

ELK MANAGEMENT CITIZEN ADVISORY GROUP RECOMMENDATIONS
FWP STAFF ASSESSMENT
AUGUST 31, 2022

We Have to Manage Elk Where They Are Not

Division/Unit/Bureau	Staff Assessment
Accounting Bureau	No comment.
Comm Ed	Communication of this recommendation would need to be carefully considered. With so many different components and known controversies surrounding some of these components, we'd need to develop an over-arching message of what we're doing and why. To be effective, the messaging would need to address questions and concerns we know exist and develop plans to communicate the implementation of these various components.
Enforcement Division	Lawful trappers are routinely targets of anti-trapping groups. Currently, Enforcement works with trappers to deter and investigate trap thefts/vandalism. Signage advertising the presence of trapping activity will make it easier for groups to be more efficient in their efforts leading to an increased workload in already difficult investigations.
Legal Unit	<p>How will trappers ensure signs are kept visible to the public? Will there be a standardized sign produced by the Department? One sign per trap? And would the trap be in the vicinity or directly next to the trap?</p> <p>Aerial hunting of wolves is prohibited by federal law.</p> <p>If we don't have current R1 data, how can we represent we're under objective?</p>
Licensing Bureau	No comment.
Parks and Outdoor Recreation Division	No comment.
Technology Services Division	Previous USFS road and trapping setback work would likely need to be revisited and changes would likely be asked for. Potential changes to ALS and regs if seasons are adjusted. TSD involvement if 3 rd parties collect data and Wildlife wants that data integrated into WIS. Contracts for these services will require TSD. There would be costs associated with the additional storage needed for this data.
Wildlife Division	Elk are surveyed and counted where/when feasible and most effective, and are typically counted using aerial surveys which can be subject to weather conditions and maintenance issues with aircraft. Aerial surveys do not count all elk in a hunting district/area, and are not always effective in heavily wooded habitat like in NW Montana. Thus, the issue of who collects the data (3 rd party or FWP) may be less important than understanding where the data can be reasonably and effectively collected. FWP is investigating the use of other metrics to evaluate elk populations in that part of the state and is currently investigating new methods for achieving population estimates. While elk numbers were historically higher in NW Montana, that was when there was significantly more open canopy and earlier succession resulting from intensive logging and fire. FWP is undertaking a multi-year study in the Noxon area to evaluate elk response to forest treatments and predator management. Lessons from this effort will have applications throughout the region. There seems to be some misunderstanding regarding objectives in the 2004 Elk Plan and population estimates. The Elk Plan objectives are based on

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	<p>counted elk during surveys and are not a population estimate. It is unclear how the population estimate for the Bob Marshall was conducted historically, or if it consisted solely of wintering elk. Elk utilizing the Bob Marshall include migratory elk from the Rocky Mountain front, the Blackfoot-Clearwater area and elk wintering within the wilderness complex. The habitat to support elk numbers from the “good old days” is no longer available and likely won’t be given the social, legal, and ecological constraints on forest management. The situation observed in the early days is not likely to happen again and in effect created a “boom and bust” scenario. Even in the 1960s there was concern that elk numbers were too high creating habitat damage.</p> <p>Management actions within wilderness areas are limited. White-tailed deer are the dominant ungulate in NW Montana and are the primary prey of large carnivores. FWP continues to cooperate regularly with federal partners (i.e., USFS) on proposed elk habitat improvement projects across R1 (as well as statewide); examples include prescribed burn projects involving RMEF near the Bull River, elk winter range enhancement projects near the confluence of the Yaak and Kootenai Rivers, and weed management projects from the Thompson River corridor west Miller Creek. Travel management on forest lands takes into account multiple variables, including grizzly bear and elk security, and is at the discretion of the land management agency (i.e., most often USFS in NW MT). FWP often provides information and recommendations for road use to their federal partners such as USFS. It is unclear if limited access to hunter or trappers is possible or if the additional disturbance to wintering animals would be offset by any potential benefit by increased carnivore harvest. Given the large landscape, carnivores are likely to repopulate the area quickly from surrounding areas.</p> <p>Within NW Montana, the Fish and Wildlife Commission recently approved an increase in mountain lion harvest with the goal of reducing lion populations by 12.5% across the ecoregion with an up to 30% decrease in ungulate focal areas. The effects of this will be monitored to determine impact on elk populations where possible. Relative to wolf harvest, Region 1 also eliminated road setbacks for trappers in Sanders County and has sought out additional opportunity for wolf harvest based on a robust wolf population that can sustain additional harvest.</p> <p>Although black bears do kill elk calves and adult elk on occasion, they are not believed to be a major predator of elk and deer. Black bears are also a valued big game animal in NW Montana drawing people for across the state and country to that area of the state. Harvest of black bears in Region 1 is the highest in the state and typically ranges from 400-700 bears. FWP is establishing an improved monitoring strategy for evaluating black bear populations to determine if additional harvest can occur while maintaining this valuable resource. Extending black bear seasons in some areas is not feasible due to low grizzly bear numbers (e.g., Cabinet-Yaak Ecosystem). FWP will continue to look for opportunities to propose an extended season and the Bob Marshall wilderness may be one place where extending the season could be an option given the limited harvest that occurs there.</p> <p>While FWP cannot guarantee a species will not be listed (wolf) or delisted (grizzly bears), FWP coordinates management of wolves and grizzly bears with federal partners which is directed toward managing populations at a level that maintains state management authority for wildlife in Montana.</p>