

**ELK HERD UNIT MANAGEMENT PLAN**  
**Elk Herd Unit #9 B,C,D**  
**VERNAL/BONANZA/DIAMOND**  
**2023**

**BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION**

**Daggett, Uintah, Duchesne counties** - Boundary begins at the Green River and the Utah-Colorado state line; west along the Green River to Flaming Gorge Reservoir; west along the south shoreline of Flaming Gorge 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 this summit to the Dry Fork-Whiterocks drainage divide; southwest along the divide to USFS Trail #025 and Whiterocks Lake; south along the lake and trail to 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; south along this river to the Green River; south along this river to the White River; east along this river to the Utah-Colorado state line; north on this state line to the Green River. EXCLUDES ALL NATIVE AMERICAN TRUST LANDS WITHIN THIS BOUNDARY.

**Any Bull Elk Unit Boundaries**

**Unit 9b 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). EXCLUDES ALL NATIVE AMERICAN TRUST LANDS WITHIN THIS BOUNDARY.

**Unit 9d 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. EXCLUDES ALL NATIVE AMERICAN TRUST LANDS WITHIN THIS BOUNDARY.

**Limited Entry Bull Elk Unit Boundaries**

**Unit 9c 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 Gorge Creek to the USFS/private land boundary at the head of Davenport Draw; south along the USFS/private land boundary on the west side of Davenport Draw to the BLM boundary; south along the BLM boundary approximately one-third of a mile to the rim of Diamond Mountain; south and easterly along this rim until the rim intersects 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 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 and reduce competition for forage between elk and livestock
- 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 areas of refuge such as tribal trust lands, private property or the Dinosaur National Monument where they are not available to the public. 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 3,000 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. Because tribal lands only comprise a small portion of elk habitat on this unit, the objective was not adjusted.

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 boundaries between units and subunits during the winter when aerial counts are conducted depending on winter conditions. Therefore, the Yellowstone and Vernal/Diamond/Bonanza 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.

**Bull Elk Harvest Objectives** - As per the Statewide Elk Management Plan, harvest strategies are used to provide diverse hunting opportunities for the public. The subunit specific harvest strategies are as follows:

- **Subunit 9B** - This is a general season any bull hunting unit. Limited Entry Youth Any Bull Elk permits are available on this subunit on a statewide basis.

- **Subunit 9C** - This is a limited entry bull elk unit with a mean age harvest objective of 6.0-6.5 years old.
- **Subunit 9D** -This is a general season any bull hunting unit. Limited Entry Youth ANy Bull Elk permits are available on this subunit on a statewide basis.

**CURRENT STATUS OF ELK MANAGEMENT**

**Habitat** - Existing habitat needs to be protected and crucial habitat needs to continue to be improved. A number of habitat improvements have occurred within this unit over the past 10 years. Recent habitat improvements for elk habitat include commercial lumber harvest, prescribed fire, habitat restoration on the Simplot phosphate mine, mechanical treatment of brush, etc. Conifer domination and encroachment on summer and transition range needs to be addressed, possibly by re-establishing the natural fire intervals in the conifer zone. Decadent stands of mountain sagebrush need to be thinned and regenerated on the winter range to minimize winter depredation on lower elevation agricultural areas. The primary factor limiting this unit from supporting larger elk populations is agricultural depredation and competition for forage with domestic & feral livestock. Over utilization of winter browse in areas of heavy concentrations of deer and elk during hard winters is also a limiting factor.

**Range Area an Approximate Ownership**

Ownership	Summer Range		Winter Range	
	Area (acres)	%	Area (acres)	%
Forest Service	259,549	58	32,164	10
Bureau of Land Management	77,659	17	172,469	52
Utah State Trust Lands	5,662	1	24,955	7
Native American Trust Lands	0	0	25,955	8
Private	84,465	19	63,111	19
USFWS Refuge	0	0	125	0
National Parks	7,210	2	9,649	3
Utah State Parks	0	0	2,935	1
Utah Division of Wildlife Resources	13,429	3	1,599	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,078,460</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>677,886</b>	<b>100</b>

**Population** - The post-season 2022 population estimate is 2,700 on the Vernal/Diamond/Bonanza unit. This estimate excludes elk located on Tribal Trust Lands.

<b>Winter Trend Counts (excludes Tribal Trust Lands)</b>			
	<b>Year</b>	<b>Trend Count</b>	<b>Population Estimate</b>
Vernal/Diamond/Bonanza	2013	2,431	3,000
Vernal/Diamond/Bonanza	2019	2126	2,700

**BARRIERS TO ACHIEVING UNIT MANAGEMENT OBJECTIVES**

**Habitat** - There are issues with the loss of winter range due to sagebrush decline and cheatgrass expansion. Poor range conditions during drought years is also a challenge as well as poor quality summer/transitional range due to conifer dominance. Conifer and PJ invasion of grasslands and browse areas critical for wildlife continues to be a barrier.

**Population** - It is difficult to maintain significant elk numbers on public lands due to refuge areas like Tribal Trust lands, Dinosaur National Monument, and private property. Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) could reduce future elk production if it becomes widespread across the unit at a high enough prevalence rate.

**Other Barriers** - There are consistent conflicts with agricultural crop depredation and fence damage on private lands. These challenges occur in the winter and year round with resident elk in lower elevation agricultural areas including Jensen, Ouray, lower Uinta River, 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 & BLM 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 USFS to treat cheatgrass expansion and reseed problem areas in old burn scars between Deep Creek and White Rocks Canyon.
- Cooperate with BLM & the Ute Tribe to increase vegetative under story and reduce Pinyon & Juniper encroachment into the sagebrush zone.
- Cooperate with Simplot to maximize elk habitat on the phosphate mine to reduce winter depredation on adjacent agricultural areas.
- Utilize targeted antlerless elk harvest to reduce the impacts of elk use on critical deer winter range areas on the Vernal Subunit.
- Target elk herds in agricultural areas with Private Lands Only hunts to reduce depredation impacts on private property and shift elk back to public lands.
- If drought conditions become serious enough to limit forage availability, emergency drought permits may be approved by the Wildlife Board to reduce elk density.

**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 to encourage elk back to public lands.
- When funds are available, pursue a GPS collar study for the Yellowstone and

Vernal/Bonanza/Diamond units to better understand the effects of hunting in relation to refuge areas on these units, 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 to increase tolerance of elk or remove elk by increasing hunting pressure on private lands to push elk back to public lands.
- Whenever feasible hunts will be targeted to address elk herds in agricultural areas to reduce depredation and fence damage.
- 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.