

ELK HERD UNIT MANAGEMENT PLAN
Elk Herd Unit #9A
YELLOWSTONE
2023

BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

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 **(EXCLUDES ALL NATIVE AMERICAN TRUST LANDS)**.

UNIT MANAGEMENT GOALS

- Manage for a population of healthy animals providing a broad range of recreational opportunities including hunting and viewing
- Consider impacts of the elk herd on other wildlife and land uses including agricultural crops. Maintain the population at a level within the long-term capacity of the available habitat
- Encourage elk to return to public lands by adjusting hunt strategies and hunting pressure

UNIT MANAGEMENT OBJECTIVES

Habitat -

- Maintain sufficient habitat to support elk herds at population objectives
- Encourage elk to remain on public lands as much as possible throughout the year
- Maintain the existing crucial elk habitat across the unit
- Work with partners to improve and protect the quality of elk habitat.

Population - Past management practices have resulted in elk emigrating to Tribal Trust lands or private property in the fall where they are not available to the public. The state has no management authority over elk on Tribal Trust lands. One of the objectives of the 2022 Statewide Elk Plan is to try to encourage more elk to return to public lands by changing hunt strategies. To achieve this objective while providing landowners more tools to benefit from elk on their lands and to reduce elk damage on private property, new hunt options are recommended. Elk coming from tribal or other refuge areas are not readily available to the public for recreation and are very difficult to manage due to jurisdiction and private property issues. To help landowners address these issues, Private-Lands-Only antlerless elk permits have been available since 2016 and have proven to be a successful tool from August 1-January 31st. To further increase tolerance of elk on private property by addressing the number of bull elk on these lands, it is recommended that a Private-Lands-Only general season Any Bull elk hunt with extended season dates for the Uinta Basin agricultural areas be instituted starting in 2025. This hunt will allow landowners an additional opportunity to harvest bull elk from their private property.

Target Winter Herd Size Objective - Manage towards an objective of 3,500 wintering elk on the unit, this estimate will exclude Tribal Trust Lands where the Division does not have management authority. This represents a change to how the unit population estimate was calculated in the past, and is why the objective is being reduced from 5,000 elk to 3,500 elk.

Population estimates will be based on elk that winter on non-Tribal Trust Lands where the state has management authority. The Division will continue to survey elk on tribal lands to maintain an estimate of total population for future management decisions, but the state will manage the herd toward the objective of elk on lands where the Division has management authority.

Radio collar data across the south slope of the Uintas confirm that while the unit boundaries represent fairly distinct wintering populations, some elk occasionally move back and forth across the boundary between the Yellowstone and the Vernal during the winter when aerial counts are conducted depending on winter conditions. Therefore, the Yellowstone and Vernal units will continue to be surveyed at the same time and the distribution of elk during the trend counts will be taken into consideration when determining whether the populations are above or below objective.

CURRENT STATUS OF ELK MANAGEMENT

Habitat - Existing habitat needs to be protected and crucial habitat needs to continue to be improved. Several prescribed burns and wildfires have significantly increased and improved elk habitat on the Yellowstone unit over the past 20 years. The Petty Mtn., Pigeon Water & Burnt Mill understory prescribed burns (6,000), the Neola North fire (43,000 acres) and the East Fork & Center Creek fires (89,000 acres) resulted in increased elk habitat by reducing conifer and increasing available grasses.

Range Area and Approximate Ownership

	Summer Range		Winter Range	
Ownership	Area (acres)	%	Area (acres)	%
Forest Service	593,508	94	23,708	7
Bureau of Land Management	0	0	0	0
Utah State Trust Lands	0	0	0	0
Native American Trust Lands	30,141	5	202,749	59
Private	4,745	1	118,651	34
Department of Defense	0	0	0	0
Utah State Parks	0	0	0	0
Utah Division of Wildlife Resources	0	0	14	1
TOTAL	628,394	100	345,122	100

Population - The post-season 2022 population estimate is 3,050 elk on the Yellowstone unit. This estimate excludes elk located on Tribal Trust Lands.

Winter Trend Counts by subunit (excludes Tribal Trust Lands)			
	Year	Trend Count	Population Estimate
Yellowstone	2013	1680	2,100
Yellowstone	2019	2,441	3,050

BARRIERS TO ACHIEVING UNIT MANAGEMENT OBJECTIVES

Habitat - There are issues with poor quality summer/transitional range due to conifer dominance. Drought conditions can be a real limitation for elk habitat. Over utilization of winter browse in areas of heavy concentrations of deer and elk during hard winters is also a limiting factor. Decreasing winter range due to loss of sagebrush, resulting in cheatgrass expansion and the loss of wildlife forage due to an increase in feral horses on critical ranges are also a cause for concern. Pinyon Juniper invasion of grasslands and browse areas critical for wildlife continues to be a challenge.

Population Barriers - It is challenging to maintain elk distribution on public lands due to refuge areas on tribal trust lands and private property. Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) could reduce future elk production if it becomes widespread across the unit at a high prevalence rate.

Other Barriers - The primary factor limiting this unit from supporting larger elk populations is agricultural depredation and competition for forage with domestic and feral livestock. There are consistent conflicts in the spring and summer with large numbers of elk in agricultural areas, such as Arcadia, Duchesne River corridor, lower Uinta River, Mtn. Home, Clay Basin, Bluebell, Neola, and others. The inability to remove depredating animals from agricultural areas due to tribal trust lands or private lands exacerbates the conflict

STRATEGIES FOR REMOVING BARRIERS AND REACHING UNIT MANAGEMENT OBJECTIVES

Habitat

- Cooperate with USFS to reinstitute a natural fire interval in the conifer zone to improve elk habitat.
- Cooperate with USFS & sportsman's groups to reseed after wildfires and prescribed burns.
- Cooperate with Ute Tribe, County, USFS & sportsmen to remove feral horses from the unit.
- Cooperate with USFS to treat cheatgrass and reseed problem areas in the Neola North burn scar between White Rocks Canyon and Uinta Canyon.
- Cooperate with the Ute Tribe to increase vegetative under story and reduce Pinyon & Juniper encroachment into the sagebrush zone.
- Cooperate with the Ute Tribe to improve and re-vegetate winter range areas like Clay Basin and the Neola North fire area to reduce cheat grass dominance and increase desirable forage for elk.
- If drought conditions become serious enough to limit forage availability, emergency drought permits may be approved by the Wildlife Board to reduce elk density.

- Critical private property parcels need to be protected from habitat loss through measures like the Young Living conservation easement that recently protected 11,500 acres in the Utah area, while keeping it in agricultural production.

Population

- Encourage elk to remain on public lands by adjusting hunt strategies to reduce hunting pressure where elk are commonly pushed onto refuge areas. Implement Private Lands Only bull and cow hunts with long season dates to encourage elk back onto public lands.
- As funds are available, pursue a GPS collar study for the Yellowstone unit to better understand the effects of hunting in relation to refuge areas, better define habitat classification and identify migration corridors and future wildlife crossing sites, etc
- Monitor CWD prevalence across the unit in accordance with the statewide CWD management plan and assist Utah Department of Agriculture and Food in monitoring elk farms/ranches for compliance.

Other Barriers

- Provide private landowners with Private Lands Only cow and bull permits with long seasons to increase tolerance of elk or remove elk by increasing hunting pressure on private lands to push elk back to public lands.
- Coordinate with the Ute Tribe to try to remove elk that are causing problems in agricultural areas adjacent to Tribal Trust lands.
- Whenever feasible, hunts will be targeted to address elk herds in agricultural areas to reduce depredation and fence damage and shift elk back to public lands.
- If Private Lands Only hunts, depredation hunts, tribal hunts, and landowner harvest are insufficient to reduce elk herds in low elevation agricultural areas, DWR removal will be implemented following approved action plans.

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.