

KY Elk Working Group

Virtual Meeting

December 8, 2020

Members:

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

Dan Crank, KDFWR

Chris Garland, KDFWR

Gabe Jenkins, 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

Purpose (Paul Horn): Goal is for group to discuss high-priority topics related to KDFWR's elk program.

Habitat Enhancement (Chris Garland):

- Primary concern is loss of quality herbaceous habitat/forage associated with grassland/meadow habitats as a result of the decline in the coal economy.
- Recent important habitat stewardship projects mentioned by KDFWR include Dewey Lake, Paul Van Booven WMA, and others. It was noted by KDFWR that many/most of these are all RMEF-funded projects.
- KDFWR desires larger scale habitat projects at the landscape level.

Public Access (Gabe Jenkins):

- KDFWR *owns* only a few thousand acres in the entire 16-county elk zone.
- This lack of land ownership is a huge challenge for habitat stewardship and public access.
- It is hard for KDFWR to commit time and funds to habitat work on coal property that could change ownership every couple of years, often resulting in new mining activity in areas of recent habitat stewardship work.
- KDFWR now has several land owner agreements that allow for increased public elk hunting access on private lands.
- Those programs account for approximately 300,000 acres of public access in the elk

zone (on private land).

Zones & Season Timing (Dan Crank):

- First KY elk hunt in 2001.
 - KY went to a Unit system in 2019, and hunters apply for a particular unit.
- Elk behavior has changed significantly since the early 2000s, with significant human pressure resulting in elk being less visible.
- Until 2019, elk were subject to continuous hunting pressure from Sept – Jan each year.
- Now hunting pressure is lessened with implementation of more discrete hunting-method seasons with breaks in between.
- Until recent years, hunters could switch hunting Units- this is no longer the case.

Research Update (Dan Crank):

Historic:

- Initially, almost every reintroduced elk was radio-collared; currently not feasible.
- Little research was conducted from 2005 – 2010.
- Intensive research resumed with John Hast (PhD) and Brittany Slabach (MS) in 2010.

Recent:

- In Jan 2020, KDFWR deployed collars and vaginal implant transmitters in 25 cows to evaluate calf survival and recruitment.
- By summer 2020, 21 vaginal-implant transmitters (VITs) remained and each located with calves; 17 calves still alive.
- KDFWR goal is to deploy 33 more collars and VITs in Jan – Feb 2021.
- Second goal is to deploy/maintain a minimum of 100 radio-collars on elk in the near term to collect population data.
- Opportunistic data collection continues to assess impacts of brainworm (*P. tenuis*).
- Micronutrient levels are being investigated to build a baseline level for elk; low levels of Copper and Selenium have been detected as well as high levels of Sulphur in some elk.

Poaching & Rewards (Paul Horn):

- KDFWR has a solid reward program but does not receive much input from the public.
- Law Enforcement suspects lack of participation due to fear of reporters/informants being made known in local communities.
- Since 2009, number of verified cases of poaching or illegal take has been low with respect to elk population size (average < 15/year).

Geographic Goals (Paul Horn & Gabe Jenkins):

- Western portion of elk zone is predominately public land (USFS > 70%) but few elk due lack of grassland/meadow habitat.
- In this area, Whitley and McCreary counties were the most recent addition to the 16-county elk zone to connect with the TN elk herd for enhanced genetic diversity.
- KDFWR goal in adding these two western counties was to create a more contiguous management area between KY and TN.

- Steven Dobeey suggested that we offer Daniel Boone NF a seat in the Working Group.
- Gabe Jenkins supported the suggestion, while noting that DBNF manages approximately 600K acres in the KY elk zone.
- It was commented that a partnership with DBNF could result in opportunities for landscape-scale habitat and access projects.

Closing Remarks:

- Donald Thomas (Rep for KY Hunting Guides) made suggestions for several regulatory amendments:
 - Decrease cow tags by 50% for 2021.
 - Close cow season
 - Decrease archery tags by 50% and move to after Bull Firearm Seasons.
 - Start bull rifle season the first Sat in Oct.
 - KDFWR establish same “contract” for all landowners involved in a public access program.
 - Establish mandatory online elk hunter education for permit recipients.
 - KDFWR should offer online elk hunting guide application process.
- Chris Garland asked for recommendations be sent to KDFWR for consideration.
- Steven Dobeey suggested adding the topic of Land Acquisitions to future agendas because increased land ownership by KDFWR would resolve two primary roadblocks (hesitancy to implement habitat stewardship on private land and general public access).
- Josh Lillard stated that he had received questions about consistency on ATV/UTV use on areas in the elk zone.
- Donald Thomas and Greg Watts brought up the issues and difficulties with enforcement of livestock and ATV issues on the HAA’s and WMA’s in the elk zone.
- KDFWR noted this prohibition was in place on all WMAs.
- Likewise, it was noted that private coal lands open to public access via a Hunter Access Agreement were generally resistant to off-road use if the land was still under a bond release from mining activities.
- In short, off-road vehicles would damage trees/vegetation planted for restoration efforts associated with bond agreement, and damage could negate bond or make the 5-year restoration window restart.
- In closing, Gabe Jenkins suggested each Working Group member offer their top three goals or discussion topics at the next meeting.
- Next meeting set for Tuesday January 12, 2021.