

# **ELK MANAGEMENT ACTIONS IN RESPONSE TO BRUCELLOSIS RISK**

## **FWP REGION 5, SPRING 2014**

### **FWP REGION 5 – MANAGEMENT ACTION #1**

- 1. Type of action (dispersal hunt, hazing, fencing, etc.):** small scale lethal elk management removal (EMR).
- 2. Brief description of commingling:** Approximately 600 elk winter in the western edge of HD 560 between Greeley Creek and Mission Creek. This herd starts the winter near Mt. Greeley around the headwaters of Peterson Creek, Greeley Creek and Locke Creek. As winter progresses the herd moves north and west down to lower elevations in Locke Creek and Work Creek. Elk have established this movement pattern over the last eight years as the herd has increased. This seasonal movement brings elk into the same pastures as cattle and in close proximity with cattle as early as January in some years with heavy snow pack, and as late as February or early March in years with minimal snow pack.
- 3. General location(s) of landowner(s) involved:** This hunt took place in Park County immediately east of Mission Creek and south of I90 along the western edge of hunting district 560. Only one ranch was included in the hunt. No neighboring ranches were included as they did not have a commingling situation. However, neighbors who were likely to have elk displaced onto their lands were in periodic communication with the ranch hosting the dispersal action to keep all interested neighbors informed.
- 4. Do landowners allow public hunting access during general hunting season?** Yes, this ranch allows public hunting for deer, elk and antelope during archery and rifle seasons. They meet or exceed department standards to qualify for game damage assistance. Most of the adjacent/neighboring ranches also allow sufficient access to qualify for game damage assistance.
- 5. Elk population status (below, at or above objective):** The elk population objective for this portion of HD 560 is 300 elk combined from two herd units that winter in this area. During the winter of 2013-14 1,038 elk were observed in these two herd units, 246% above objective. The elk herd unit targeted during this dispersal action has increased from approximately 110 elk in the winter of 2000-01, to approximately 719 elk in the winter of 2013-14.
- 6. Start and stop date for action implementation (identify if fencing was permanent or temporary):** The small scale lethal removal ran from March 4<sup>th</sup> -April 30<sup>th</sup> 2014. The landowner also hazed elk before this dispersal action started and during this hunt when elk were within occupied cattle pastures and hunters were not available.
- 7. Brief summary of action (include fence delivered, cost/cost shares, number of hunters involved, number/classification of elk harvested, etc.):** Seven cow elk were taken by 7 different hunters. Hunters were restricted to one antlerless elk. In total, 28 hunters were

notified from the HD 560 and HD580 game damage rosters. Approximately 15 of these hunters did participate in the hunt and most hunted multiple days. No hunt coordinator was used and minimal effort was required to coordinate hunters from FWP. The landowner handled hunter scheduling.

**8. Number and results of elk blood collections, if any:** Blood samples were collected by hunters from six of the seven harvested elk and submitted for brucellosis testing. However, only two of the samples were suitable for testing. The other samples were either contaminated at the time of collection or frozen during shipping from cold weather, rendering them unsuitable for testing. The two samples that could be tested were negative for exposure to brucellosis. The landowner was very supportive of brucellosis testing.

**9. Did action reduce commingling?** Based on the opinion of the landowner, commingling between elk and livestock was reduced dramatically as a result of the dispersal action. Elk frequently moved into cattle pastures during the hunt but only remained there for short periods of time until pushed out by hunters. Based on FWP observations as well as observations from the landowner, multiple elk herds would have spent most of the risk period within cattle pastures and in close proximity to cattle without the dispersal action. As a result of the dispersal action, elk spent only short intervals of time within cattle pastures until they were hazed out by the landowner or pushed out by a hunter. The landowner used hazing to move elk away from cattle when no hunters were present. Hazing appeared to result in the elk moving shorter distances away from cattle and returning to cattle pastures quicker than when hunters were used to disperse elk.

**10. General summary consensus by cooperators, collaborators and participants:** From an FWP perspective the hunt set up and administration worked smoothly, similar to a damage or management hunt. Minimal time was required for hunter coordination as the landowner handled most of that. Feedback from hunters was all positive. One hunter declined to hunt due to the late pregnancy stage of cow elk that would be harvested. Several of the hunters knew the landowner and had hunted the ranch on previous occasions. Several hunters were new to the ranch but developed a positive relationship with the landowner and plan to return and hunt the ranch during the general season in the future. The landowner was satisfied with the dispersal of elk and the reduction of elk use in close proximity to cattle. The landowner had a positive experience with hunters and would like to participate in a dispersal hunt again next year if the elk move back onto the ranch during the risk period.

**11. Issues, concerns, short/long term circumstances or other comments:** Almost half of the ranch was closed to hazing/hunting with the intent to maintain large areas on the ranch where elk could remain with relatively little disturbance. No neighboring landowners complained of elk being pushed onto their lands or into close proximity to their cattle as a result of this dispersal action. The potential for conflict with neighbors is moderate in this situation and probably increases the later into the spring the hunt is conducted. Regardless of efforts to avoid it, elk

getting pushed onto neighboring lands may be an unavoidable consequence of these hunts and is an issue that will have to be carefully considered in each case.

The frequency of elk moving into cattle pastures during this dispersal action was higher than during the 2013 dispersal action on the same ranch. The primary reason for this is thought to be weather related. Snow conditions were well above average during the risk period in 2014. Frequent storms, cold temperatures, and persistent snow cover were all present during the risk period. These winter weather factors were far more extreme than during the past 3-4 winters and resulted in a higher frequency of elk attempting to move into low elevation cattle occupied pastures. These weather factors and the resulting elk activity should be considered to be out of the ordinary and not expected during a 'normal' year.