

**ELK HERD UNIT MANAGEMENT PLAN**  
**Elk Herd Unit #9**  
**South Slope**  
**October, 2016**

**BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION**

**Wasatch, Summit, Daggett, Uintah, Duchesne counties** - Boundary begins at the junction of US-40 and SR-87 in Duchesne; north on SR-87 to SR-35; northwest on SR-35 to the Provo River; north along the Provo River to the North Fork Provo River; north along the North Fork Provo River to SR-150; north along SR-150 to the Summit/Duchesne county line (summit of the Uinta Mountains); east along the summit of the Uinta Mountains to US-191; north along US-191 to Cart Creek; north along Cart Creek to Flaming Gorge Reservoir; east along Flaming Gorge Reservoir to the Green River; east along the Green River to the Utah-Colorado state line; south along the Utah-Colorado state line to the White River; west along the Whiter River to the Green River; north along the Green River to the Duchesne River; west along the Duchesne River to US-40 at Myton; west along US-40 to SR-87 in Duchesne. Includes subunits 9a (Yellowstone), 9b (Vernal), 9c (Diamond Mountain) and 9d (Bonanza). **(EXCLUDING ALL INDIAN TRUST LANDS).**

This unit will continue to be managed with four subunits. See Appendix A for subunit boundary descriptions.

**LAND OWNERSHIP**

Ownership	Summer Range		Winter Range	
	Area (acres)	%	Area (acres)	%
Forest Service	857,114	79%	55,705	8%
Bureau of Land Management	77,627	7%	173,728	26%
Utah State Institutional Trust Lands	8,861	#1%	25,800	4%
Native American Trust Lands	30,119	3%	228,531	34%
Private	88,798	8%	180,042	27%
Department of Defense	0	0	0	0
USFWS Refuge	0	0	125	#1%
National Parks	7,240	#1%	9,486	1%
Utah State Parks	0	0	2,862	#1%
Utah Division of Wildlife Resources	11,398	1%	1237	#1%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1,081,157</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>677,516</b>	<b>100</b>

**UNIT MANAGEMENT GOALS**

Manage for a population of healthy animals capable of providing a broad range of recreational opportunities including hunting and viewing. Consider impacts of the elk herd on other wildlife and land uses including private property rights, agricultural crops and local economies. Maintain the population at a level that is within the long-term capacity of the available habitat.

Existing habitat needs to be protected and crucial habitat needs to be improved. A number of habitat projects have occurred within this unit over the past 20 years. Past and proposed projects include commercial lumber harvest, prescribed fire, wildfire, mechanical treatment of brush, etc. Conifer domination on summer and transition range needs to be addressed and natural fire intervals in the conifer zone re-established. Old and decadent stands of mountain sagebrush need to be thinned and regenerated on the winter range to minimize winter depredation on lower elevation agricultural areas. Critical private property parcels need to be protected from development through conservation easements, acquisitions, etc.

Remove or significantly reduce year round resident elk from all low elevation agricultural areas and from along the Tribal/agricultural boundary to increase tolerance of elk. Depredation due to elk coming off of tribal lands into agricultural areas has become unmanageable and will continue to increase and spread if not addressed. These animals are not readily available to the public for recreation and are very difficult to manage due to property ownership issues.

## **UNIT MANAGEMENT OBJECTIVES**

### **Population**

Target Winter Herd Size Objective– Manage towards an objective of a total of 8,000 wintering elk. The herd will be distributed between two wintering subpopulations:

- |        |  |                        |
|--------|--|------------------------|
| 9a     | - Yellowstone wintering subpopulation                      | - approximately 5,000* |
| 9b,c,d | - Vernal/Diamond Mountain/Bonanza wintering subpopulations | - approximately 3,000  |

\*Approximately 90% of the elk that winter on the Yellowstone subunit are found on Ute Tribal Trust Lands, which makes it nearly impossible to get enough antlerless harvest to control this population without antlerless harvest occurring on Tribal lands. In 2012 the Ute Tribe stopped antlerless harvest of elk that winter on their lands. Until the Tribe decides to limit the growth of the herd it will be nearly impossible for the state to stabilize or reduce this herd towards the objective. The state will continue to make every attempt to reduce depredation on agricultural areas and will try it's best to maintain the population near the current level through antlerless harvest on non-tribal lands. If the Tribe agrees to limit the growth of this elk herd and a new population objective is agreed upon, this plan will be updated at that time.

Radio collar data on the South Slope confirm that while the subunit populations are fairly distinct wintering populations, elk sometimes move back and forth across the subunit boundaries during the winter when aerial counts are conducted depending on conditions. Therefore, the entire unit will be surveyed at one time and the distribution of elk during the trend count will be taken into consideration when determining if the subpopulations are above or below objective.

Limited Entry Age Objective - Manage for a mean age of harvested bulls between 6.5-7.0 years of age on subunit 9c (Diamond Mountain) as dictated by the Statewide Elk Management plan. The remainder of the unit will be managed for general season Any Bull hunting. Limited Entry Youth Any Bull Elk permits will also be issued for the Any Bull portion of the unit.

**Habitat**

Maintain sufficient habitat to support elk herds at and reduce competition for forage between elk and livestock.

Winter Range - Maintain the existing crucial winter range. Improve the quality of at least 5,000 acres of winter range within the next 5 years.

Summer range -Improve the quality of at least 5,000 acres of summer and transitional range over the next 5 years.

**CURRENT STATUS OF ELK MANAGEMENT**

**Population**

The post season 2015 population estimate for the unit is 10,500 elk, split between the Yellowstone (7,800) and the Vernal/Diamond/Bonanza (2,700) subunits.

<b>Recent Winter Trend Counts by subunit</b>			
	<b>Year</b>	<b>Trend Count</b>	<b>Population Estimate</b>
Yellowstone	2004	3,305	5,000
Yellowstone	2007	4,745	5,850
Yellowstone	2010	4,721	5,900
Yellowstone	2013	6,010	7,500
	<b>Year</b>	<b>Trend Count</b>	<b>Population Estimate</b>
Vernal/ Diamond/Bonanza	2004	1,850	2,470
Vernal/ Diamond/Bonanza	2007	2,604	3,225
Vernal/ Diamond/Bonanza	2010	2,346	2,935
Vernal/ Diamond/Bonanza	2013	2,336	2,925

**Habitat**

Twenty vegetative trend studies were monitored by the Utah Division of Wildlife Range Crew in 2015. In 2015, the browse and herbaceous understory components, on the majority of studies in his unit, showed some improvement since the 2003 drought related sagebrush die off. Most of the improvements occurred in the higher elevation mtn. brush and mountain big sagebrush communities. However, the most crucial winter range areas in the lower elevation Wyoming sagebrush communities continue to struggle and are only in Fair condition. There are several critical winter range sites that are in Poor or Very Poor range condition on the Vernal subunit due to cheat grass invasion. Those areas should be managed to protect the remaining desirable vegetation. Overutilization by elk of those areas should be avoided.

When looking at elk population objectives, the Division has taken into account factors 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) overall range health. As these factors change the Division will adjust the population objective as needed.

Several factors impact the ability of this unit to support larger elk populations including agricultural depredation, competition for forage with domestic & feral livestock, over utilization of winter browse in areas of heavy concentration of deer and elk during hard winters.

**Completed habitat improvement projects**

Over the past 5 years numerous habitat improvement projects have been completed that benefit elk on this unit. These include, both prescribed and wild fire, pinyon-juniper chainings, conifer thinning, lop & scatter, Dixie harrow projects, etc.

This table lists specific habitat improvements that have occurred in the last 5 years.

<b>Completed Project</b>	<b>Acres</b>
Raven Ridge harrow project	500
Simplot Phosphates Browse Seeding.	80
Salt Creek Ponderosa Pine Thinning Project	660
Red Fleet Phase II/Maintenance	320
Davis Draw Sagebrush Project	425
Calder Reservoir Terrestrial Habitat Improvement Project	225
Big Brush Creek Big Game and Sage Grouse Habitat Improvement	515
Mail Draw Reseeding- Diamond Mountain	5
Sagebrush Project in Davis Draw-Diamond Mountain	180
Deadman Bench follow-up herbicide	1,005
Reseeding- Diamond Mountain	40
Taylor Mountain Greater Sage Grouse Habitat Improvement	645
Burnt Mill Spring Ponderosa Pine Thinning Project	40
Burnt Mill Spring Ponderosa Pine Thinning Project	40
Simplot Browse Plots	50
Dry Fork Hazardous Fuel Project Phase II	2,880
Marshall Draw / Warren Draw Lop and Scatter	945
Mail Draw Water Development Project	0
Little Mountain Lop and Scatter phase II	475
Little Mountain Lop and Scatter Phase I	470
Blue Mountain Chain Harrow and Seeding	600
Blair Springs Bullhog	450
Deadman Bench Harrow Phase III	515
Six Mile Slashing	1,700
Taylor Mountain Fire--BLM ESR Supplement	2,020
Taylor Mountain Fire--Private Lands	305
Diamond Rim Mastication	610
White Sage Slashing	605
Brown's Park Browse Plots	65
<b>Total</b>	<b>16,370</b>

### **Proposed Habitat Projects**

Following is a partial list of proposed habitat enhancement projects on unit 9. Others will be added as opportunities arise.

<b>Proposed Project</b>	<b>Acres</b>
Taylor Mountain Fire Rehabilitation	880
Crouse Reservoir Lop and Scatter	2,350
Crouse Canyon Brows Plots	80
Mail Draw Shrub and Forb Project	55
Shiner Basin	3,700
Blue Mountain Chain Harrow and Seeding	504
Cottonwood Springs Bullhog - Lop & Scatter	4,130
Cart Creek Watershed Treatment Phase 2	436
Grassy Bench Lop and Scatter	1200
Hatch Cove/Diamond Mtn Lop & Scatter	1620
Little Hole WMA Browse	40
Mail Draw Shrub and Forb Project Phase II	38
Little Davenport Slashing/Lop & Scatter	1800
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>13,880</b>

### **BARRIERS TO ACHIEVING UNIT MANAGEMENT OBJECTIVES**

#### **Habitat Barriers**

- Loss of winter range due to loss of sagebrush and resulting cheat grass expansion.
- Poor range conditions during drought years.
- Loss of wildlife forage due to an increase in feral horses on the critical ranges.
- Poor quality summer/transitional range due to conifer dominance.
- Loss of winter range due to oil & gas development.
- Conifer and PJ invasion of grasslands and browse areas critical for wildlife

#### **Population Barriers**

- Difficulty harvesting enough antlerless elk to maintain populations due to the presence of refuge areas like Tribal lands, Dinosaur National Monument, and private property.
- Two management directions (UDWR and Ute Tribe) for the same population.

#### **Other Barriers**

- Agricultural crop depredation.
- Establishment of year round resident herds in lower elevation agricultural areas: Arcadia, Jensen, Ouray, lower Duchesne River, lower Uinta River, Pleasant Valley, etc.
- Private property owners that inhibit the removal of depredating animals from agricultural areas.
- Elk use of private rangelands on the Diamond Mountain Subunit.
- USFS lack of manpower and funding to conduct NEPA clearances for habitat improvements.

## **STRATEGIES FOR REMOVING BARRIERS AND REACHING UNIT MANAGEMENT OBJECTIVES**

### **Habitat Barriers**

#### **Management Actions to Remove Habitat Barriers**

- Continue to monitor permanent range trend studies located throughout winter range.
- Annual on the ground habitat assessment surveys.
- Cooperate with USFS & BLM to reinstitute natural fire interval in conifer zone to improve elk habitat.
- Cooperate with Ute Tribe & sportsmen groups to remove feral horses from critical winter range.
- Cooperate with USFS to treat cheat grass expansion and reseed problem areas in old burn scars between Deep Creek and Uinta Canyon.
- Cooperate with BLM & the Ute Tribe to increase vegetative under story and reduce Pinyon Juniper invasion of the sagebrush zone.
- Cooperate with Simplot to maximize elk habitat on phosphate mine to reduce winter depredation on adjacent agricultural areas.
- Cooperate with the Ute Tribe & BIA to improve and re-vegetate winter range areas like Clay Basin and Neola North to reduce cheat grass dominance and increase desirable forage for elk.
- Utilize targeted antlerless elk harvest to reduce the impacts of elk use on critical deer winter range areas on the Vernal Subunit.
- Target resident elk herds in agricultural areas to reduce depredation impacts on private property shift elk back to public lands.

### **Population Barriers**

#### **Management Actions to Remove Habitat Barriers**

- Pursue a cooperative management agreement with the Ute Tribe concerning the elk that we cooperatively manage that specifies a population target to jointly manage for.
- Cooperate with the Ute Tribe to remove enough antlerless elk from this herd to maintain the agreed upon population level.
- Provide private landowners with hunts and private lands permits that increase hunting pressure on private lands to pressure elk back to public lands.

### **Other Barriers**

#### **Management Actions to Remove Other Barriers**

- Whenever feasible hunts will be targeted to address year round elk herds in agricultural areas to reduce depredation.
- Provide private landowners permits and hunting options that increase hunting pressure on private lands to pressure elk back to public lands.
- Cooperate with Ute Tribe to ensure that hunting pressure or removal occurs on Tribal lands when depredation hunts are held on adjacent private property to reduce or remove problem animals.
- If depredation hunts, tribal hunts, and landowner harvest are insufficient for removal of resident elk herds in low elevation agricultural areas, aggressive DWR removal will be implemented following approved action plans.
- Cooperate with Ute Tribe to ensure hunting pressure continues on Tribal lands to prevent elk from becoming year round residents on the winter range.
- Cooperate with Ute Tribe to increase consistency of Tribal harvest data to improve population estimates.
- Cooperate with UDOT to pursue fencing of Hwy 40 to reduce vehicle mortality.

## APPENDIX A

### Unit 9a South Slope, Yellowstone Subunit

**Wasatch, Summit, Duchesne, Uintah counties** -- Boundary begins at SR-87 and US-40 in Duchesne; north on SR-87 to SR-35; northwest on SR-35 to the Provo River; north along this river to North Fork Provo River; north along this river to SR-150; east and north on SR-150 to the Summit-Duchesne county line (summit of the Uinta Mountains) at Hayden Pass; east along the summit of the Uinta Mountains to the Dry Fork-Whiterocks drainage divide; south atop this divide to USFS Trail #025; southwest on this trail to Whiterocks Lake and the East Fork of the Whiterocks River; south along this river to the Whiterocks River; south along this river to the Uinta River; south along this river to the Duchesne River; west along this river to US-40 at Myton; west on US-40 to SR-87 in Duchesne.

### Unit 9b South Slope, Vernal Subunit

**Daggett and Uintah counties** -- Boundary begins at the Dry Fork-Whiterocks drainage divide and the Daggett-Uintah county line (summit of the Uinta Mountains); east along the summit of the Uinta Mountains to US-191; north along US-191 to Cart Creek; north along Cart Creek to Flaming Gorge Reservoir; east along Flaming Gorge Reservoir to the Green River; east along the Green River to Gorge Creek; south along Gorge Creek to the summit and the head of Davenport Draw; south along the USFS-Private Land boundary on the west side of Davenport Draw and continuing south along this USFS boundary to the BLM boundary on the Diamond Mountain rim; southeast along the Diamond Mountain rim to the Diamond Mountain road (Jones Hole Road); southwest along this road to the Brush Creek road; south along this road to the Island Park/Rainbow Park road; east along this road to the Dinosaur National Monument boundary; northeast along this boundary to the Utah-Colorado state line; south along this state line to the Green River; south along this river to the Duchesne River; north along this river to the Uinta River; north along this river to Whiterocks river; north along this river to the East Fork of the Whiterocks River; north along this river to Whiterocks Lake and USFS Trail #025; northeast on this trail to the Dry Fork-Whiterocks drainage divide; north atop this divide to the Daggett-Uintah county line (summit of the Uinta Mountains).

### Unit 9c South Slope, Diamond Mountain Subunit

**Daggett and Uintah counties**--Boundary begins at the Utah-Colorado state line and the Green River at Browns Park; west along this river to Gorge Creek; south along this creek to the summit and the head of Davenport Draw and the USFS boundary; south on this boundary on the west side of Davenport Draw and continuing south on this boundary to the BLM boundary on the Diamond Mountain Rim; east and south along this rim to the Diamond Mountain road (Jones Hole Road); south and west on this road to the Brush Creek road; south on this road to the Island Park/Rainbow Park road; east on this road to the Dinosaur National Monument boundary; north and east on this boundary to the Utah-Colorado state line; north on this state line to the Green River.

### Unit 9d South Slope, Bonanza Subunit

**Uintah County** -- Boundary begins at the Colorado-Utah state line and the White River; west along this river to the Green River; north along this river to the Colorado-Utah state line; south along this state line to the White River.