

ELK HERD UNIT MANAGEMENT PLAN
Elk Herd Unit # 8
NORTH SLOPE
December 2023

BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

Daggett and Summit counties--Boundary begins SR-150 and the Summit-Duchesne county line at Hayden Pass (summit of the Uinta Mountains); north on SR-150 to the Utah-Wyoming state line; east on this state line to the Utah-Colorado state line; south on this state line to the Green River; west along this river to Flaming Gorge Reservoir; west along the south shoreline of this reservoir to Cart Creek; south along this creek to US-191; south on US-191 to the Uintah-Daggett County line (summit of the Uinta Mountains); west along the summit of the Uinta mountains to SR-150 at Hayden Pass.

Unit 8a North Slope, Summit Subunit

Summit County--Boundary begins at the Utah-Wyoming state line and SR-150; south on SR-150 to the Summit-Duchesne county line at Hayden Pass; east on this county line to the head of Burnt Fork drainage bottom(Divide Pass/Island Lake); north along this drainage bottom to the Utah-Wyoming state line; west on this state line to SR-150.

Unit 8b North Slope, West Daggett Subunit

Daggett and Summit counties--Boundary begins at the Burnt Fork drainage bottom and the Utah-Wyoming state line; east along this state line to the Flaming Gorge Reservoir main channel western shoreline(on the east side of Lucerne Point); west around Lucerne Point to the Utah-Wyoming state line (includes Lucerne Point); west along the state line to the western shore of Flaming Gorge Reservoir; southeast along this shoreline to Cart Creek; south along this creek to US-191; south on US-191 to the Uintah-Daggett County line (summit of the Uinta Mountains); west on this county line to the head of Burnt Fork drainage bottom(Divide Pass/Island Lake); north along this drainage bottom to the Utah-Wyoming state line.

Unit 8b North Slope, Three Corners Subunit

Daggett County--Boundary begins at the Flaming Gorge Reservoir main channel western shoreline on the east side of Lucerne Point at the Utah-Wyoming state line; east on this state line to the Utah-Colorado state line; south on this state line to the Green River; west along this river to the Flaming Gorge Reservoir west shoreline; west along this shoreline to the Utah-Wyoming state line; east along the state line to Lucerne Point; east around Lucerne Point to the Utah-Wyoming State line.

UNIT MANAGEMENT GOALS

Manage for a population of healthy animals capable of providing a broad range of recreational opportunities, including hunting and viewing. Balance elk herd impacts on human needs, such as private property rights, agricultural crops and local economies. Maintain the population at a level that is within the long-term capability of the available habitat to support. This unit will be managed with three subunits (Summit, West Daggett and Three Corners).

Continue habitat projects to improve forage for all wildlife populations. Numerous habitat projects have occurred within this unit over the past decades. Past and proposed projects include: prescribed fires in pinyon-juniper areas followed by aerial reseeding with forbs, grasses and browse species; mechanical treatment of pinyon-juniper and conifer encroachment in critical

browse / grassland areas; and working with land agencies and livestock grazers to improve overall forage conditions for both wildlife and livestock.

UNIT MANAGEMENT OBJECTIVES

Habitat

Enhance forage production on a minimum of 10,000 acres of elk habitat, through direct range improvements to maintain population management objectives.

Continue working with private landowners and federal, state, and local agencies to maintain and protect critical and existing winter range from future losses.

Continue providing improved habitat security and escapement opportunities for elk by working with federal agencies on motorized vehicle travel plans.

Population

Target Winter Herd Size – Manage elk numbers to achieve a target population size of 2,300 wintering elk.

Radio telemetry data confirm, under certain conditions, some animals move back and forth across the subunit boundaries. Therefore, ideally, the entire unit will be surveyed in the same year and the distribution of elk during the trend count will be taken into account when determining if the subpopulations are actually above or below objective.

Subunit population objectives are as follows:

Summit (8a) –	300 elk
West Daggett (8b) –	1,300 elk
Three Corners (8c) –	700 elk

Bull Harvest Strategies (set in statewide elk plan)

On the Summit (8a) and West Daggett (8b) subunits bull harvest will occur under a general season “Any Bull” hunting strategy.

On the Three Corners (8c) subunit bull harvest will be managed under a limited entry strategy with an age objective of 5.5-6 years for the average age of bulls harvested.

CURRENT STATUS OF ELK MANAGEMENT

Habitat

Unit 8a, North Slope / Summit subunit

The steep slopes on the study sites have high erosion potential. However, the understory, especially the bunch grasses, is dense and vigorous and provides adequate soil stabilization. Browse trends on the unit for the key browse species, mountain mahogany, are stable to slightly up. The study sites in this area continue to remain stable.

Unit 8bc, North Slope / West Daggett and Three Corners subunits

Overall range trend within these subunits has been greatly impacted by recent drought, which has reduced forage production and plant survival. Browse communities at lower elevations, especially sagebrush, suffered die-offs from the sustained drought. However, where these browse die-offs have occurred, perennial native grasses have increased.

The greatest positive impact to this unit occurred from the 2002 Mustang / Dutch John wild fire, which burned 22,000+ acres. The fire area was reseeded and has significantly increased forage from perennial forbs and grasses.

The Utah Division of Wildlife Resources Big Game Range Inventory crew assessed the North Slope permanent Big Game Range Trend Study sites during 2020. Overall, the majority of the sites are in good condition. Bear Top Mountain remains in poor condition due to abundance of annual grasses and lack of perennial forb and browse cover. Clay Basin Bench winter range is also in very poor condition due to lack of lost browse and perennial grasses. The key browse species are principally Wyoming big sagebrush, mountain big sagebrush and mountain browse species such as true mountain mahogany. Areas where sagebrush is the key species have remained stable, but recruitment of young plants has generally remained low. The perennial forb understories associated with mountain big sagebrush and Wyoming big sagebrush have stayed low, but have shown stable to upward trends for perennial grasses. Annual grasses, namely cheatgrass (*Bromus tectorum*), have increased across sites, placing sites at increased risk for fire.

Factors That Reduce Carrying Capacity of Unit

Several factors influence the population objective including: agricultural depredation, competition for forage with domestic livestock, over-utilization of winter browse in areas of heavy concentration of deer and elk during hard winters.

Some of the winter range in this unit is located in Wyoming where that state also has elk depredation and concerns with elk numbers. Management authority for elk once they enter Wyoming is outside the Utah DWR's jurisdiction.

Elk within this unit are sometimes in conflict with both agriculture and ranching. This is especially relevant on winter range and yearlong elk range, but also concerns over elk use on summer range conflicting with livestock grazing on USFS and BLM lands.

Completed Habitat Improvement Projects

Over the past decades, many habitat improvement projects have occurred that benefit elk and livestock. These include prescribed and wild fire, pinyon-juniper chainings, timber sales, conifer thinning, guzzler installation, etc.

Range area and approximate ownership

Ownership	Yearlong range		Summer Range		Winter Range	
	Area (acres)	%	Area (acres)	%	Area (acres)	%
Forest Service	15946	85	458890	91	89470	46
Bureau of Land Management	0	0	13933	3	40624	21
Utah State Institutional Trust Lands	314	2	4311	1	21903	11
Native American Trust Lands	0	0	0	0	0	0
Private	2268	12	23905	5	41724	21
Department of Defense	0	0	0	0	0	0
USFWS Refuge	0	0	0	0	0	0
National Parks	0	0	0	0	0	0
Utah State Parks	0	0	0	0	0	0
Utah Division of Wildlife Resources	127	1	1075	<1	2545	1
TOTAL	18655	100	502114	100	196275	100

Number of elk on the unit

When looking at the population objective, the Division has taken into account barriers which include, 1) depredation issues 2) winter range that is beyond division control 3) social and political factors 4) current range improvements 5) future range improvements and 6) range health.

In general, summer elk habitat is extensive within this unit; however, the elk population objective is determined by winter range and impacts of elk on private land agriculture and ranching.

One factor in determining the population objectives for the West Daggett and Summit subunits is winter range. During winters with deep snow, elk move down to lower elevations. Elk conflict with agricultural and ranching practices on private land. Significant depredation occurs in these areas.

The Three Corners subunit consists of a higher percentage of year-round habitat, and also experiences significant depredation on private land year round.

Population

The current population is approximately 2,600 wintering animals (modeled). Subunit numbers are as follows:

- Summit (8a) – 750 elk
- West Daggett (8b) – 1,200 elk
- Three Corners (8c) – 650 elk

BARRIERS TO ACHIEVING UNIT MANAGEMENT OBJECTIVES

Habitat Barriers

- Loss of winter range due to sagebrush die off and resulting cheatgrass expansion
- Poor range conditions during drought years
- Reduced quality summer/transitional range due to conifer dominance
- Conifer invasion of grasslands and browse areas critical for wildlife
- Obtaining USFS NEPA clearances to do habitat work on Forest Service lands

Population Barriers

- Conflicts with antlerless hunt season structure and other hunts
- Difficulty harvesting antlerless elk to maintain populations due to herds staying at difficult areas to hunt
- Resistance by federal land agencies and landowners to increasing the population objective
- Increased use of the Mustang wildfire area by elk from adjacent units

Other Barriers

- Crop Depredation throughout the unit
- Elk use on private rangelands throughout the unit

STRATEGIES FOR REMOVING BARRIERS AND REACHING UNIT MANAGEMENT OBJECTIVES

Habitat Strategies

Monitoring

Continue to monitor permanent range trend studies located throughout the herd unit.

Conduct cooperative seasonal range rides and surveys to evaluate forage condition and utilization.

Actions to Remove Habitat Barriers

Work cooperatively with the USFS and BLM to utilize prescribed burning, mechanical conifer and pinyon/juniper removal, and grazing to enhance elk forage

Utilize antlerless elk harvest to improve or protect forage conditions if and when vegetative declines are attributed to elk over-utilization

Cooperate with and provide input to land management planning efforts dealing with management affecting habitat security, quality and quantity

Population Strategies

Monitoring

Population Size – Utilizing harvest data, aerial trend counts, postseason classification and mortality estimates, a model has been developed to estimate winter population size.

Bull Age Structure – Monitor age class structure of the bull population through harvest surveys, ground classification and aerial counts./classification. Average age of harvest on the Three Corners limited entry subunit will be determined by tooth age data from bull harvest.

Harvest – The primary means of monitoring harvest will be through the statewide mandatory harvest reporting. Achieve the target population size by use of antlerless harvest using a variety of harvest methods and seasons. Bull harvest strategies will be developed through the RAC and Wildlife Board process in accordance with the Statewide Elk Management Plan.

Management Actions to Remove Population Barriers

Continue focused antlerless elk hunts east of Red Creek and around Manila to place pressure on that portion of the elk herd that causes crop and rangeland depredation on private land.

Continue working with federal agencies and private landowners to monitor elk numbers and elk use of the Mustang wildfire area.

Continue private lands only cow hunts to reduce depredation issues in West Daggett.

DURATION OF THIS MANAGEMENT PLAN

This Unit Management Plan was revised in 2023 following the revision of the Statewide Elk Management Plan. This Unit Management Plan will be revised after the next Statewide Elk Management Plan revision to ensure all current management tools are being used. Revision of this plan may also take place as needed to address future issues or incorporate new management strategies. Unit elk plan goals, objectives, recommendations and strategies are constrained within the sideboards set in the Statewide Elk Plan, which supersedes unit plans. It is possible that changes to the Statewide Elk Plan may affect unit plans. Additionally, changes to Utah State Code and/or Administrative Rule may also affect elk plans.