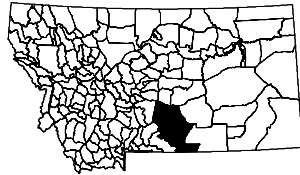


MID-YELLOWSTONE EMU
(Hunting Districts 500, 502, 510, 570 and 575)



Description: This 4,665-square-mile EMU is located on both the north and south sides of the Yellowstone River between Big Timber and Billings. Elk are distributed across about 920-square-miles (20%) of the EMU. The EMU is comprised almost entirely of privately owned land used primarily for cattle grazing and hay production. Some row crop production also occurs. Much of the EMU is open rangeland, but timbered breaks and hills also are present.

Public Access: Public access to elk varies across the EMU. In Hunting District (HD) 500, one large residential subdivision is closed to hunting and tends to serve as a sanctuary for elk during part of the hunting season. However, many of these elk are available for harvest on adjacent ranches at some time during the season. Access to the small number of elk in Painted Robe Creek on the north end of this HD has been relatively good since elk season was opened in 1992.

In HD 502, one ranch has served as a sanctuary for elk during the last several hunting seasons. Harvest has occurred only on the rare occasions that the elk have wandered off this property. Limited access for hunters has made elk management very difficult in this HD.

Essentially all landowners currently allow hunting in the small area that elk occupy in HD 510. Elk damage agricultural crops in much of this area, so landowner cooperation for elk hunting has not been an issue to date.

Elk are found primarily in two areas within HD 570: 1) the timbered breaks north of the Yellowstone River between Sweet Grass Creek and Berry Creek and; 2) south of Harlowton in the Fish Creek/Tony Creek breaks. Access has been relatively good in the area north of the Yellowstone River, where most landowners with elk on their lands allow at least limited public access. However, in the Tony Creek area, access for hunters has been much more restricted. One Block Management cooperator allows good access. However, two adjacent landowners control the majority of the elk habitat and allow very limited access, restricting hunting opportunity to a small group of friends and/or family.

Elk occur in four areas of HD 575. Elk are found only occasionally in the Red Lodge/Willow Creek area, and access is limited by landowners that do not currently view elk as a problem or, in one case, by a non-resident landowner who doesn't like to see elk killed. In the Shane Ridge/Cow Creek area, one ranch has generally provided reasonable access to hunters because of game damage. However, some of the surrounding landowners are more protective of elk. In the Fishtail Creek area, two Block Management cooperators provide good access to elk, but the elk are not consistently found on their properties. For the most part, three adjacent landowners are currently reserving elk hunting opportunities for themselves and a very limited number of friends, while one adjacent non-resident landowner does not allow hunting of any kind. Elk in the Work Creek area are generally unavailable to hunters because most landowners are protective of the elk. Elk are occasionally harvested on adjoining lands belonging to one Block Management cooperator and one other rancher.

Elk Populations: The EMU currently supports somewhat over 600 elk, representing 9 reasonably distinct elk herds. Twenty years ago there were essentially no elk in these HDs, and these were not included when the original elk plan was written in 1992. It appears that elk occupation of these areas has primarily resulted from expansion of elk herds in HDs 520, 580, 590 and, to a lesser extent, 560.

Maximum counts in HD 500 occurred during 1997 and 1998 when approximately 120 elk were observed in the Valley Creek area on a regular basis (Figure 1). Relatively good hunter access in this area has allowed aggressive elk harvests and a resulting decline in the number of elk; less than 50 have been counted there since 2000. Although total counts of elk in Painted Robe are not made, it is likely there are less than 30 elk there at this time.

Currently, about 70 elk spend the majority of the year in the Dry Creek/Elbow Creek area of HD 502 (Figure 1). These elk initially moved into the area during the late 1990's from the Line Creek herd in adjacent HD 520. At first, they returned to the Line Creek area on a regular basis but in recent years have spent most of their time in HD 502. These elk have caused some problems on both alfalfa fields and haystacks. Severely limited hunting access has prevented significant harvest and, as a result, this herd has doubled in size since 1998.

Since 2001, elk from both HD 502 and 520 (Line Creek) have occasionally moved into the Cottonwood Triangle portion of HD 510. These elk have caused significant game damage to cornfields. Attempts to reduce elk numbers in this area have been largely unsuccessful, apparently because they move to a sanctuary provided by a private landowner in HD 502.

In the early 1990s, there were reports of up to 75 elk in the timbered breaks north of the Yellowstone River between Berry Creek and White Beaver Creek in HD 570 (Figure 2). Since implementing an elk-hunting season in 1992, numbers of elk appear to have been relatively stable. However, hunting pressure appears to have spread elk into the timbered hills to the west toward Sweet Grass Creek. These elk often disappear when hunting

starts, presumably crossing the Yellowstone River into HD 575. Numbers remain in the range of 50-75 elk. Numbers of elk in the Fish Creek/Tony Creek area of HD 570 peaked in the early 1990s, when landowners reported 75-80 elk during the summer/fall period. Some of these elk move up Fish Creek and into HD 580 during the hunting season and during winter. In recent years, there has been approximately 40-60 elk in the northwestern corner of HD 570 (Figure 2).

Occasionally, 25-50 elk move out of the Butcher Creek herd unit of HD 520 into the Red Lodge/Willow Creek portion of HD 575. This number has remained relatively stable in recent years. Elk numbers will be difficult to control in this area because of a sanctuary situation involving a non-resident landowner with large landholdings in both HDs. With one exception, the smaller adjoining landowners are restrictive in providing elk hunting opportunities.

Occasionally there are 25-50 elk in the Shane Ridge/Cow Creek area of the Yellowstone River Breaks between Columbus and Laurel. There is evidence that many of these elk move back and forth across the Yellowstone River to HD 500. With one exception, landowners in this area provide little access for elk hunting.

Numbers of elk observed in the Fishtail Creek area of HD 575 have been increasing since 1993, when approximately 40 elk moved there from the rapidly expanding Morris Creek herd in HD 520. Although some elk have continued to move between these two areas, it appears most now spend the majority of their time in Fishtail Creek. Currently, there are 100-150 elk in this area.

Elk have occurred in the Work Creek area of HD 575 for a number of years. However, no efforts have been made to survey the area on a regular basis because most landowners there do not allow elk hunting. Currently, about 100-150 elk use the head of Work Creek (Figure 3), and there is evidence that another 50 elk use the lower portion of the drainage. There is likely some interchange between these elk and those in the Trout Creek area of HD 520. Elk also have been observed crossing the Yellowstone River, moving between the Work Creek/Hump Creek area of HD 575 and the White Beaver Creek/Bridge Coulee area in HD 570.

Recreation Provided: An average of about 630 hunters hunted elk for about 2,800 days in this EMU each year from 1999-2001. There are no comparable harvest data for the 1990-1992 period. Only HDs 500 and 570 had an elk-hunting season in 1992. Elk hunting seasons were initiated in HDs 575, 502, and 510 in 1994, 2000, and 2002, respectively.

Annual Elk Harvest: The average annual elk harvest was just over 90 elk, with bulls comprising about 30% of the elk harvest (average = 27) during 1999-2001. Slightly over 20% of the harvested bulls were spikes. During this same period, the average annual harvest of antlerless elk was approximately 65 animals. There are no comparable harvest data for the 1990-1992 period.

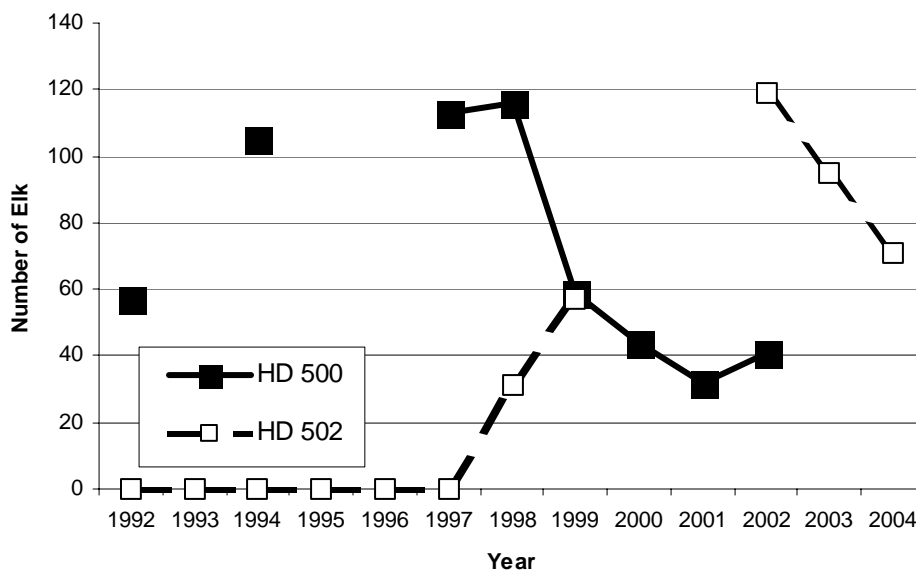


Figure 1. Number of elk observed during post-season aerial trend counts in HDs 500 and 502, 1992-2004.

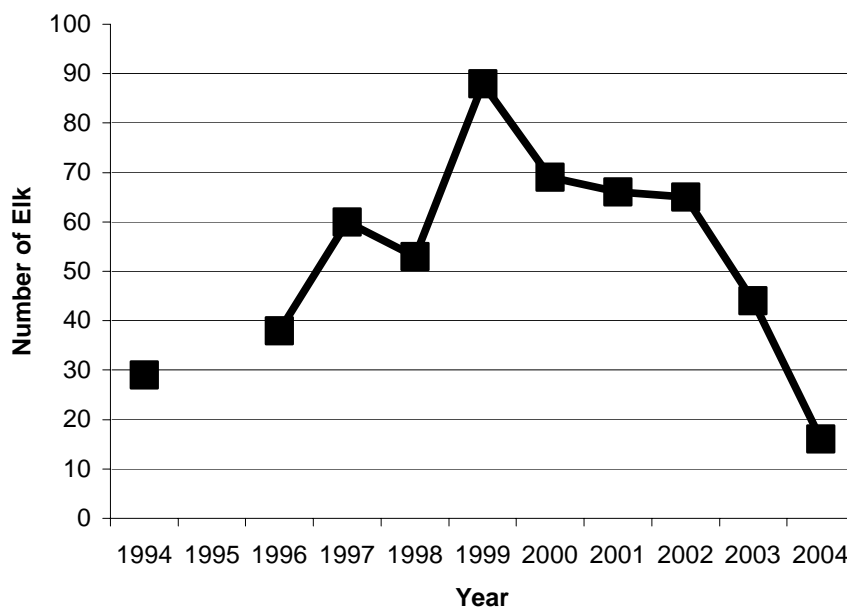


Figure 2. Number of elk observed during post-season aerial trend counts in HD 570, 1992-2004.

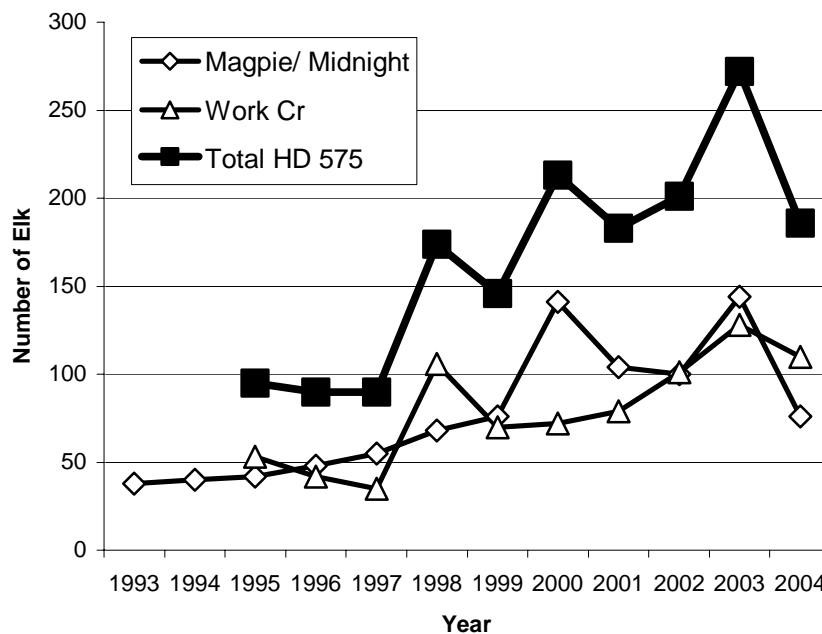


Figure 3. Number of elk observed during post-season aerial trend counts in HD 575, 1993-2004.

Accomplishments: Recently, increased enrollment in the Block Management Program, in conjunction with a relatively liberal season type in HD 500 and 570, has resulted in stabilizing or, in some cases, reducing elk numbers and conflicts in these HDs. These successes have resulted in the expansion of the liberal season type to other HDs in this EMU. An aggressive Block Management Program is also attempting to target areas with a history of complaints about elk.

Management Challenges: Limited hunting access to many of the areas supporting elk makes obtaining adequate harvests nearly impossible. For some landowners, it is a new and unique experience to have elk on their property, and their initial response is to protect the elk from hunters. There also has also been somewhat of a shift toward landowners who do not make their primary living from ranching. These landowners have less concern about economic damage to crops/pasture, and less personal interest in allowing elk hunting. This creates elk “refuges”, reduces total harvest, and creates economic damage for adjacent landowners that do allow hunting.

Population Monitoring: In this EMU, counts of each elk herd unit will generally be conducted post-hunting season in conjunction with deer surveys. Low densities of elk may make it economically unfeasible to attempt to count all elk in each herd unit. Specific flights to survey elk will not generally be conducted except in cases where elk damage complaints generate concern about overall herd size and trend.

SUMMARY OF PUBLIC COMMENT

For the most part traditional landowners are opposed to the expansion of elk into previously unoccupied habitat. Although this concern is most frequently heard from farmers who raise corn, the same sentiment certainly is found among those who primarily raise alfalfa. Non – traditional landowners, who do not rely on the land for their primary livelihood, generally like elk and are reluctant to reduce numbers. It appears that this type of landowner is also less supportive of elk management through sport hunting. In many cases these individuals are not part of the local “community” and have little, if any interest, in the concerns of their neighbors whose livelihood are tied to the land. The hunting public has some enthusiasm for the expanded recreational opportunities provided by elk in this area, but they are well aware of the concerns of the traditional landowner. Hunters are generally more willing to support liberal season types in this area than in adjacent HDs, which have been occupied by elk for years. The hunting public is generally frustrated by the management philosophy of the non-traditional landowners.

MANAGEMENT GOAL

Prevent elk populations from increasing and prevent elk from expanding into new areas where game damage is likely to occur. Elk damage to agricultural crops will be the primary factor driving management in this EMU. Elk numbers should be maintained at no more than present levels and, in most areas, reduced whenever possible.

HABITAT OBJECTIVES AND HABITAT MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Elk habitat in this EMU is entirely on private land where conflicts with agricultural Operations are inevitable. Elk habitat does not need enhancement because this only has the potential to increase elk numbers and cause more conflicts with agriculture.

GAME DAMAGE STRATEGIES

FWP will recommend elk hunting regulation types that allow for the maximum opportunity to control elk numbers through recreational hunting. Each game damage situation will be addressed based on its own circumstances. FWP has a set of possible options that include stack yard protection, herding, early and late season special hunts, directing hunters to the problem area during the general season, kill permits, use of A-7 elk licenses, or liberalizing the general antlered and antlerless elk harvest. The A-9/B-12 antlerless licenses are now another available management tool. In many cases, increasing public hunting on private land will be necessary to help reduce game damage problems.

ACCESS STRATEGIES

FWP will provide hunting regulation types that allow for the maximum opportunity to manage elk through recreational hunting. FWP will aggressively explore opportunities to

include in the Block Management Program those areas supporting elk. FWP will continue dialogue with both traditional and non-traditional landowners to try to increase access for hunters.

POPULATION OBJECTIVES

- 1) Maintain no more than 445 elk observed during post-season aerial surveys in this EMU. Individual post-season maximum herd count objectives are as follows:
 - m) HD 500 – 60 elk.
 - n) HD 510 – 10 elk.
 - o) HD 502 – 50 elk.
 - p) HD 570 – 100 elk.
 - q) HD 575 – East of Stillwater River – 75 elk
 - r) HD 575 – West of Stillwater River - Work Creek – 150 elk.
- 2) Maintain no more than 75 bulls observed during post-season aerial surveys in this EMU. Objectives for maximum counts of bulls by HD are as follows:
 - a) HD 500 – 10 bulls.
 - b) HD 502 – 10 bulls.
 - c) HD 510 – 10 bulls.
 - d) HD 570 – 20 bulls.
 - e) HD 575 – 25 bulls.

POPULATION MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

REGULATION PACKAGES

Six-week either-sex archery regulation.

Antlerless:

The Standard Regulation is: limited antlerless permits with the permits valid past the end of the general season AND, a general antlerless regulation may be recommended for a portion of the season.

The Standard Regulation will be recommended if: the total herd unit post-season counts are within 20% of the herd objective.

The Liberal Regulation is: a general antlerless season will be recommended for a portion (or all) of the season AND, increased antlerless permits with the permits valid past the end of the general season may also be recommended. [Limited A-9/B-12 antlerless licenses (B-tags) may also be recommended].

The Liberal Regulation will be recommended if: the total herd unit post-season counts are more than 20% above the herd objective.

To minimize game damage potential, there will be no Restrictive Regulation.

Antlered:

The Standard Regulation is: 1.) limited permits for antlered bulls valid during the 5-week general season OR, 2.) increased numbers of limited permits for antlered bulls valid past the end of the general season, AND/OR a late season youth hunt (permits).

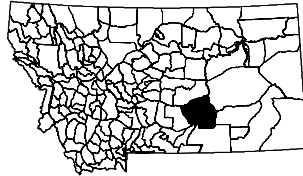
1.) Limited permits for antlered bulls will be recommended if: the number of bulls counted during post-season aerial surveys is within the range of 50% below to 100% above the objective level.

2.) Increased permits for antlered bulls valid past the end of the general season AND/OR, a late season youth hunt (permits) will be recommended if: the number of bulls counted during post-season aerial surveys is more than 100% above the objective level after 2 consecutive years of more limited permits.

The Restrictive Regulation is: very limited permits for antlered bulls during the 5-week general season.

The Restrictive Regulation will be recommended if: The number of bulls counted during post-season aerial surveys is less than 50% of the objective level for 2 consecutive years.

BULL MOUNTAIN EMU
(Hunting District 590)



Description: This 2,877-square-mile EMU includes the Bull Mountains (BM), and the Pine Ridge Hills (PRH) of south-central Montana. The terrain and habitat of these two areas are similar, ponderosa pine hills with grassy meadows, and scattered dry land and irrigated agriculture. The PRH lie south of the Yellowstone River and west of the Bighorn River. Irrigated croplands are found near the foothills of the PRH. The Bull Mountains are bounded on the north by the Musselshell River and its associated irrigated lands. There is movement by elk across the Musselshell River into hunting district (HD) 530 but for the most part, elk are not found north of the Musselshell on a regular or permanent basis. The primary economic use of the area is cattle grazing, however in the past 10 years, a large amount of timber has been removed from both areas.

Public Access: Approximately 6% of the PRH annual herd range of 205 square miles and 12% of the Bull Mountains annual herd range of 858 square miles is comprised of public lands. Most of these public lands are scattered state school trust (DNRC) sections and small USDI - Bureau of Land Management (BLM) holdings, many of which are inaccessible to the public. The largest block of accessible public land in the PRH is a 3.4 square mile block of DNRC land in the center of elk distribution. The largest block of public lands in the Bull Mountain herd range is 9.5 square miles on the edge of the annual range of elk and it receives very little use by elk during the hunting season. Elk occupy private lands throughout the year and are most often found on private lands during the hunting season. In both areas, outfitters control access to a large amount of the private land during the elk archery season. Additionally, numerous ranches in the Bull Mountains have been purchased by non-resident landowners whose primary interest is elk hunting during the archery season. During the archery season, nearly 100% of elk are on land owned by people who, outfit their property, do not allow any hunting, or only allow family and personal friends access to hunt. Although access to private lands in both areas is very limited, rifle permit hunters have enjoyed good success in most years.

Elk Populations: In 1992, we estimated (not based on flight surveys) that there were 70-100 elk in the PRH and 150-200 elk in the Bull Mountains. Since then, aerial trend counts indicate a rapidly expanding population with 900 elk counted in the BM during 2001-2002 and 429 elk counted in the PRH during 2003-2004 (Figure 1).

Recreation Provided: Almost all recreation provided by elk in this EMU is hunting related; wildlife viewing is minimal. During 1990-1992 an average of 119 hunters hunted an average of 711 hunter days per year. This increased to an average of 507 hunters and an average of 3,093 hunter days per year during 1999-2001. Because the vast majority of HD 590 is private land, it is likely that there will be decreasing opportunity for the general public to harvest an elk, even with expanding populations. Residential development, coal mining, and land purchases by non-residents will also affect opportunities to hunt elk in the Bull Mountains.

Current Annual Elk Harvest: During 1999-2001, an annual average of 66 antlered elk and 118 antlerless elk were harvested compared to annual averages of 22 antlered and 23 antlerless elk during 1990-1992. In 2001, elk harvest in this EMU was 19% of total harvest in Region 5 compared to 6% of the Regional harvest in 1992. In 2001, 85.5% of all bulls harvested had more than three points on at least one antler. During 1999-2001, archery harvest averaged 19 bulls and 7 antlerless elk per year. It is possible, however, that our harvest surveys underestimate archery harvest.

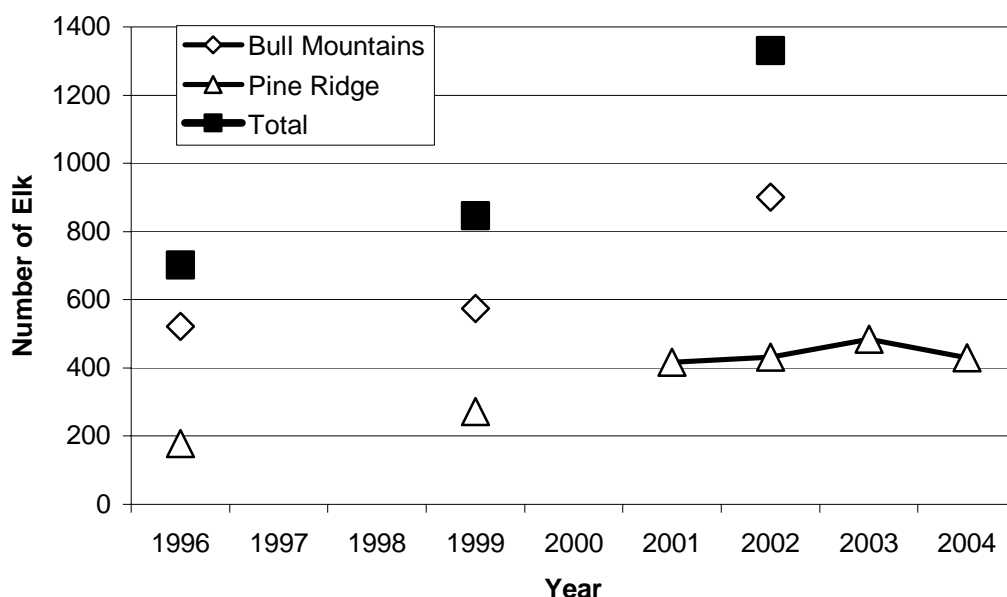


Figure 1. Number of elk counted during post-season aerial trend surveys in HD 590, 1996-2004.

Management Challenges: Changing land ownership patterns and outfitting during the archery season limit access to public and private land and will continue to affect our ability to manage elk in this hunting district. There has been a shift in land ownership toward owners who either do not make their primary living from ranching, or who have become dependant upon the additional income derived from outfitting. These owners have a different perspective on public hunting and elk numbers than traditional landowners, and have less personal interest in allowing elk hunting by the general public. Decreased hunting pressure on these lands creates elk “refuges” and reduces the total harvest.

Because of their proximity to Billings, there will be more pressure to subdivide tracts of land for residential development in the BM and PRH. It will be important to identify critical habitat on private land that may be protected through leases, conservation easements, purchase, or land exchanges and to meet with interested land managers to review and evaluate activities that may affect elk habitat.

An additional management challenge exists in the PRH where elk bed and loaf in the ponderosa pine hills and feed in irrigated crops adjacent to bedding areas. The irrigated cropland and the ponderosa pine hills are often owned by different landowners, and landowners not suffering crop damage are much more tolerant of elk than landowners receiving game damage. This difference in tolerance levels among landowners has resulted in low harvests of elk, increased game damage complaints, and the issuance of several kill permits over the last three years. Without improved access to harvest elk within current "refuges", this pattern of elk feeding in irrigated crops and bedding in adjacent elk "refuges" will lead to increased conflict in the future.

Population Monitoring: Elk populations will be monitored through post-season fixed-wing aerial trend surveys. The difficulty of surveying elk in this area is related to the fact that elk are scattered over a very large geographic area. Approximately 16-20 hours of flight time is necessary to survey the PRH and 45-60 hours of flight time to survey the BM. Three complete surveys were conducted in the BM and 6 complete surveys were conducted in the PRH between 1995-1996 and 2003-2004. Budget constraints restrict us to surveying each area at least once every three years. Because of damage problems, the PRH was surveyed 4 consecutive years between 2000-2001 and 2003-2004. If counts for either PRH or BM were below objective, we would commit to conduct another count there in the next year, outside the normal schedule.

SUMMARY OF PUBLIC COMMENT

Over the years public comment has fallen into 2 major categories: Those that want more elk, or no reduction in the number of elk; and those that want significantly fewer elk. The former group is largely comprised of archers, landowners with outfitters, and "new" landowners that have purchased land for recreational purposes. Those that would like fewer elk are those that receive significant amounts of game damage by elk. It is likely that there will be a significant amount of opposition to the proposed reductions in elk numbers.

On April 21, 2004, FWP sent a letter to 45 and 55 landowners in the PRH and BM areas, respectively, soliciting comments on the proposed objectives for the Bull Mountain EMU. In addition, two sportsmen's clubs and several local sportsmen in Roundup and Billings were asked for their comments. FWP received written or verbal responses from four landowners in the PRH and six landowners in the BM. Two of the landowners in the PRH and three of the landowners in the BM own very large ranches that support a large number of elk during the hunting season. All of the landowners that responded play an important role in the current elk management system in the EMU.

All but one of the respondents believed the objectives for number of elk counted were too low. In addition, several landowners preferred management directed at maintaining a large number of mature bulls with large antlers. Several landowners stated that without their cooperation, FWP would not be able to achieve the objectives for the EMU. There has been, and continues to be a belief among landowners, that FWP will have to change the permit allocation system in order to receive cooperation from the landowners.

Based on this input, we increased the objective for the Bull Mountain portion of the hunting district and maintained the objectives for PRH. We maintained the original PRH objectives because we have extensive game damage problems with elk in irrigated crops in the PRH.

MANAGEMENT GOAL

Perpetuate viable elk populations and habitat, provide opportunity for hunters to harvest older bulls, and maintain populations within the constraints of landowner tolerance. We will emphasize maintaining the numbers of elk in individual herds at levels that do not economically harm the majority of landowners who still allow public hunting.

HABITAT OBJECTIVES

- 1) Identify areas on public lands which may have the potential to hold elk during the hunting season if beneficial habitat manipulations are initiated.
- 2) Identify critical habitat on private land that may be protected through leases, conservation easements, purchase or land exchanges that may help to increase harvest.

GAME DAMAGE STRATEGIES

Stabilize elk populations at a level that is the least detrimental to the majority of landowners. Options include: 1) directing hunters to landowners with elk depredation problems, 2) increasing the number of antlerless permits, 3) extending antlerless elk seasons in areas with greatest depredation problems, 4) establishing early and late season hunts in areas where numbers of elk can be reduced and, 5) issuing landowner kill permits in areas where damage occurs on an annual basis, but where public hunting cannot be used as a tool to reduce elk numbers.

ACCESS STRATEGIES

The key to managing elk populations in this EMU is developing access to private lands for elk hunters but the reality is that we currently do not have the tools to achieve this objective. Presently, access to some of the larger ranches in this EMU is very restrictive because their goals for the elk populations differ considerably from that of FWP. We will discuss elk numbers, elk damage, and hunter access with landowners. In addition, hunters will be directed to those landowners requesting reductions in elk herds. We will also use the Block Management Program or other cooperative programs to attempt to establish increased access for hunters to elk populations, while maintaining existing access.

POPULATION OBJECTIVES

- 1) Maintain 1,050 elk observed during post-season aerial trend surveys. This represents a reduction in elk numbers of approximately 20% from spring 2002 levels. Individual post-season trend count objectives are 300 elk for the PRH and 750 elk for the Bull Mountains.
- 2) Maintain an observed post-season bull count of 60 in the PRH and 150 in the Bull Mountains.

POPULATION MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Trend in observed numbers of elk in the BM and the PRH will be considered independently so that hunting regulations north and south of the Yellowstone River may be different.

REGULATION PACKAGES

Six-week either-sex archery regulation, EXCEPT see Restrictive Regulation for Antlered elk.

Antlerless:

The Standard Regulation is: limited antlerless permits (170-250 permits north of the Yellowstone River and 35-60 permits south of the Yellowstone). Permits may be valid past the end of the general season.

The Standard Regulation will be recommended if: the number of elk observed by herd unit during post-season aerial surveys is within 20% of the objective.

The Liberal Regulation is: a general antlerless regulation for a portion (or all) of the general and archery seasons AND, a liberal number of antlerless permits valid as early as 15 August and as late as 15 February. Permit levels will likely remain near the current level of 180 north and 80 south of the Yellowstone. A-9/B-12 antlerless licenses (B-tags) may also be recommended.

The Liberal Regulation will be recommended if: the number of elk observed by herd unit during post-season aerial surveys is more than 20% higher than the herd objective.

The Restrictive Regulation is: limited antlerless permits.

The Restrictive Regulation will be recommended if: the number of elk counted by herd unit during post-season surveys is more than 20% below the herd objective for two consecutive flights¹.

Antlered:

The Standard Regulation is: limited either-sex permits (140-210 permits north of the Yellowstone River and 45-75 south of the Yellowstone River).

The Standard Regulation will be recommended if: number of bulls observed by herd unit during post- season aerial surveys is within 40% of the objective.

The Liberal Regulation is: increased numbers of either-sex permits which may be valid before or after the general season.

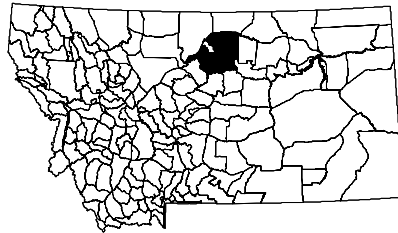
The Liberal Regulation will be recommended if: 1.) the number of bulls counted during post-season aerial trend surveys is more than 40% above objective OR; 2.) bulls are causing an inordinate amount of game damage.

The Restrictive Regulation is: limited or no either-sex permits (less than 70 permits north of the Yellowstone and less than 35 permits south of the Yellowstone) valid only during the general season. ARCHERS MAY ALSO BE REQUIRED TO APPLY FOR THE PERMITS.

The Restrictive regulation will be recommended if: the number of bulls counted during post-season aerial surveys is more than 40% below the objective level for two consecutive years¹.

¹ Note, if surveys are flown only once every three years (as currently) then a single count below objective could trigger a change in regulation packages.

BEARS PAW MOUNTAINS EMU
(Hunting Districts 680 and 690)



Description: Located in north-central Montana, this EMU encompasses 2,821 square miles. Elk habitat includes about 200-square-miles of the Bears Paw Mountains about 30 to 40 miles south of Havre and 100 square miles of the Missouri River Breaks in the Lion Coulee, Bullwhacker Cr., and Cow Cr. drainages 50 to 70 miles southeast of Havre. The majority of the EMU is in private ownership in the mountains and in public ownership [USDI - Bureau of Land Management (BLM)] in the breaks. Within the area of elk distribution, 64.5% is privately owned, 25.2% is managed by the BLM, and 10.1% by the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC).

Public Access: Because elk hunting in this unit is primarily a means to control game damage, access to private lands has traditionally been granted to elk permit holders. An elk hunter management coordinator has been used since 2001 and this has worked quite well in directing hunters onto private lands with elk. Access to elk hunting areas is largely by foot or horseback and vehicle retrieval is allowed with permission.

Elk Populations: We currently observe approximately 250 elk in this unit (Figure 1) and they are spread throughout the Bears Paw Mountains and the Missouri River Breaks southeast of these mountains. A small segment of the population spends a portion of the summer on or adjacent to the Rocky Boy Indian Reservation.

Recreation Provided: This unit provides about 450 days of hunting recreation for 85 rifle hunters and 105 recreation days for 15 archery hunters each year. Elk can occasionally be viewed throughout the year from county roads in the Bears Paw Mountains and along trails in the Missouri River Breaks.

Current Annual Elk Harvest: All elk hunting in this unit is by special permit, both for archery and the general seasons. During 1999-2001, there were 15 either-sex permits for the archery

season, 10 either-sex permits for the general season, and 50, 60 and 75 antlerless permits during the general season for 1999, 2000, and 2001, respectively. The 3-year average harvest for those years was 19 antlerless elk and 11 bull elk. In addition, 4 cows and 14 bulls were harvested on the Rocky Boy Indian Reservation in both 2000 and 2001.

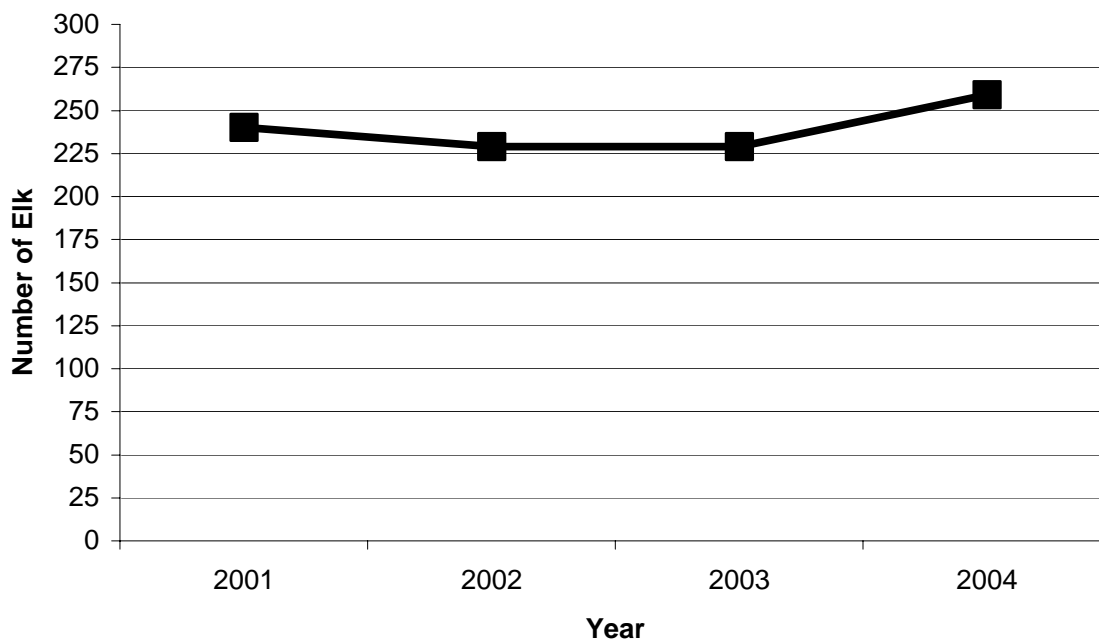


Figure 1. Number of elk counted during post-season aerial trend surveys in the Bears Paw EMU, 2001-2004.

Accomplishments: Some believe current elk numbers have been underestimated. In response to this perception and poor antlerless harvest success, the Bears Paw Mountains Elk Management Working Group was formed. The goal was to formulate a management strategy that was satisfactory to both landowners and hunters. As a result of this group meeting, more consistent and comprehensive elk surveys have been conducted and a more intensive hunter management system was developed to achieve higher harvest success rates for antlerless elk and form a more cooperative relationship between the landowners, hunters, and FWP.

Since 2001 an elk hunt coordinator has been hired to monitor the location of elk in these hunting districts and direct permit holders to the elk and how to gain permission from landowners for access. The coordinator also maintains daily contact with landowners, patrols the area, and monitors elk harvest throughout the general big game season.

During fall 2003, there were elk hunting opportunities on 14 Block Management Areas with a total of 112,846 deeded acres in Hill, Blaine, and Chouteau Counties.

Management Challenges: The majority of elk occur on private lands in the Bears Paw Mountains. Access to elk are at specific times during the hunting season can be limited on a daily basis. We have utilized an elk hunt coordinator to monitor elk movements and locations, respond to calls from antlerless permit holders, and direct them in how to gain access to the elk. This system has worked well, but we hope to improve on the average success of about 25 antlerless elk harvested with 75 permits.

A portion of this EMU includes a smaller segment of the elk herd on public lands (BLM) in the Missouri River Breaks in HD 680. This area provides a hunting location for hunters that have a hard time gaining access to private lands, but does not result in harvest of antlerless elk from areas where they are causing problems on private lands.

Some alternative hunting season strategies addressing these issues include:

1. Continue the current permit system and increase the number of antlerless elk permits.
2. Convert some antlerless elk permits to A-9/B-12 licenses (antlerless B-tags) so that permit holders concentrate their efforts on hunting antlerless elk in this area.
3. Recommend a general season for antlerless elk utilizing a quota system and maintain permits for bulls. The season would end or access to private lands would end when desired antlerless harvest is obtained. A limited number of antlerless permits valid for public lands would be maintained.

Population Monitoring: A full coverage aerial survey of occupied elk habitat is conducted annually using a FWP helicopter and pilot. These surveys are typically conducted in midwinter when animals are in large groups and in open habitat.

SUMMARY OF PUBLIC COMMENT

The draft management goal and objectives are acceptable to sportsmen. Landowners voiced strong opposition to an increase in elk numbers because game damage is excessive at existing numbers.

MANAGEMENT GOAL

The Bears Paw Mountains Elk Management Working Group has recommended a management goal of maintaining the elk population at its current level at about 250 observed elk and cooperation in the management of elk habitat to provide maximum elk hunting opportunities while controlling game damage. Because the Bears Paw Mountains is primarily a deer producing area, elk numbers will not be allowed to increase at the expense of the deer population.

HABITAT OBJECTIVES

- 1) Develop cooperative programs that encourage public and private land managers to maintain approximately 200,000 acres of occupied elk habitat.

2) Maintain elk habitat security levels that will facilitate attainment of population and harvest objectives.

HABITAT MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

FWP will:

- Cooperate with BLM, DNRC, and private land managers to identify and prioritize critical habitats that could potentially be protected through conservation easements or fee title acquisition.
- Work with private landowners to maintain existing grazing systems, public access, and elk security levels.

GAME DAMAGE STRATEGIES

Permits for antlerless elk during rifle season will be used to accomplish a harvest adequate to prevent game damage. The position of Hunter Access Coordinator will be continued to direct hunters to locations of antlerless elk.

ACCESS STRATEGIES

Opportunities for Block Management projects will be identified. The hunter management coordinator position will be continued.

POPULATION OBJECTIVES

- 1) Maintain 250 elk observed during post-season aerial trend surveys.
- 2) Maintain at least 10 bulls:100 cows observed during post-season aerial trend surveys.

POPULATION MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

To achieve the management objectives for this unit, emphasis must focus on coordination with private landowners to maintain hunting access to private lands and we will continue to use the hunter management coordinator. The hunting season format will include 6 weeks of archery hunting and a 5-week general season. Both archery and general season hunting will be by limited permit only.

REGULATION PACKAGES

Limited either-sex archery permits.

Antlerless:

The Standard Regulation is: 50-75 general season antlerless permits.

The Standard Regulation will be recommended if: the number of elk counted during post-season aerial trend surveys is between 225 and 275 elk.

The Liberal Regulation is: 1.) more than 75 general season antlerless permits (A-9/B-12 licenses may be recommended as well) OR; 2.) a general season for antlerless elk on private lands utilizing a quota system. General season on private land ends when quota reached.

Liberal Regulation **1.) (above)** will be recommended if: the number of elk counted during post-season aerial trend surveys is more than 275 elk.

Liberal Regulation **2.) (above)** will be recommended if: after 2 years of application of Liberal Regulation 1. (above) the number of elk counted during post-season aerial surveys remains above 275 elk.

The Restrictive Regulation is: less than 50 general season antlerless permits.

The Restrictive Regulation will be recommended if: the number of elk counted during post-season aerial trend surveys is less than 225 elk for 2 consecutive years.

Antlered:

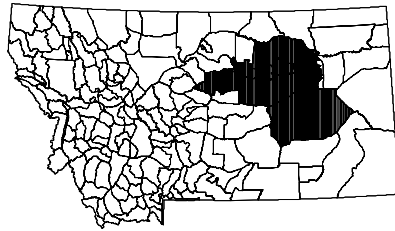
The Standard Regulation is: at least 15 either-sex archery permits and 10 general season either-sex permits.

The Standard Regulation will be recommended if: the bull:100 cow ratio observed during post-season aerial surveys is at least 10 bulls:100 cows.

The Restrictive Regulation is: less than 15 either-sex archery and less than 10 general season either-sex permits.

The Restrictive Regulation will be recommended if: the bull:100 cow ratio observed during post-season aerial surveys is less than 10 bulls:100 cows for 2 consecutive years.

MISSOURI RIVER BREAKS EMU
(Hunting Districts 410, 417, 426, 620, 621, 622, 630, 631, 632, 700, and 701)



Description: The Missouri River Breaks (MRB) encompasses 17,239 square miles of Fergus, Petroleum, Garfield, Phillips and Valley counties in northeastern Montana. Approximately 63% of the elk habitat within this EMU is comprised of public lands administered by either the USDI Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge (CMR), or Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC). Key portions of elk summer and winter ranges are located on privately owned lands. The general elk distribution occurs over 4,693 square miles and most of the available elk habitat is occupied. About 20.7% (620,787 acres) of total elk habitat occurs on the CMR. The best security areas are located in the timbered and riparian portions of the rough terrain along the Missouri River, known as the “Breaks”. Elk habitat north of the Missouri River also extends into the Larb Hills. Elk habitat on the south side of the Missouri River is more extensive because of longer timbered drainages feeding into the Missouri and Musselshell Rivers. Hunting districts 620 and 630 consist of prairie habitat bordering the breaks, but small groups of elk will typically move into these areas in late summer and fall. Similarly, HD 701 is prairie habitat, but a small group of elk occupies about 52 square miles of this HD. HD 426 contains little elk habitat and much agricultural land.

Although elk could extend their range into the prairie, conflicts with agricultural land uses and lack of fall security areas makes this unfeasible. Elk utilize private lands throughout the year in portions of this unit. Game damage reports are most numerous during drought years and years of high elk population levels.

Public Access: The general elk distribution in the Missouri River Breaks includes 1,101,344 acres of private land, 30% of which is currently enrolled in FWP’s Block Management Program. Public hunting opportunities are restricted on approximately 116,640 acres of private land, primarily as a result of fee hunting or outfitting. Good public road access exists throughout the unit and access is also possible by boat from the Missouri River and Fort Peck Reservoir. Vehicle access within the CMR has become

more restricted due to road closures over the past 10 years and in 2002, forty-four miles of trails were closed to all mechanized vehicles on proposed wilderness areas within the CMR.

Elk Populations: The number of elk observed during post-season aerial surveys currently numbers approximately 7,500 elk (Figures 1, 2, and 3). Average age of bull elk harvested has been stable to increasing since 1986 and typically ranges between 4- and 5-years-of-age as determined by analysis of cementum annuli of incisor root tips.

Recreation Provided: Rifle hunting generates 6,500 – 7,000 days of hunting recreation by around 1,500 hunters annually. During the archery season, approximately 3,100 archers spend around 21,100 hunter days pursuing elk. Excellent elk viewing opportunities are available in the Missouri River Breaks EMU. The Devil's Creek Road, Hell Creek Road, Slippery Ann Ridge and Bottom Road, Kendall Bottoms, Bell Bottoms, Rock Creek Road, Larb Hills Road, Harper's Ridge Road, Musselshell Trail, Horse Camp Trail, Crooked Creek Road, Dovetail Road and Dunn Ridge Road are some examples of public roads offering excellent elk viewing. There is also an educational, self guided wildlife viewing route along the Bell Ridge Road near the Fred Robinson Bridge. The Slippery Ann Wildlife Viewing Area on the CMR also offers the opportunity to observe large bulls and elk behavior during the rut.

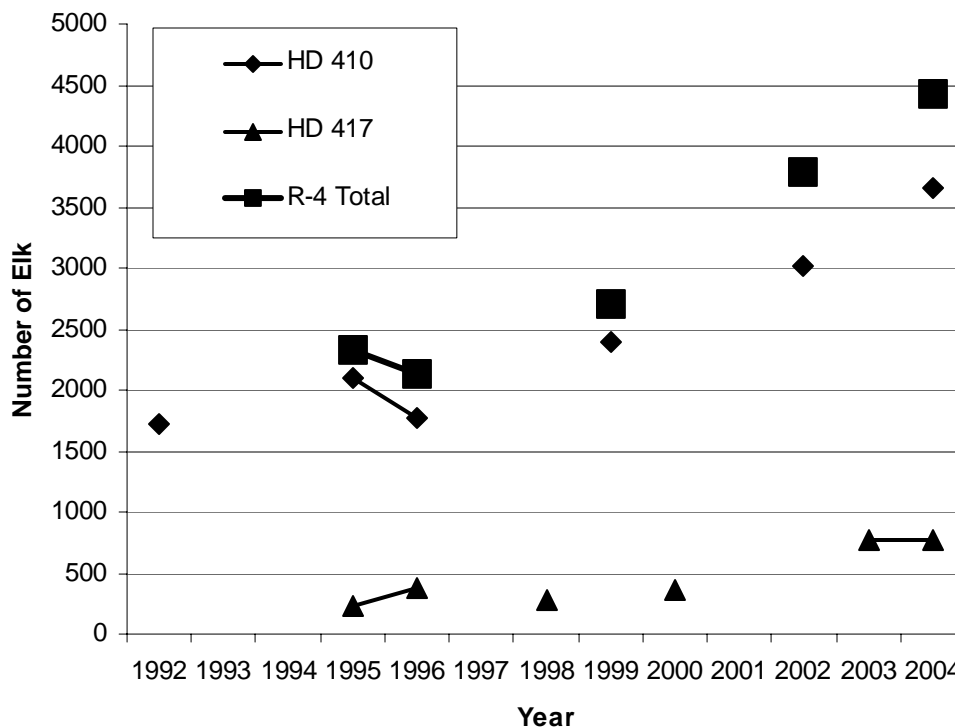


Figure 1. Number of elk counted during post-season aerial trend surveys in the Region 4 portion of the Missouri River Breaks EMU, 1992-2004.

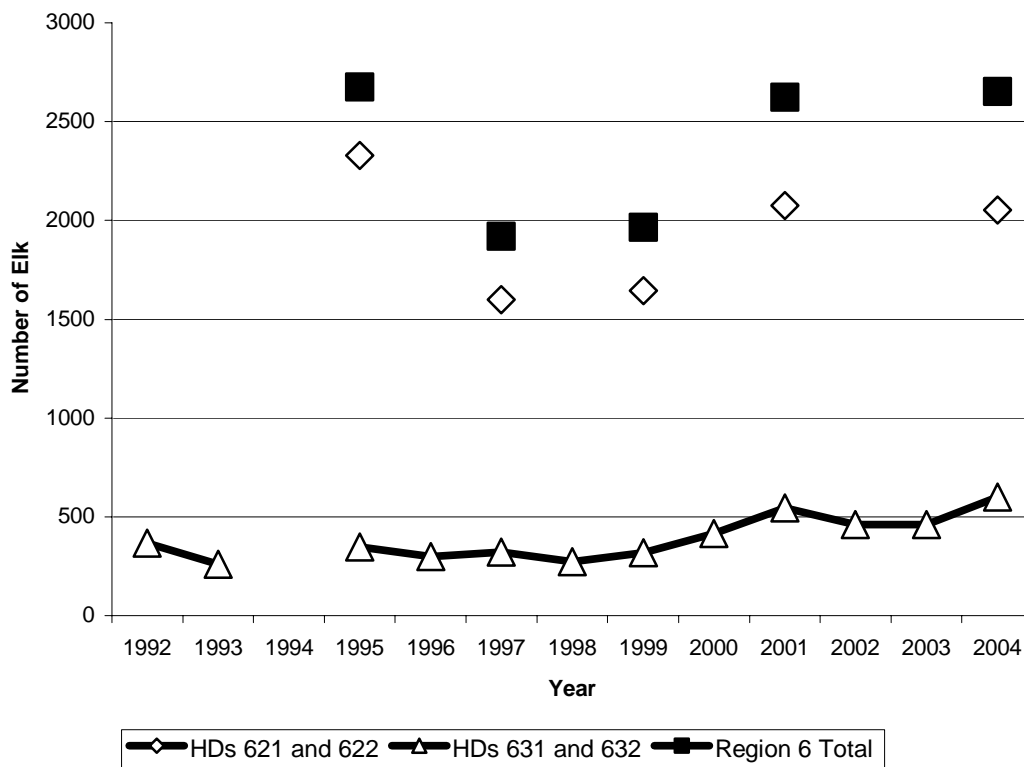


Figure 2. Number of elk counted during post-season aerial surveys of the Region 6 portion of the Missouri River Breaks EMU, 1992-2004.

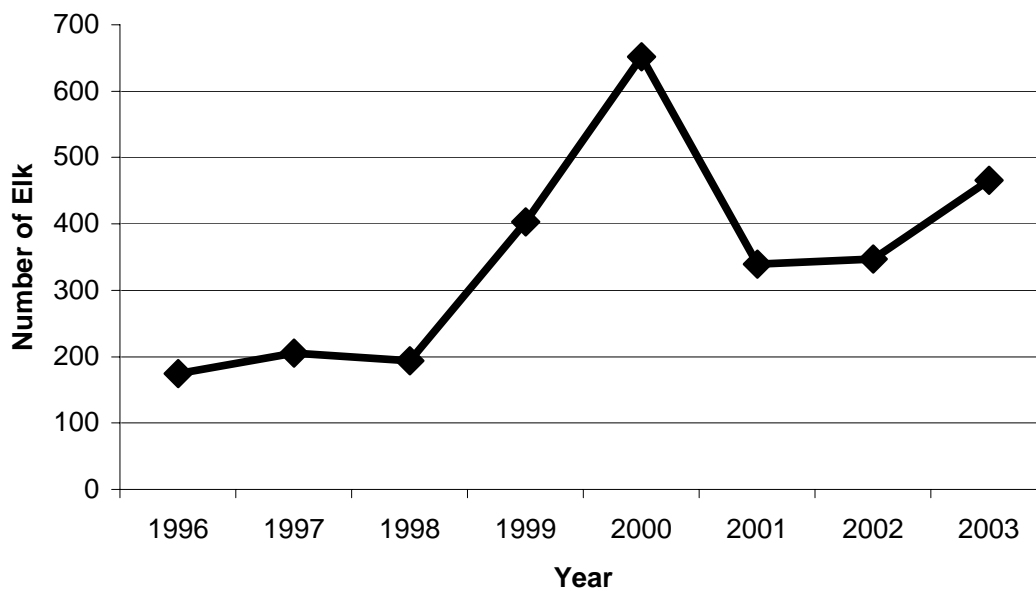


Figure 3. Number of elk counted during late summer aerial trend surveys in the Region 7 portion of the Missouri River Breaks EMU, 1996-2003.

Current Annual Elk Harvest: All elk hunting during the general season is by special permit, and most HDs also require that archers apply for a limited or unlimited number of special permits during the archery season as well. The average annual harvest during 1999-2001 was 647 antlerless elk and 507 bull elk.

Accomplishments: In 1990 the Department purchased a conservation easement in HD 631 on 19,189 acres belonging to the Page-Whitham Ranch. A 3-pasture rest rotation grazing system was established on this ranch and associated public lands to improve native range condition and wildlife habitat. Approximately 66,000 acres of elk habitat is impacted by this grazing system. This conservation easement also provides perpetual free hunting opportunities on this ranch.

In 1997, two habitat projects comprising 242 acres of cropland in HDs 622 and 631 with chronic elk depredation problems were seeded back to permanent grass cover. These projects were a joint partnership between FWP, the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, and the private landowners.

In 2001, FWP purchased a 4,489-acre conservation easement on the Cowell Ranch in HD 622. A 3-pasture rest rotation system on this land impacts 10,400 acres of elk habitat on the conservation easement and associated public lands. This easement also provides perpetual hunting opportunities.

During fall 2003, elk hunting opportunities were present on 10 Block Management Areas in Region 6 having a total of 153,500 deeded acres and 53,500 BLM acres. Region 4 had 34 landowner contracts, 156,000 deeded acres and 262,000 acres of state and federal lands within Block Management Areas in 2003. Within the Region 7 portion of the Missouri River Breaks EMU, seven cooperators totaling 27,253 deeded acres and 14,266 state and federal acres were enrolled in Block Management.

Management Challenges: Many parties have a stake in the Missouri River Breaks elk population, including federal and state land management agencies, private landowners, outfitters, hunters, and other outdoor recreationists. Working with all of these players while managing this elk population can, at times, be challenging. Some agencies and individuals would like to see elk managed at maximum numbers to provide more viewing and recreational opportunities. Meanwhile, private landowners within or near elk habitat suffer the economic consequences of elk utilizing their pastures, hay lands, and grain fields, primarily during late summer and fall. Also, other wildlife species, such as mule deer, may be negatively impacted by high numbers of elk due to increased competition for preferred forage species. It is also likely that wolves will move into the breaks at some time and rely on elk as their main prey base, especially if they are protected within the CMR, as are mountain lions.

Although the majority of elk occur on public lands, hunting access is restricted on some key private lands, primarily as a result of fee hunting or outfitting. In some areas large numbers of elk will move onto these lands during the hunting season. More than 400 elk commonly occupy one such ranch in the Larb Hills (HD 622) throughout the rifle season.

After the season closes, many of these elk move onto adjacent lands where they may compete with cattle for grazing in winter pastures or cause damage to haystacks. Partially as a result of these “refuges”, elk populations have climbed above population objectives in some areas.

Managing hunter numbers and equitably dividing the bull harvest between archery and rifle hunters has also been a challenge. The Missouri River Breaks elk population is well known for its high numbers of bulls and large, trophy bull elk. Archery hunting in particular is very popular in the breaks and over 70% of elk hunting recreation occurs during the archery season. This distinction has not come without a price.

Some archers believe that overcrowding has greatly reduced the quality of archery hunting in the Breaks and would like to limit the number of archery hunters in all Breaks HDs. Similarly, some rifle hunters believe that archery hunters are taking more than their share of large bull elk. An analysis of bull harvest between 1999-2001 revealed that in HDs 620, 621 and 622 archery hunters accounted for 56% of the total bull elk taken and 46% of the six-point or larger bulls in these HDs. In the same years, in HD 410 and 417, archery hunters accounted for 63% of the total bull elk taken and 59% of the six-point or larger bulls. During that period in HD 700 and 701, archery hunters accounted for 33% of the total antlered harvest and 24% of the six-point or larger bulls.

Population Monitoring: Elk surveys are typically conducted in mid-winter when animals are in large groups and more often in open habitat. Surveys are conducted annually in HDs 631, 632, and 700 using a fixed-wing aircraft. Surveys are conducted every other year with fixed-wing aircraft in HDs 410 and 417 and with a helicopter in HDs 621 and 622. Late summer, fixed-wing surveys are also conducted in HD 700 to supplement mid-winter surveys and have been more reliable than winter surveys. Every other year surveys will be coordinated among Regions to be accomplished during the same year from this point forward.

SUMMARY OF PUBLIC COMMENT

Many archers believe that the high number of archery hunters has reduced the quality of the hunting experience in the Missouri River Breaks. These archers would like to see a reduction in hunter numbers. Some have proposed implementing a limited entry drawing, or a pick your area type season structure. In recent years, there appears to have been an increase in the number of archery hunters supporting a limited number of archery permits in HDs 621/622 and 410 to reduce crowding. Support for this idea was also voiced at the 2004 season-setting public meetings in Region 6 and in a petition signed by 72 archers and sent to the Region 6 FWP office in Glasgow in May 2004.

The complaint heard most often from archers is that there are too many nonresident archery hunters in the Breaks. During 1999 and 2000, about 41% of elk killed by archery in the MRB was by non-resident hunters. Some rifle hunters also believe that archers are harvesting the larger bulls because they have a longer season and can hunt bulls during the rut. These rifle hunters, too, would like to see the number of archery hunters limited.

This has been a very controversial topic for several years; however, there has also been very strong support for maintaining the current season structure. In a survey conducted following the 2000 hunting season, 2,350 randomly selected MRB archery hunters were sent a questionnaire regarding different hunting season options in the breaks. Of the 1,500 archery hunters who returned this questionnaire, 59% favored making no changes to the current season, 30% wanted to go back to an unrestricted archery season in HDs 410 and 700, and 25% favored limiting the number of archery hunters. Other alternative archery season strategies received even less support.

Public comments to the Draft EMU Plan did not favor limited permits for archery hunters. The FWP Commission decided not to retain the Restrictive Regulation option for archery at this time. They directed FWP to further explore the bull allocation issue, but to do so on a statewide basis rather than just in the MRB EMU.

MANAGEMENT GOAL

Manage elk habitat in its most productive condition and elk numbers at levels that provide excellent recreational opportunities while minimizing game depredation on private land. All FWP management actions and recommendations concerning elk habitat will give equal consideration to other wildlife species.

HABITAT OBJECTIVE

Work cooperatively with public and private land managers to maintain and/or improve 3 million acres of productive elk habitat. The majority of elk habitat in this EMU occurs on BLM (37%), private lands (37%), and the CMR (21%). The DNRC manages about 5% of the elk habitat and less than 1% is managed by other federal agencies or consists of tribal lands.

HABITAT MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

FWP will:

- Work with land management agencies and private landowners to improve forage quality and quantity for elk via various methods, such as rest rotation grazing systems, and develop strategies that encourage elk to use forage on public lands more than private lands.
- Use conservation easements to protect land from subdivision and guarantee public access.
- Work with BLM, CMR, and private landowners to identify important wildlife habitats impacted by prescribed fires and insure that these prescribed fires actually do benefit elk and elk habitat.
- Continue to coordinate with BLM, CMR, and private landowners to implement a cooperative road management program designed to curtail off-road travel and designate walk-in hunting areas to maximize elk security, while still providing good access to public lands.

- Maintain elk populations within the carrying capacity of their habitat and maintain that habitat in good to excellent condition.

GAME DAMAGE STRATEGIES

Historically most game damage has occurred on agricultural lands adjacent to the breaks; however, in recent years, more elk have moved into prairie habitats where there is more deeded land and more potential for depredation problems. Elk movement into the prairie is especially noticeable during years of high population levels in the breaks. In Regions 4 and 6, groups of elk start to move into nearby alfalfa and grain fields in mid-summer and many of the problems are a result of groups of bulls.

Management strategies FWP will use to deal with game damage include:

- Manage elk populations within population objectives by issuing a sufficient number of either-sex and antlerless rifle permits during the general big game season.
- If the Department, landowners, sportsmen, other agencies and special interest groups cannot come to a consensus on population objectives, or harvest strategies are not being met, then the establishment of Elk Working Groups may be necessary to openly discuss these issues. In 1995, the Breaks Elk Working Group was formed in Region 6.
- Encourage and provide incentives to landowners to convert cropland having a history of chronic elk depredation problems back into grassland.
- Landowners who allow free reasonable public hunting are eligible for game damage assistance from FWP. In some cases the Department has supplied haystack-fencing materials, propane scare guns and, in isolated cases, herders have been contracted to keep elk off cropland and alfalfa fields in Region 6 during critical periods.

ACCESS STRATEGIES

Hunting access is good in most parts of the Missouri River Breaks, thanks largely to the large proportion of public land in this area. Access to public land is a problem in some areas where outfitting is occurring. It is likely that access to private land will continue to become more difficult around the breaks as nonagricultural interests purchase more land for its recreational and scenic values.

Access strategies include:

- Acquire conservation or access easements to perpetually maintain elk hunting opportunities on private land and access to public lands.
- Enroll landowners into Block Management, Access Montana, and Hunter Enhancement programs to maintain and increase hunting opportunities.
- Work cooperatively with the BLM, CMR, and private landowners on road management strategies to curtail off road vehicle travel and provide secure elk habitat, while ensuring that a sufficient number of trails are kept open to provide good hunting access and a sufficient elk harvest.

POPULATION OBJECTIVES

These objectives are based on comments from both landowners and sportsmen and the number of game damage complaints received. We expect that the objectives will be periodically updated to account for changes in landownership and management practices. In Region 4, the population objectives were established as the number of elk in 1992 when the first Elk Management Plan was adopted. Objective numbers for observed elk are low for HD 426 because it contains mostly agricultural lands and little elk habitat. In Region 6, the population objective was determined in 1997 by the Breaks Elk Working Group, which consists of approximately 25 landowners and sportsmen along with representatives from MFWP, CMR, and the BLM.

- 1) Maintain 4,325-5,075 elk observed during post-season aerial surveys. Individual observed herd area objectives are:

HD 410:	2,000 – 2,300 elk.
HD 417:	350 – 400 elk.
HD 426:	75 elk.
HDs 620, 621, and 622:	1,400 – 1,650 elk.
HDs 630, 631, and 632:	300 – 350 elk.
HD 700:	200 – 300 elk.
- 2) Maintain at least 30 bulls:100 cows observed during post-season aerial trend surveys.
- 3) The elk management goal of the CMR is to reach or maintain a density of 2.5 elk per square mile of suitable habitat on refuge lands and maintain 28 brown-tinted bulls:100 cows post-season. Recent counts and distribution indicate that density goals are being exceeded on the CMR, except possibly in HD 700. This is especially true given that perhaps only 50% of elk present are observed during summer flights in HD 700 compared to about 80% observability during winter flights in most other areas of the MRB.

POPULATION MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Elk numbers are currently being managed based on landowner tolerance to elk depredation on private lands and to maintain elk within the carrying capacity of their habitat. Management of total population numbers will primarily be achieved by varying permit numbers during the general “rifle season”. However, recently elk numbers have increased in some areas to the extent that some options in addition to permits may be necessary to reduce elk numbers to objective levels.

REGULATION PACKAGES

General Season Regulations

Antlerless:

The Standard Regulation consists of the following antlerless permit numbers:

HD 410:	200-400 antlerless permits
HD 417:	100-200 antlerless permits
HD 426:	20-25 antlerless permits
HDs 620, 621 and 622:	300-450 antlerless permits
HDs 631 and 632:	75-100 antlerless permits
HDs 700 and 701:	200-350 antlerless permits

The Standard Regulation will be recommended if: the number of elk counted during post-season aerial trend surveys is within the numerical population objective range for each hunting district or group of hunting districts.

The Liberal Regulation consists of the following three options **1.)** increased antlerless permit numbers:

HD 410:	more than 400 antlerless permits
HD 417:	more than 200 antlerless permits
HD 426:	more than 25 antlerless permits
HDs 620, 621 and 622:	more than 450 antlerless permits
HDs 631 and 632:	more than 100 antlerless permits
HDs 700 and 701:	more than 350 antlerless permits

OR; **2.)** in addition to 1.) (above), A-9/B-12 licenses (B-tags) valid during archery and the general season OR; **3.)** a general antlerless regulation for a portion of (up to 5-weeks) the general season.

Liberal Regulation 1.) (**above**) will be recommended if: the number of elk counted during aerial post-season trend surveys is above the population objective range for each hunting district or group of hunting districts.

Liberal Regulation 2.) (**above**) will be recommended if after 2 years of application of Liberal Regulation 1.), the number of elk counted has not declined to within 10% above the objective range.

Liberal Regulation 3.) (**above**) will be recommended if after 2 years of application of Liberal Regulation 2.), the number of elk counted remains above the objective range.

The Restrictive Regulation consists of the following antlerless permit numbers:

HD 410:	less than 200 antlerless permits
HD 417:	less than 100 antlerless permits
HD 426:	less than 20 antlerless permits
HDs 620, 621 and 622:	less than 300 antlerless permits
HDs 631 and 632:	less than 50 antlerless permits
HDs 700 and 701:	less than 200 antlerless permits

The Restrictive Regulation will be recommended if: the number of elk counted during post-season aerial trend surveys is below the population objective range for each hunting district or group of hunting districts for 2 consecutive years.

Antlered:

The Standard Regulation consists of the following permit numbers:

HD 410:	50 or more either-sex permits
HD 417:	25 or more either sex permits
HD 426:	5 or more either-sex permits
HDs 620, 621 and 622:	50 or more either-sex permits
HDs 631 and 632:	20 or more either-sex permits
HDs 700 and 701:	75 or more either-sex permits

The Standard Regulation will be recommended if: the bull:100 cow ratio observed during post-season aerial trend surveys is between at least 30 bulls:100 cows.

The Restrictive Regulation consist of the following permit numbers:

HD 410:	less than 50 either-sex permits
HD 417:	less than 25 either-sex permits
HD 426:	less than 5 either-sex permits
HDs 620, 621 and 622:	less than 50 either-sex permits
HDs 631 and 632:	less than 20 either-sex permits
HDs 700 and 701:	less than 75 either-sex permits

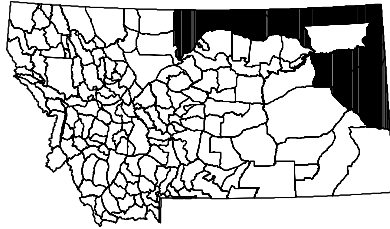
The Restrictive Regulation will be recommended if: the bull:100 cow ratio observed during post-season aerial trend surveys is less than 30 bulls:100 cows for 2 consecutive years.

Archery Regulations

The Standard Archery Regulations are:

HDs 410, 417, and 426:	Unlimited either-sex archery only permits; 1 st , 2 nd , or 3 rd choice.
HDs 620, 621 and 622:	Limited either-sex archery only permits; 1 st choice only.
HDs 631 and 632:	Limited either-sex archery only permits.
HDs 700 and 701:	Unlimited either-sex archery only permits; 1 st , 2 nd , or 3 rd choice.

HI-LINE EMU
(Hunting Districts 600, 610, 611, 640, 641, 650, 651, 652, 670, and 703)



Description: This EMU includes 21,104 square miles that have a very low elk density or are void of elk. It includes all of the land in FWP administrative Region 6 north of Highway 2 and the hunting districts in the eastern third of the Region. In FWP administrative Region 7, it includes the northeastern portion of the Region, encompassing all or portions of Richland, Dawson, McCone, Wibaux, Prairie, and Fallon Counties. All of this area is prairie habitat and at least 75% of this land is privately owned and much is intensively farmed. Terrain features, vegetation cover, landownership, and primary land use in most of this EMU do not provide suitable or secure elk habitat. This is a new EMU; none of these hunting districts were included in an EMU in the 1992 Elk Plan.

Public Access: There is fair to good hunting access in most of this area.

Elk Populations: Three small elk populations are present in this EMU. The population in the Rock Creek drainage of HD 670 typically numbers between 25 and 50 elk. A smaller and more seasonal elk population occurs in HD 610, where elk from the Milk River Valley and associated breaks in Alberta, Canada recently started moving into grain fields and pastures in Montana. The third population occurs in the southern portions of HD 651 and the northern portions of HD 703 in the vicinity of Lambert, Montana and typically numbers less than 50 elk.

Elk presence in the rest of this EMU is limited to the occasional sighting of lone animals or small groups of elk wondering through the country. These elk may come from the Missouri River Breaks, Bears Paw Mountains, Sweet Grass Hills, Canada, or from the Theodore Roosevelt Park area of North Dakota. The elk populations in all of these areas have been either increasing, or at high levels during the past 10 years, which has resulted in more elk periodically wandering out of these secure habitats and into adjacent prairie habitats. Elk historically occurred in the prairie and it appears that, if given a chance, they would reoccupy it. However, this is incompatible with existing agriculture practices

and also poses an increased threat of Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) spreading into Montana from adjacent States and Provinces.

Recreation Provided: Some hunters go to HDs 670 and 610 specifically looking for an elk. However, most elk hunting in this EMU is opportunistic by hunters primarily looking for deer, but also possessing an elk license. Prior to 2003, only HDs 610 and 670 had a hunting season for elk.

Annual Elk Harvest: 20-50 elk.

SUMMARY OF PUBLIC COMMENT

Most hunters and landowners within this EMU realize that secure elk habitat is lacking in these hunting districts and understand the damage elk can do to agricultural crops. Little negative public comment was received regarding the general elk archery and rifle regulations in most of this unit and many local hunters have expressed an interest in harvesting an elk in this area with a bow or rifle. The North Valley County Elk Working Group, which consists of approximately 25 landowners and sportsmen, has also voiced support for this regulation. However negative comments have been received from some landowners and hunters residing in HDs 651 and 703, who would prefer a more limited elk harvest in this area.

MANAGEMENT GOAL

Maintain very low elk densities within these hunting districts compatible with individual landowner tolerance.

HABITAT OBJECTIVES

Permanently suitable or secure habitat does not exist in this EMU.

HABITAT MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

None.

GAME DAMAGE STRATEGIES

Game damage complaints will be handled on a case-by-case basis. General either-sex archery and general elk seasons should minimize depredation problems.

ACCESS STRATEGIES

Access to deeded land will generally depend upon private landowner discretion. Hunters should realize that few elk are present and landowner permission is required to hunt. FWP elk hunting regulations provide the means to control elk populations. Large tracts of public land are also present in the central portion of this unit.

POPULATION OBJECTIVES

Maintain elk numbers as low as possible to address landowner tolerance, the high potential for agricultural damage, and to minimize the possibility of CWD entering from Canada or the Dakotas.

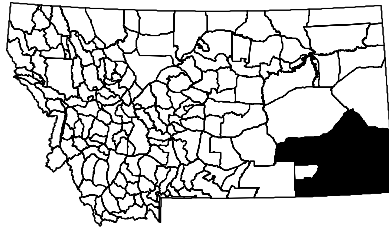
POPULATION MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Provide hunting regulations that will maintain very low elk densities within this EMU.

Antlerless and Antlered Elk Regulations:

The Standard Regulation is: 6-week either-sex archery regulation and 5-week general season either-sex regulation.

CUSTER FOREST EMU
(Hunting Districts 702, 704 and 705)



Description: The Custer Forest EMU encompasses 14,378 square miles of Big Horn, Treasure, Rosebud, Custer, Fallon, Powder River, and Carter counties in southeastern Montana. About 45% (6,400 square miles) of the EMU is elk habitat. Approximately 25% of the EMU is public land administered primarily by the USDA –United States Forest Service (USFS), USDI- Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC). Key portions of elk summer and winter ranges are located on privately owned lands. Current elk distribution occurs over 3,298 square miles, which is 23% of the EMU. About 63% of the area of current elk distribution is on private lands. The best security areas are located in the timbered and riparian portions of the rough terrain along the Powder and Tongue Rivers, the Little Wolf Mountains, and portions of the Custer National Forest. Elk habitat also occurs in the Long Pines and Ekalaka Hills in the eastern portion of the EMU.

Public Access: Of the private land currently supporting elk, 15% is currently enrolled in FWP’s Block Management Program. Public hunting opportunities are restricted on 66% of the private land with elk, primarily as a result of fee hunting or outfitting. Public access to portions of the Custer National Forest (13% of the EMU) is good. Good public road access exists throughout the unit and motorized hunting access is fair to good.

Elk Populations: We estimate that approximately 800-1,000 elk are present in this EMU. These estimates include minimum numbers of 200 elk in HD 702, 500 elk in HD 704, and 100 elk in HD 705. Although elk could extend their range into the prairie, conflicts with agricultural land uses and lack of fall security areas makes this undesirable. Elk utilize private lands throughout the year in all portions of this EMU.

Recreation Provided: During 1999-2001, an annual average of 1,692 days of hunting recreation was provided for an average 313 hunters in this EMU. Both hunters and hunter days increased through the period. A little more than half of hunters and two-thirds of hunter days were during archery season. With the advent of the general antlerless rifle

season in 2002 (outside the Custer Forest boundary), a total of 757 hunters (archery and rifle) spent 3,951 days hunting elk. In 2002, 57% of hunters and 67% of hunter days in the EMU were in HD 704.

Current Annual Elk Harvest: Prior to 2002, all elk hunting in this EMU during the general season was by permit only. The average annual general season harvest during 1999-2001 was 23 antlerless elk and 17 bull elk. During the same period, the average annual archery harvest was 2 antlerless elk and 18 bull elk. In 2002, in addition to permit hunting, a general antlerless season outside Forest boundaries was instituted. Harvest during the general season was 93 antlerless elk and 31 bull elk. Eighty-four percent of the antlerless harvest and 46% of the bull harvest occurred outside forest boundaries. Fifty-seven percent of antlerless harvest and 53% of bull harvest was from HD 704.

Accomplishments: Within the EMU there are 167 Block Management Areas; 55 of these offer or have the potential to offer elk hunting opportunities on roughly a half million acres.

Management Challenges: Many parties have a stake in the Custer EMU elk population, including federal and state land management agencies, private landowners, hunters, outfitters, and other outdoor recreationists. Some would like to see elk managed at maximum numbers to provide more viewing and recreational opportunities. However, private landowners within or near elk habitat suffer economic consequences as a result of elk utilizing their pastures, hay lands, and grain fields. Satisfying the expectations of all of these players while managing this elk population can, at times, be challenging.

Public access by hunters to elk occupying private land is, at times and places, difficult. The reluctance of some landowners to allow the general public access for hunting recreation and population management presents a management challenge. Difficult challenges occur in areas where some landowners desire increased harvest of elk while adjacent landowners discourage harvest.

Hunting access is restricted on some key private lands, primarily as a result of fee hunting or outfitting. These lightly hunted areas provide a “refuge” for elk and large numbers of elk will move onto these lands during the hunting season. After the season closes, many of these elk move to adjacent lands where they may compete with cattle for grazing in winter pastures or cause damage to haystacks. These “refuge” situations have contributed toward elk populations increasing above the population objectives in some areas. Game damage reports could become numerous during drought years, severe winters, and years of high elk population levels.

Other wildlife species, such as mule deer, may be negatively impacted by high numbers of elk due to increased competition for preferred forage species. Balancing the needs of all wildlife in the area is another management challenge. FWP management actions and recommendations concerning elk will give equal consideration to other wildlife species.

Population Monitoring: Elk surveys are usually conducted in mid-winter when elk are typically in large groups and in open habitats. However, the scattered distribution of elk and their low densities in this EMU make population monitoring difficult and costly and few surveys have been accomplished. We currently estimate number of elk present based on occasional flights, ground observations, and reports by landowners and the public. We will explore the possibility of establishing a valid, cost-effective aerial trend area for this EMU.

SUMMARY OF PUBLIC COMMENT

The elk in this EMU are scattered and at low density and have not attracted a lot of public interest at this time. Most comments about elk are received from private landowners with concerns about increasing elk numbers and game damage. The majority of landowner and hunter comments received in the winter of 2002-2003 relative to the general antlerless season were neutral to positive. Hunters have expressed a desire to maintain or increase elk numbers.

MANAGEMENT GOAL

Manage elk habitat in its most productive condition and elk numbers at levels that provide good recreational opportunities while minimizing game depredation on private land.

HABITAT OBJECTIVE

Work cooperatively with public and private land managers to maintain and/or improve elk habitat.

HABITAT MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

FWP will:

- Provide technical assistance to land management agencies and private landowners for programs such as rest rotation grazing systems that will improve forage quality and quantity for elk. Special emphasis will be placed on strategies that encourage elk to use forage on public lands more than private lands.
- Identify important wildlife habitats potentially impacted by prescribed burning and work with the BLM, USFS, and private landowners to ensure that planned prescribed fires benefit elk and elk habitat.
- Maximize security for elk by continuing to coordinate with BLM, USFS, and private landowners to implement a cooperative road management program designed to curtail off-road travel and designate walk-in hunting areas.
- Maintain elk populations within their carrying capacity to maintain elk habitat in good to excellent condition.

GAME DAMAGE STRATEGIES

Historically, most game damage has occurred on croplands. However, in recent years, more elk have moved into prairie habitats and, in some cases, stayed in these areas. Elk movement into the prairie is especially noticeable during years of high population levels.

FWP will use the following strategies to address game damage:

- Maintain elk populations at population objectives by issuing a sufficient number of either-sex and antlerless rifle permits and instituting a general antlerless regulation during the general big game season.
- The establishment of Elk Working Groups that includes landowners, hunters, FWP, and other agencies and groups may potentially be necessary to reach a consensus on population objectives or harvest strategies.
- Pursue development of incentives for landowners to convert cropland in or near occupied elk habitat back into grasslands.
- Employ standard methods of game damage relief including fencing, scare devices, herding, and kill permits.

ACCESS STRATEGIES

Hunting access ranges from poor to good across the Custer Forest EMU. Access to the Custer Forest is generally good. In other areas, public access is a problem where leasing and outfitting occur or where landowners are reluctant to allow general public access. It is likely that access to private land will continue to get more difficult as nonagricultural interests purchase more land for its recreational and scenic values.

FWP will:

- Pursue and acquire Conservation or Access Easements to perpetually maintain elk hunting opportunities on private land and access to public lands.
- Maintain liberal hunting regulations to provide landowners the opportunity to maintain elk numbers at acceptable levels on their land.
- Work with willing landowners to provide and manage public access and develop new access strategies.
- Enroll landowners into the Block Management Program to maintain and increase hunting opportunities. Pursue Access Montana projects to open, improve, and maintain access to public lands supporting elk.
- Work cooperatively with the BLM, USFS, and private landowners on road management strategies that provide secure elk habitat by curtailing off-road vehicle travel, while ensuring that enough trails are open to provide good hunting access and a sufficient elk harvest.

POPULATION OBJECTIVES

- 1) Maintain estimated post-season elk numbers at 500 elk. This objective number is based on comments from landowners, hunters, and the number of game

damage complaints received. The objective will be periodically updated to take into account changes in landownership, management practices and landowner tolerance. This objective is below the minimum number of 800 elk currently estimated in the EMU. When valid, repeatable survey areas are established, the objective numbers should be reviewed.

- 2) Maintain an observed post-season bull:100 cow ratio of 30-40 bulls:100 cows.

POPULATION MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Elk numbers are currently managed based on level of landowner tolerance to elk depredation on private lands. Depredation includes damage to privately owned cropland and alfalfa fields, stored forage, and damage to fences.

REGULATION PACKAGES

Six-week either-sex archery regulation.

Antlerless:

The Standard Regulation is: 50-100 either-sex permits valid in all EMU HDs AND, 50-100 antlerless permits valid in all EMU HDs AND, a 5-week general season antlerless regulation (outside the Custer Forest boundaries).

The Standard Regulation will be recommended if: the number of elk counted during post-season aerial trend surveys is within 20% of the population objective.

The Liberal Regulation is: more than 100 either-sex permits valid in all EMU HDs AND, more than 100 antlerless permits valid in all EMU HDs AND, a 5-week general season antlerless regulation throughout the EMU.

The Liberal Regulation will be recommended if: the number of elk counted during post-season aerial trend surveys is more than 20% above the population objective.

The Restrictive Regulation is: less than 50 either-sex permits valid in all EMU HDs AND, less than 50 antlerless permits valid in all EMU HDs. There will be NO general antlerless season.

The Restrictive Regulation will be recommended if: the number of elk counted during post-season aerial trend surveys is more than 20% below the population objective.

Antlered:

The Standard Regulation is: more than 50 either-sex permits valid in all EMU HDs.

The Standard Regulation will be recommended if: the bull:100 cow ratio

is at least 30 bulls:100 cows.

The Restrictive Regulation is: less than 50 either-sex permits valid in all EMU HDs.

The Restrictive Regulation will be recommended if: the bull:100 cow ratio is less than 30 bulls: 100 cows.