

KY Elk Working Group

Virtual Meeting - Notes

January 19, 2021

In attendance:

Kentucky Fish & Wildlife Commission: Paul Horn, 7th District Commission Member

Josh Lillard, 5th District Commission Member

KDFWR Staff:

Brian Clark, KDFWR

Chris Garland, KDFWR (absent)

Gabe Jenkins, KDFWR

Dan Crank, KDFWR

Partners:

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

Introductory Discussion (Brian Clark):

- Brian provided a brief overview/explanation for Chris Garland's compilation of the Group's top three priorities as decided during the last meeting on 1-12-21.
- Top priority is "Increasing Hunter Access" with a subcategory 1a that details "Habitat".
- Subcategory 1a was created because KDFWR wishes to invest habitat stewardship resources on properties where public access exists.
- While waiting for remaining members to join meeting, Brian suggestion a discussion related to development of loyalty redraw program. This concept was heard by KDFWR Commission in June 2020 and referred to this Elk WG for evaluation.
- Gabe relayed that successfully drawn applicants must sit out from consideration of an elk tag for three years.
- Paul Horn clarified that even with a loyalty program- all successfully drawn applicants must sit out for three years whether the tag is used to harvest an elk or not.
- Gabe Jenkins suggested that priorities 1 and 1a should be separated, with consideration of large-scale habitat work on private property.
- WG agreed that priority 1a shall include a focus on habitat work on public land with strong consideration for work on private land when identified as a need.
- Moving to priority 2 "Obtain a more accurate population estimate", Gabe clarified that the current research with UK will not create a new population model. Rather, this project will gather critical data to be incorporated into the existing SPR model or a future model.
- UK data collection now is paramount for any population model. Those include age-specific reproduction rates and survival of cows and calves.

- Brian noted that KDFWR evaluates elk population status using 1) a life-table model, and 2) a SPR model from University of Montana (UM)--which is a proprietary model.
- To run a model using more recent and current data collected in KY, KDFWR will need to contract with UM to update the current SPR model.
- As addressed in previous WG meetings, most consternation for the SPR model centered on wide confidence intervals.
- Matt Springer addressed wide confidence intervals and explained those were largely the result of small sample sizes (hence KDFWR's goal to collect more and improved data).
- Matt relayed that model results will be most enhanced by collection of more standard data over a lengthy period with minimal changes to harvest structure during study period.
- KDFWR has the model code but not the technical ability to rewrite model code, written by population modeling experts.
- Gabe relayed that data collection since SPR model evaluation will be significantly enhanced by data collected by KDFWR since that time (with minimum 5 years data collection).
- SPR Model was run for years 2016, 2017, and 2018.
- Once KDFWR has strong baseline for population parameters, running of the SPR model will offer significantly enhanced results with smaller confidence intervals, with the ability to accept future changes in harvest structure.

Increasing Hunter Access

- Paul Horn acknowledged a host of programs offered by KDFWR that increases public access (i.e., access programs on private land and access related to elk permits).
- Dan Crank acknowledged that KDFWR has exhausted all resources to find landowners with > 5,000 acres.
- As such, Dan suggested KDFWR revisiting the Hunter Access Agreements to include landowners with < 5,000 acres.
- Paul recommended increased attention to creating improved access on state-owned WMAs.
- It was noted that KDFWR owns only one WMA within the KY Elk Zone. Further, there are several concerns with putting habitat money on private ground with active coal mining.
- Steven Dobey suggested that all parties increase outreach efforts to educate sportsmen and women about ongoing and future habitat work in KY's elk zone.
- Dan Crank noted that WG priorities included a suggestion to increase public access for guides. However, this is in direct violation of KAR's that prohibit guides on WMAs.
- Don Thomas suggested that guides are an essential asset to hunters and the Elk Program and suggested that attention be given to the topic of guides when evaluating Hunter Access Agreements that do not include WMAs. Other members concurred that it would be prudent to explicitly identify whether HAA participants would allow guiding, for full disclosure to hunters and those assisting them.

Habitat Work

- Paul Horn suggested increased efforts on habitat work but perhaps starting on a smaller scale and building upwards.

- Dan noted that habitat work on private coal lands are confounded by competing interests by a host of parties or land use expectations (land manager, inspectors, bond release, etc.).
- The KDFWR Elk Program does not possess the time/resources to implement habitat stewardship work. It has been and is currently being done as practicable (e.g., burning, forest management, etc.) on KDFWR-owned and –managed lands by regional staff or through grant projects.

Obtain more accurate population estimate

- Paul suggested the Commission consider obtaining a quote to update the existing SPR Model using data collected from 2019-current.

Proposed elk draw enhancements

- Proposed redraw program would use permits not purchased for use by successful applicants, and those would be offered to loyalty applicants.
- Loyalty applicants are a relatively small number of people with perhaps 100 individuals over 20 years.
- This proposal offers a tangible reward by offering loyalty applicants to be included in a smaller pool (assuming there are unclaimed elk tags within a given year, which has been in the case in the past).
- Gabe suggested an early date by which successful loyalty applicants can claim such tags; this would allow more time for planning purposes.
- Paul Horn asked KDFWR to compile some data to illustrate how many unclaimed permits could be expected.
- Gabe acknowledged that details of the loyalty redraw program will have to be fleshed out by the WG before taking a detailed proposal to the Commission for consideration.
- Donald Thomas suggested the Elk Program evaluate how to offer permits to loyalty applicants based on their application history (i.e., by sex or hunting method).

Closing discussion

- Donald Thomas asked what timeline would be needed to get a SPR Model with confidence intervals in the range of 1,500 elk.
- Matt Springer suggested that a sensitivity analysis could offer such a timeline based on KDFWR's data collected.
- Gabe acknowledged that attempting models at a smaller scale will yield smaller sample sizes that will continue to negatively impact confidence intervals.
- Paul Horn noted that KDFWR should use all tools and data available to enhance any model used to evaluate elk abundance.
- Gabe stated the important takeaway should be that the initial iteration of the SRP model with limited data reflects a growing elk herd at 95% confidence intervals. By continuing enhanced data collection, incorporation into a new SPR model will offer significant improvements with smaller confidence intervals.
- Matt Springer noted the KDFWR life table still offers management value and should identifying any declining trends, so should be a complement to the SPR Model.

- KDFWR staff will bring forward data/information on HAA acreages, habitat work done to date, and stats related to the proposed loyalty redraw program.
- Dan Crank asked the WG to maintain interest in non-consumptive uses associated with elk, with particular emphasis on elk viewing. While many people in KY do not hunt elk, those could become supporters of elk and conservation in Kentucky if offered the opportunity to establish positive elk viewing opportunities.
- Further, KDFWR recommended that considerations for elk-viewing opportunities be proactive with consideration only given to areas with potential for permanent or long-term viewing opportunities.
- Next Elk Working Group meeting was tentatively set for 9:00 AM on 02/09/21.