ELK HERD UNIT MANAGEMENT PLAN
Elk Herd Unit 13
LA SAL
December 2023

BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

Grand and San Juan counties - Boundary begins at I-70 and the Green River; south along the Green River to the Colorado River; north along this river to Kane Springs Creek; southeast along this creek to Hatch Wash; southeast along this wash to US-191; south on US-191 to Big Indian Road; east on this road to Lisbon Valley Road; east on this road to Island Mesa Road; east on this road to the Utah-Colorado state line; north on this state line to I-70; west on I-70 to the Green River.

This boundary includes two subunits including:

Unit 13A - La Sal, La Sal Mountains - Grand and San Juan counties - Boundary begins at I-70 and the Green River; south along the Green River to the Colorado River; north along this river to Kane Springs Creek; southeast along this creek to Hatch Wash; southeast along this wash to US-191; south on US-191 to Big Indian Road; east on this road to Lisbon Valley Road; east on this road to Island Mesa Road; east on this road to the Utah-Colorado state line; north on this state line to the Dolores River; northwest along this river to the Colorado River; northeast along this river to the Utah-Colorado state line; north on this state line to I-70; west on I-70 to the Green River.

Unit 13B - La Sal, Dolores Triangle - Grand County - Boundary begins at the Colorado River and the Utah-Colorado state line; south on this state line to the Dolores River; northwest along this river to the Colorado River; northeast along this river to the Utah-Colorado state line.

LAND OWNERSHIP

Approximate Elk Habitat and Ownership WMU 13A, La Sal Mountains

	Yearlong Range		Summer Range		Winter Range		Spring/Fall	
Ownership	**Area (acres)**	**%**	**Area (acres)**	**%**	**Area (acres)**	**%**	**Area (acres)**	**%**
Bureau of Land Management	19,764	87	116	<1	58,546	41	1,483	13
Private	765	3	34,287	30	14,993	10	1,880	16
Utah State Institutional Trust Lands	1,935	9	27,949	25	5,082	4	86	1
Utah Department of Natural Resources	180	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Utah Department of Transportation	0	0	0	0	41	<1	0	0
United States Forest Service	0	0	51,030	45	65,049	45	8,265	71
TOTAL	22,645	100	113,382	100	143,711	100	11,714	100

Approximate Elk Habitat and Ownership WMU 13B, Dolores Triangle

	Yearlong range		Summer Range		Winter Range	
Ownership	**Area (acres)**	**%**	**Area (acres)**	**%**	**Area (acres)**	**%**
Bureau of Land Management					61,435	88
Utah State Institutional Trust Lands					6,645	9
Private					1,915	3
TOTAL					69,995	100

UNIT MANAGEMENT GOALS

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

Maintain and protect existing crucial elk ranges needed to support the population objectives. Seek cooperative projects to improve the quality and quantity of elk habitat and to minimize conflicts with livestock and other wildlife. Promote enhancement of habitat security and escapement areas for elk.

UNIT MANAGEMENT OBJECTIVES

Population

Target Winter Herd Size - Maintain a winter population of 2,500 elk distributed on the subunits as follows:

La Sal Mountains 1,800 elk
Dolores Triangle 700 elk

The population objective for the Dolores Triangle subunit was decreased in 2008 by 150 elk (approx. 20%) to be consistent with Dolores Triangle deer management plan revision due to poor winter range conditions. Range conditions have not improved and the population objective will be maintained at the reduced level.

Bull Harvest Age Objective - Maintain a 3-year average bull harvest age of 5.5–6.0 years old on limited entry hunts.

Habitat

Summer Range - Maintain and improve summer forage availability on the La Sal Mountains through aspen regeneration and oakbrush thinning projects. Coordination with private landowners on summer ranges will be discussed and implemented as conditions and funding allow.

Winter Range - Maintain and improve winter foraging areas through browse regeneration and pinyon-juniper removal projects. Monitor range conditions and elk use in the Dolores Triangle to maintain habitat quality necessary to achieve population objectives. Address excessive habitat utilization through harvest strategies coordinated with Colorado Division of Parks and Wildlife (CDPW).

CURRENT STATUS OF ELK MANAGEMENT

Population

La Sal Mountains

The elk population on the La Sal Mountains is currently 1,900 elk, just above the management objective, based on modeling efforts. The last helicopter survey was conducted in January 2021. A total of 1,711 elk were counted, yielding a population estimate of 2,100 elk. Antlerless harvest has been utilized at levels sufficient to reduce elk numbers towards the management objective.

Aerial surveys can be beneficial for population estimate trends, but should not be relied on solely for age or sex classification data, given the inherent social behavior of elk during survey sessions, when bulls tend to be by themselves away from large cow groups and often in rugged, hard to survey locations. Observer error is also greater at this time when classifying calves, given their body size at this time. Data from both aerial surveys and summer classification indicate that calf production and bull:cow ratios are stable on this unit.

Bull harvest on limited entry hunts has increased over the past 5 years, with a 5-year average of 103 bulls harvested per year. Average age of bulls harvested has remained slightly above the harvest age management objective for the past five years, with a 5-year average of 6.1 years old. Harvest results for the La Sal Mountains Bull Elk limited entry subunit over the past 5 years are listed below (includes CWMU harvest).

Year	LE Bull Permits	LE Bull Harvest	LE Bull Avg. Age	Spike Bull Harvest	Antlerless Harvest
2018	162	103	5.9	104	196
2019	160	92	5.7	100	187
2020	160	99	6.2	53	324
2021	163	107	6.2	64	271
2022	160	112	6.5	98	299

The number of bulls harvested on the Colorado portion (unit 60) of the La Sal Mountains has stayed stable over the past 5 years. Annual harvest in Colorado has averaged 66 bulls during the past 5 years. The Colorado portion is managed under a 4-point or better bull harvest strategy.

Dolores Triangle

This unit is winter range for elk that summer in the Glade Park and Pinon Mesa areas (unit 40) of western Colorado. CDPW biologists estimate the population of unit 40 at 4,835 elk. The number of elk that winter in the Dolores Triangle unit is dependent upon winter severity. Winter population numbers have typically varied between 300 and 700 elk, with 400 elk observed during the 2021 aerial survey. A small number of limited entry bull permits have been issued each year for this area. Antlerless harvest was initiated in 2007 and has remained somewhat stable since.

Habitat

La Sal Mountains

Summer ranges and upper elevation winter ranges on the La Sals generally appear to be in good, stable condition according to permanent range trend studies conducted by UDWR in 2019. There are 14 permanent range trend study locations on the unit of which 13 are found within elk use areas. Winter ranges are showing slightly downward trends in range condition, with only 33 percent of sites being in

fair-good to excellent condition. There is increased decadence in sagebrush communities and slight downward trends in herbaceous communities. Interagency spring range transects have shown relatively stable utilization by elk. Range use has slightly increased over the last 10 years. USFS and BLM assessments of current vegetative trends on the unit have not indicated overutilization of herbaceous forage by elk.

The La Sal WMU contains 291,452 acres of elk habitat comprised of eight percent of year-long range, 39 percent summer range, 49 percent winter range, and four percent spring/fall range. Habitat quality and quantity are the main limiting factors. One specific habitat threat identified on the unit is the encroachment by pinyon-juniper woodland communities into important rangelands. These woodlands cover 16 percent of the unit. A majority of habitat restoration work on the unit has been lop and scatter or bullhog projects to reduce encroachment. Other habitat management practices have been prescribed fires to promote aspen regeneration and forest health, and seeding to augment the herbaceous understory. Winter range varies in condition across the unit. Those portions of winter range that are categorized as being in poor condition have a lack of recruitment of browse and existing browse is becoming decadent. Summer range habitats contain introduced perennial grasses that may be posing a threat to the herbaceous understory due to their aggressive growth outcompeting native plants. In mountain big sagebrush communities, there is an additional risk of invasion by annual grasses which can increase fuel loads. Recreation on the La Sal Mountains is also increasing which may lead to loss of habitat or reduction of browse and vigor and lead to increased noxious weed invasions.

Crop depredation by elk on this unit has been minor during the past 5 years and typically occurs during the spring months. The one exception, a chronic summer alfalfa depredation problem, was resolved by permanently fencing the property. Given the current conditions, associated land use factors, and concern for potential competition with a struggling deer population, the elk population objective cannot be raised at this time

Several habitat improvement projects that will benefit elk have been completed or are planned by federal agencies, UDWR, and private landowners (see Appendix I). These projects should allow elk numbers to be maintained at the population objective without creating conflicts with other land uses.

Dolores Triangle

The Dolores Triangle is entirely winter range for the Colorado unit 40 elk herd. Elk use is highly variable dependent on snowfall amounts at upper elevation ranges. A series of woodland fires in this area have created substantial new forage areas for elk. Lower elevation winter ranges have been impacted by prolonged drought and concentrated ungulate use adjacent to agricultural fields. There is increased decadence in sagebrush communities and downward trends in soil and herbaceous communities. Cheatgrass invasion is evident in these sites. Elk use of these sites has increased, but is typically low during mild winters. Potential competition with deer herds during severe winters is a concern. Habitat improvement projects completed for other species have benefited wintering elk on this subunit.

BARRIERS TO ACHIEVING UNIT MANAGEMENT OBJECTIVES

Population

Big Game / Livestock Competition - Resistance of livestock operators to increasing elk herds and public concerns of impacts from a large elk population on a struggling deer population.

Elk Distribution - Elk herd congregation on private land CWMUs during the hunting seasons where hunting pressure is significantly lighter than on public lands (La Sal Mountains). Elk use of low elevation winter ranges in poor condition during severe winters (Dolores Triangle).
Harvest Age Objective - Public resistance to increasing numbers of bull hunting permits to reduce average age of harvest.

Habitat

Drought - Impact of prolonged drought to range condition and forage availability. Annual precipitation and weather patterns are the primary influence on range conditions and, ultimately, elk population carrying capacity on this mountain range.

Limited Summer Range - Amount of quality summer habitat for foraging and reproductive activities is limited and shared with livestock and other big game.

Habitat Loss – Plant succession changes in important summer areas (conifer encroachment in aspen stands) and winter areas (pinyon-juniper invasion in mountain brush-sagebrush communities) reduces biological carrying capacity. Lack of browse regeneration and invasion of annual grasses on lower elevation winter ranges also impact habitat quality.

Other Barriers

Land Resource Activities - Impacts from habitat fragmentation and disturbance as a result of fire, logging and energy development activities. Recent forest fires and logging operations have provided new forage areas but, because of their large acreages, have reduced escapement and security areas. Current and future oil and gas development could potentially fragment existing elk habitat and displace elk to less productive areas.

Elk Distribution on Winter Range - Congregation of large elk herds on some winter areas may result in excessive utilization and could impact range conditions of important deer winter ranges.

Crop Depredation - Chronic crop depredation problems could result in reducing elk numbers in specific areas.

Predation - The La Sal Mountains has a healthy black bear population. Black bears are known to take elk calves, but bear predation does not appear to have a significant impact on elk calf survival rates.

Disease - Chronic wasting disease has been documented in deer and elk on this mountain range.

Illegal Harvest - Extent of illegal harvest on this unit is unknown, but because both subunits cross state boundaries and trophy-quality bulls are present, the potential for illegal activities is elevated. Illegal harvest of mature bulls has the potential to affect the availability of limited entry permits.

STRATEGIES FOR REMOVING BARRIERS AND REACHING UNIT MANAGEMENT OBJECTIVES

Population Monitoring

Population Size - The population is monitored using harvest data, aerial trend counts and classification, preseason classification, and survival estimates. The wintering population on this unit varies because of the movement of elk from and into Colorado depending on winter snowfall amounts.

Bull Age Structure - Monitor age class structure of the bull population primarily using checking stations, uniform harvest surveys, tooth analysis, field bag checks, preseason classification and aerial classification. Limited entry bull elk ages will be determined by laboratory tooth analysis from teeth submitted by successful hunters.

Harvest - The primary means of monitoring harvest will be through statewide mandatory harvest reporting. The target population size will be achieved through antlerless harvest using a variety of harvest methods and seasons.

Management Actions to Remove Population Barriers

Big Game/Livestock Competition - Continue to work with land management agencies and public grazing operators, as well as private landowners to assure that proposed population objectives are reasonable and attainable. Antlerless harvest through Limited Entry, Private Lands Only (PLO) and mitigation permits will be the primary strategy utilized to achieve and maintain population objectives and to address specific habitat concerns and depredation problems. Keep public informed of deer and elk population trends and incorporate elk management strategies that have minimal impacts to the deer population.

Elk Distribution - Coordinate with CWMU operators to develop hunting strategies to reduce elk congregations on private land during public land hunting seasons. Continue coordination with Colorado Division of Wildlife to ensure bull harvest management on Colorado hunt unit 60 complements harvest strategies implemented on the La Sal Mountains. Development of elk harvest strategies for the Dolores Triangle must consider weather conditions that dictate elk movements into Utah.

Harvest Age Objective - Continue public relations to provide information on effect of changing permit numbers in relation to average age of harvested bulls.

Habitat Monitoring

Habitat Condition and Trend – Continue analysis of trends in habitat condition through permanent range trend studies, pellet transects, and field inspections. Land management agencies will similarly conduct range monitoring to determine vegetative trends, utilization and possible forage conflicts. Range trend studies will continue to be conducted by DWR to evaluate elk habitat health, trend, and carrying capacity.

Management Actions to Remove Habitat Barriers

Limited Summer Range - Work with public land management agencies to develop specific vegetative objectives to maintain the quality of important elk use areas. Respond to any range deterioration concerns and address documented excessive forage utilization.

Habitat Loss - Cooperate with federal land management agencies and private landowners in carrying out habitat rehabilitation projects such as reseedings, controlled burns, water developments etc. on public and private lands to maintain or increase biological carrying capacity.

Management Actions to Remove Other Barriers

Land Resource Activities - Continue to coordinate with land management agencies and energy development companies in planning and evaluating resource uses and developments that could impact habitat quality. Work to develop and administer access management plans for the purposes of habitat protection and escape or “security” areas.

Elk Distribution on Winter Range - Utilize antlerless harvest in specific areas when necessary to target elk concentrations impacting winter range conditions and/or important deer wintering areas.

Crop Depredation - Work with private landowners to make sure depredation is maintained within tolerable levels, and will not become a limiting factor. Utilize depredation hunts, fencing and other actions where appropriate to reduce/mitigate crop depredation.

Predation - Maintain bear hunting seasons to control bear population. Maintain high quality summer habitats to protect important calving areas (see “Management Actions To Remove Habitat Barriers”).

Disease - Continue testing of suspect animals to detect presence of CWD in the elk population.

Illegal Harvest - In areas where illegal bull harvest has been documented, law enforcement efforts will be focused through action plans.

Appendix I. Completed and current habitat projects on the La Sal unit.

Habitat Projects

Completed Projects Fall 2016-Spring 2023

Project ID	*Project Name*	*Acres**	*Treatment Type*
3630	Brush Hole Shrub Treatment	261	Bullhog
3742	Fish Park Gunnison Sage-grouse Habitat Improvement	89	Lop and scatter
3763	West Slope WUI Hazard Fuels Reduction	1532	Bullhog, pile and burn
3892	East Coyote Wash Allotment	89	Chain harrow
4034	Brush Hole Phase 2	442	Bullhog
4491	West Slope WUI Phase 4	375	Bullhog
4514	Moab Mule Deer Winter Range Habitat Improvement-Phase 3	1471	Lop and scatter
4614	North End La Sal (Brush Hole Phase 3)	748	Bullhog
4793	Castle Valley Wildfire Mitigation Project	1245	Lop and scatter
4837	North End La Sal (Brush Hole Phase 4)	1305	Bullhog, clearcutting
4858	Moab Mule Deer Winter Range Habitat Improvement-Phase 4	1162	Lop and scatter
4998	Mountain Island Ranch Stream and Wetland Restoration	334	Stream work, seeding
5252	La Sal Sustainability Collaboration #1		Archaeology
5260	Mill Creek (Moab) Watershed Restoration Partnership	449	Weed treatment, seeding, vegetation removal, lop and scatter, fence
5507	La Sal Creek Watershed Restoration	39	Lop and scatter

5525	Mill Creek (Moab) Watershed Restoration Partnership II	964	Weed treatment, seeding, vegetation removal, lop and scatter
5527	La Sal/Abajo Rx and Mx FY 22	203	Bullhog
5860	Pack Creek Post Fire Revegetation Collaboration	674	Seeding, lop and scatter
5903	Colorado River Restoration 6.0	109	Seeding, lop and scatter, stream work
5915	East Coyote		Archaeology
5938	Mill Creek (Moab) Restoration Partnership	1222	Lop and scatter, lop and chip, planting, pile and burn, fence

**Total project area, not all necessarily in elk habitat*

Habitat Projects

Projects in Progress

Project ID	*Project Name*	*Acres**	*Treatment Type*
5573	Moab Field Office Cheatgrass Control	3735	Herbicide application
5918	Eastern La Sals Watershed Restoration Phase II	4872	Bullhog, lop and scatter, pile and burn
6518	Mill Creek (Moab) Restoration 4	199	Stream restoration, seeding, planting
6544	Colorado River Riparian Side Canyon Restoration	7596	Herbicide, seeding, planting, non-native removal
6617	Eastern La Sal Watershed Restoration Phase III	7269	Lop, pile and burn

**Total project area, not all necessarily in elk habitat*

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.