Next Meeting: March 3, 2009, 6:00 p.m. – 9:00 p.m. Dillon, MT. Meeting place will be identified in the next meetings agenda.

For more information please contact Jim Hagenbarth at hagenbarthj@msn.com or 406 490-2121.

Please refer to next page for attachments

Attachment A

MADISON VALLEY ELK ISSUES WORKING GROUP

Recommendations Respectfully Submitted to the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks Commission

December, 2008

Introduction

The Madison Valley Elk Issues Working Group met 5 times – June through November of 2008 – to address and problem solve around issues related to elk management and elk numbers in the area. Approximately 35 people attended each meeting representing landowners and landowner managers; sportsmen and women; a conservation organization; the US Forest Service (USFS); and the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) including one Commissioner. The Group agreed to work in a collaborative, interest-based process within self-defined ground rules and process agreements.

Recommendations and Agreements

The following consensus recommendations to the Commission were developed in response to the issue statement and within the Collaborative Framework (see Attachment A) crafted and agreed upon by the Working Group.

1. Recognizing that we are currently over the Elk Management Plan objective for the Madison elk herds in Hunting Districts 360 and 362, strive for a reduced elk population distributed across the Valley through the following strategies:
 - Target a harvest of 1500 cow/calf elk per year for each of the next two years (2009/2010 and 2010/2011 if possible within the Commission's biennial process) with General Season landowner-sportsmen efforts and Early and Late Management Season cow only hunts.
 - Beginning in 2009, start Seasons August 15 and continue to February 15 with:
 - Antlerless harvest focus utilizing elk "B" tag (A9/B12)
 - September, October, November – Emphasis on distributing animals across Hunting Districts 360 and 362.
 - December through February – Emphasis on distributing animals across the flats.
 - Design the 2009/2010 and 2010/2011 Season(s) to include:
 - An Early Management Season
 - A General Season (with possible season extension based on harvest numbers)
 - A Late Management Season
 - Conduct the remainder of the 2008/2009 season(s) as follows:
 - An extended General Season for this area (supported by the Working Group and Region 3 FWP personnel on the Working Group) if the Commission enacts a General Season extension.
 - A Late Management season based on harvest numbers and demonstrated commitment by landowners to increase harvest and distribution through access during the General season.
2. Landowners within Hunting Districts 360 and 362 commit to participate during the 2008/2009 Season(s) – actively engaging in practices that will attempt to distribute and harvest elk in accordance with the intent of these agreements.
 - Using an approach that includes the entire area rather than individual properties, private landowners will facilitate an amount of public access intended to achieve the 1500 harvest objective for the 2008/2009 General season with the goals of:
 - Implementation of a 2008/2009 Management season;
 - Adoption of these agreements for 2009/2010 and 2010/2011;
 - Ability to evaluate if documented hunter numbers on private land during the General Season moves the situation toward harvest/distribution goals.

- Landowners commit to a self-managing approach to encourage accomplishment of the intent of these agreements.

3. In order to facilitate ongoing management efforts and aid in accomplishing annual harvest objectives and agreements:

- Local landowners agree to contract/pay for a Hunt Coordinator and “office” during the 2008-2009 and 2009/2010 Seasons to:
 - Manage hunter access over the remaining Seasons and across Hunting Districts 360 and 362. All hunters desiring access to private land in the Valley would go through the Hunt Coordinator and he/she would distribute hunters according to where access is permitted at particular times and where elk are present with the initial intent of at least 30 hunters per day across all Seasons. Block Management cooperators numbers will be honored.
 - Communicate with landowners for daily information about access and animal distribution and with FWP about improving the process.
- Local landowners will publish notice of contacts and would ask that FWP publish in all pertinent materials as well.
- Local landowners will print and provide maps that:
 - Identify hunter areas, contact points, and the contact person(s);
 - Display the FWP logo;
 - Explain the “rules of engagement” on individual properties;
 - State ethical hunting rules;
 - Explain the Brucellosis kit process for individual properties.
- Fully implement across all Seasons in 2009/2010. Local landowners and FWP will evaluate the 2008/2009 and 2009/2010 experiences with a Hunt Coordinator and determine the best approach for future years.

4. With the intent of achieving liberal harvest numbers, consider the following regarding tags and regulations:

- Since the season setting/regulation decision-making process for 2008/2009 has already occurred with the Commission, a Management Season roster (previously referred to as Game Damage season) should be used for draw during 2008/2009 Management Season.
- Antlerless tags should be available over the counter for the 2009/2010 General Season:
 - Brow Tined Bull/antlerless plus over-the-counter A9/B12 valid in both Hunting District 360 and 362

5. Continue the Madison Valley Elk Issues Working Group with meetings after the Early Management Season, after the General Season, and after the Late Management Season to:

- Determine the success of hunter access and distribution based on the whole area rather than individual landowners;
- Evaluate the success of the Hunter Coordinator approach and determine the best option for the future.
- Evaluate herd reduction outcomes after the Seasons.
- Evaluate herd distribution between February 15 and June 15.
- Evaluate general progress after the Seasons and recommend adaptive strategies.
- Evaluate the level of safe and ethical hunting displayed and if useful, continue to explore the possibility of a required Hunter ethics course.
- Recommend adaptive strategies where useful.
- The current expressed Hunting Districts 360 and 362 landowner tolerance is 2500 elk in the Madison Valley. Recognizing this tolerance level, the Working Group commits to a collaborative process to establish a new elk population objective that considers tolerance, distribution, science and aspects of range conservation and management. By November 2010, the Working Group will arrive at a new population objective to recommend to the FWP Commission.

6. Use all game damage tools with kill permits used as a last resort.

7. Work to increase the tag/permit price to cover additional management costs and additional damage funds.

Attachment B

Collaborative Framework

The Working Group spent its early meetings creating the following collaborative framework that clarified its task; recognized the legitimacy of the involved interests; and established principles that helped define the space within which consensus recommendations came about.

Issue Statement

It is the intent of the Madison Valley Elk Issues Working Group to send the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks Commission a consensus recommendation that manages elk numbers and distribution to maintain and where appropriate, improve the health of the range, of the economy, of livestock and of wildlife – with recognition and respect for both private property rights and hunting opportunities.

Interests

It is in the interest of conservation organizations to:

- Have the Madison Valley continue to support sustainable wildlife populations including elk moving across the landscape.
- Find the balance between human needs and wildlife needs.

It is in the interest of landowners to:

- Reduce elk numbers because economic viability is being increasingly threatened including exposure to Brucellosis.
- Be able to manage our grazers by timing and time for the economic benefit of our private forage.
- Maintain healthy landscapes because everything depends on health.
- Preserve privacy and legal invulnerability.
- Preserve private property rights so property values remain in tact.
- Be able to turn elk into an asset rather than a liability or cost.
- Be part of the local community.

It is in the interest of sportsmen and women to:

- Maintain and increase hunting opportunities for resident, non-leasing, non-guided hunters.
- Encourage ethical, fair-chase hunting.
- Maintain healthy herd dynamics.
- Motivate landowners and public land and resource managers to help reach sports hunting goals.
- Maintain the value of elk as an asset.
- Maintain Montana's hunting tradition for future generations.
- Have access for youth, novices, the elderly, and the physically challenged.

It is in the interest of outfitters to:

- Maintain economically viable outfitting businesses.
- Have elk populations dispersed on private and public lands.
- Be able to offer what attracts and maintains clientele (i.e., guaranteed license).
- Have opportunities for clients to have quality hunting experiences including hunting for bull elk.

It is in the interest of FWP to:

- Manage elk numbers within appropriate population objectives.
- Redistribute elk from the Valley floor across private and public lands.
- Motivate landowners to help reach sports hunting goals.
- Provide for and encourage ethical hunting.

Guiding Principles

- We believe that elk are an important resource for the Madison Valley and for the State of Montana.

- We believe that wildlife and livestock herds and landscape health are important for the economic, ecologic, and social sustainability in the Madison Valley.
- We believe that our cultural heritage of outdoor recreation and agriculture is dependent on the preservation of open space and the ability and responsibility to manage all the resources.
- We recognize that elk have positive and negative implications for the economic well-being of the Valley and, as such, we should strive for balance by increasing the benefits and decreasing the costs of elk.
- We believe in elk populations based on healthy, sustainable habitat.
- We recognize that elk distribution in the Valley is “screwed up”.
- We believe that hunters are an important management tool.
- We believe in a level of access that combines “interests” of both landowners and hunters.
- We believe that any solution must honor private property rights.
- We believe that commercial interests should be able to have reasonable expectations in terms of economic sustainability. We also recognize that “tweaking” of strategies can impact the livelihood of some.
- We believe that hunting and harvest on public land is part of the solution.
- We recognize the economic value of a “Brucellosis-free” status for the State of Montana.
- We believe that a socially acceptable elk management strategy must address all “interests” as described – to be successful.

Desired Condition

Through approval and implementation of their recommendations, the Working Group hopes to eventually achieve the following desired condition in terms of elk numbers and distribution; opportunities for access so hunting remains a viable elk management tool; and healthy habitat and range..

Elk Numbers and Distribution

- Elk numbers are corrected so the range is not overgrazed.
- An appropriate combination of elk numbers are distributed across public and private land providing for ample public and ethical hunting opportunities and viable private and public outfitting opportunities.
- Sportsmen are satisfied with the number of elk on public land and landowners are satisfied with the number elk on their property.
- Unacceptable impacts on cattle ranches (i.e., forage, fencing, safety, etc.) and public private range are eliminated.
- Elk arrive on winter range as winter conditions dictate (normally December).
- Distribution within the winter range is across the winter range in groups appropriate to what the range/habitat can support.
- In spring, elk leave the flats when high country opens up – pre-calving.
- Elk calve off the Valley floor and up in the foothills and forested lands.
- Summer distribution is in the forested, higher elevations – not on the flats.
- In the fall, large groups of cow/calves stay high.

Healthy Range/Healthy Habitat

- There is an appropriate combination of cattle and elk numbers to provide for healthy range and habitat.
- Wildlife numbers are viewed in concert with domestic AUM’s; cattle and horse numbers show tolerance for wildlife.
- Seasonal grazing livestock systems are in place with the possibility of a Valley-wide grazing plan.
- The range is weed free; grasses that reseed such as Blue Bunch, are increasing. Club Moss is controlled within a five region area.
- The risk of Brucellosis has been reduced through reduction of elk numbers and elk population distribution. Exposure of cattle to elk during late winter is minimized with the best case scenario of no risk of transmission.

Access

- The level of access addresses the interests of both private landowners and public hunters.
- Meaningful incentives exist for landowners who provide access to hunters; incentives are in place and are contributing to increased public access.
- Cooperative landowner groups are working together to manage larger land areas than just their individual properties.