

KY Elk Working Group
Virtual Meeting - Notes
January 12, 2021

In attendance:

Kentucky Fish & Wildlife Commission: Paul Horn, 7th District Commission Member
Kenny Knott, 4th District Commission Member
Josh Lillard, 5th District Commission Member

KDFWR Staff:

Brian Clark, KDFWR
Chris Garland, KDFWR
Gabe Jenkins, KDFWR
Dan Crank, KDFWR
Officer Greg Watts, KDFWR

Partners:

Mike Abell, Backcountry Hunters & Anglers – Kentucky
Steven Dobey, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (Recorder)
Ben Maki, Mossy Oak
Matt Springer, UK Wildlife Extension Specialist
Donald Thomas, Kentucky Elk Guides Association
Tim Reed, Daniel Boone National Forest

Introduction of New Member: Tim Reed with Daniel Boone NF introduced himself as the District Ranger for the Stearns District. All working group members offered introductions to Mr. Reed.

Review of Minutes from 12-08-2020 Meeting: Steven Dobey with RMEF offered a review and summary of minutes from the last meeting.

Submitted Top Three Priorities (Chris Garland):

- Per Paul Horn's suggestion, each member identified their top three priorities for consideration by the Elk Working Group.
- Brian Clark: Public access, large-scale habitat work, expanding herd.
- Paul Horn: Habitat enhancement, public access, decrease cow harvest until a population estimate with low confidence intervals.
- Kenny Knott: Habitat work, decrease cow harvest, public access.
- Mike Abell: Decrease cow hunting until a more accurate population estimate, establish a science-based method of tag allocation, improve public access. Also noted was to reduce poaching and improve habitat.
- Josh Lillard: Make considerations for elk viewing, in conjunction with elk hunting.
- Dan Crank: Commercial activities (elk hunt guiding) on WMAs, habitat work on WMAs, improve elk viewing opportunities.

- Gabe Jenkins: Assisted expansion of elk into southwest Unit 1, large-scale habitat work, improve public access. Gabe noted an important consideration that continued expansion of CWD in adjacent states may impact KY efforts to relocate elk in the future.
- Tim Reed: Habitat work, location and type of public access, consumptive and non-consumptive outdoor recreation aspect.
- Chris Garland: Public access, expansion of herd, updated population estimate to support tag allotment.
- Donald Thomas: Increasing elk population while decreasing cow elk permits, increasing public access for hunters while including access for elk guides, habitat improvement. Donald also noted one error in the 12-08-2020 minutes that erroneously attributed a comment to him regarding use of ATVs on wildlife management areas. The correction was noted, and subsequently corrected in the final minutes from the 12-08-2020 meeting.
- Steven Dobey: Habitat enhancement work, land acquisitions, enhance partnerships.
- Ben Maki: Evaluate how partners such as Mossy Oak can increase message awareness.
- Greg Watts: Consistent public access across the elk zone, large-scale habitat work, increased officer presence in the elk zone.
- Matt Springer: Public access, large-scale habitat work, identifying scientific gaps within the elk management plan and associated recommendations.

Rollup of Recurring Top Three Priorities (Chris Garland):

- Many suggestions overlapped but the top categories of concern were:
 - 1a. Increasing hunter access
 - 1b. Large-scale habitat work
 2. Obtaining a more accurate population estimate
 3. Population increase and/or geographic expansion
- Mike Abell engaged discussion on the topic of KY's elk population estimate and the associated model. Mike noted a pervasive perception among sportsmen who do not believe output from the current population model.
- Matt Springer detailed the complexity of SPR Models and suggested identifying ways to assess data input for future population models.
- Gabe Jenkins noted that since herd is still growing- focus should be on the explicit need for habitat work, rather than population size.
- Brian Clark offered a description of KDFWR's Life Table Model versus the SPR Model. Brian further explained how increased and continued collection of data will decrease/narrow confidence intervals of the more complex SPR Model.
- Paul Horn suggested that data collection should span across elk zone, rather than within smaller study sites.
- Gabe Jenkins noted that variation in data collection spurred KDFWR interest in the SPR Model, whereby results verified a proof-of-concept that a SPR Model would work for KY.
- Model evaluation indicated that population rates for cow/calf survival and reproductive output from 100 radio-collared animals across 5 years will yield strong output from the SPR Model.

- Gabe Jenkins clarified that new code for the SPR Model code will be needed since KDFWR data collection methods were revamped in 2019.
- Mike Abell noted that sportsmen see data indicating the number of elk increasing while the number of allotted elk permits decline, and this generates confusion among the public. It was further specified that the current management plan suggests moving away from a discrete population number and focus efforts on promoting a healthy elk herd.
- General follow-up discussion among group members generated agreement that focus should not be on a discrete number, but the general health of the herd.
- Donald Thomas acknowledged that guides fight a misconception among hunters who base expectations on historic elk distribution and visibility, and habitat conditions.
- Paul Horn suggested that each working group member review the list of recurring top priorities and name the top three for the next meeting.
- It was decided that the working group will meet next in an effort to collectively identify the top three priorities.

Overview of 2015-30 Elk Management Plan (Gabe Jenkins)

- Gabe Jenkins shared that by 2013-14, the Department had met the initial elk population goal of 10,000 animals and efforts were transitioning from restoration to management phase.
- Elk Program and Commission initiated public stakeholder meetings in 2014 to seek input on a new management plan.
- Surveys of user groups resulted in first draft of Plan in summer 2014 that was presented to Commission in November 2014.
- Edits produced a new draft for public comment in January 2015 that was presented to Commission in March 2015.
- Commission approved that 2015-30 Elk Management Plan that went into effect in April 2015.
- Gabe noted three tenets of the Plan included: historical and current status, current issues, and goals and objectives.
- In 2015, the Plan identified the top three Current Issues were habitat, recreation, and population monitoring.
- Gabe described development of a Plan of Work that encompasses goals for five-year segments over the 15-year period, the first of which was completed in 2020.
- Each Plan of Work used as an Elk Program guide for management efforts and data collection within each 5-year period.

Recap of 2020 Elk Season (Dan Crank)

- Dan noted the only current season is the late-season hunt in Letcher and Knott counties.
- Brian Clark clarified that the late season “nuisance” hunt had to be postponed in order to accommodate regulatory filings of Hunter Access Agreements.
- Dan relayed total available tags in 2020-21 was 646 and 569 of those were sold.
- Archery season harvest rate was 36%, up from 31% last year.

- Bull season week one harvest rate was 61% this year and week two was 49%.
- Last year, those bull harvest numbers were 41% and 32%.
- Harvest rates for cows week one and two this year were 36% and 42%; those cow statistics from last year were 45% and 40%.
- All holders of a Commission Tag were successful, 74% of Landowner-Cooperator Permit holders were successful; one (of one) Voucher tags was successful.
- Youth permit holders were 68% successful this year and 57% successful during the 2019-2020 season.
- Harvest rates based solely on permit holders that claimed tags.
- Dan and Paul commented that cooler weather enhanced harvest success in 2020-21.
- Brian and Gabe clarified that the late season “nuisance” hunt was occurs on private land in a small targeted area with high incidents of elk-vehicle collisions.
- Across all seasons, the overall elk harvest rate for 2020-21 was 47%.
- Dan Crank noted that during the 2020-21 season, cow harvest was less than 100 animals.
- Donald Thomas remarked that some guides have concerns over fetus numbers/pregnancy rates from field collection, and Dan Crank stated no concerns over pregnancy rates (from blood tests on handled animals).

Update from Guides Association (Donald Thomas)

- Most guides feel that elk population is in bad shape.
- Most guides feel they are being targeted by law enforcement.
- Matt Springer inquired if guides maintain data on hunter harvest success/rates, as those data would be beneficial.
- Gabe Jenkins clarified that the hunter harvest survey is now mandatory so the Department will have statistics relating to time afield, for inclusion to the SPR Model.

Upcoming Surveys (Dan Crank)

- All hunters required to complete post-season survey by February.
- Response rate is 70-80%.
- Overall reported wounding loss is approximately 4%, with most occurring during cow firearm seasons.
- Analysis and compilation of post-season hunt survey should be complete by summer 2021.

Impending research/immediate goals (Dan Crank)

- Staff have begun putting out bait for trapping with clover traps until helicopter pilots arrive.
- Dan educated group members of costs associated with elk trapping/research; overall cost to trap and track 100 elk over five years in in excess of \$800K.
- Gabe Jenkins noted that administering meds to potential brainworm cow elk would bias current research as it could influence existing survival rates.
- Paul Horn suggested a second study to evaluate brainworm infection and survival rates.

Homework (Brian Clark)

- Elk Program will verify harvest numbers and provide those to Working Group members.
- Gabe Jenkins offered to share a condensed version of the current Elk Management Plan.
- Chris Garland will synthesize final list of top three priorities for consideration by the working group.

Closing Remarks

- Brian Clark noted that KDFWR received an Open Records Request for minutes of the 12-08-20 Elk Working Group meeting.
- Paul Horn and members scheduled the third meeting on 01/19/21 to finalize the list of top three priorities for consideration by the Elk Working Group.
- Brian Clark remarked that all Elk Working Group meetings are recorded in Zoom at least for a period of time, and that link can be shared with group members as needed to verify accuracy of meeting notes, etc.