

Idaho Fish & Game News

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Fish and Game is Revising its Long Range Elk Plan

Idaho Fish and Game has launched a revision of its long range plan for managing elk.

Rocky Mountain elk are Idaho's premier big game animal, and Idaho's current plan is more than 12 years old. Starting in late 2011, Fish and Game launched an effort to revise and update that plan. Strategies in the plan will be driven by public expectations and changes in elk populations.

Elk are distributed throughout Idaho from the sage-dominated deserts of the south to the dense cedar-hemlock forests of the north.

The 1999 plan divided the state into 29 elk management zones, each made up of a group of units dependent upon habitat similarity, management similarity or distinct populations. Objectives were established for each zone based on elk herd movements, habitat potential, harvest opportunity, depredation concerns, population and survival.

Elk feed on grasses, forbs and shrubs, but they have certain basic requirements, including food, water and cover.

The quality and quantity of habitat available to elk ultimately determine the distribution and numbers it can support, and it is crucial to their long-term survival. Many human activities, however, can alter or degrade the habitat or result in elk abandoning some areas completely.

Most elk habitat in Idaho is managed by public agencies or private landowners. Fish and Game must rely on and work

with others to benefit the needs of the elk.

Elk populations generally can be influenced greatly by harvest, and Fish and Game has control over harvest. In its revised plan, Fish and Game will establish population goals and set hunting opportunities that are consistent with meeting or maintaining those goals.



Biologists dart and capture elk as part of population research.

IDFG photo

In 1999, the Idaho Fish and Game Commission adopted a statewide minimum objective of 10 adult bulls per 100 cows pre-season. At that time, statewide elk populations were at all time highs. Today the number is more than 100,000 elk statewide.

Idaho has witnessed ups and downs in elk numbers for decades. Five factors that have affected elk populations in Idaho over the past 15 years are predation, habitat and

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Planning for the Future Sometimes Requires Looking at the Past

Planning for the future of Idaho's elk herds and how they are to be managed means looking back as well as ahead.

To revise a plan for the future of Idaho's elk, Fish and Game biologists and wildlife managers considered hunter preferences and the status and trends in elk populations.

During the winter of 2012, the University of Idaho, with direction from Fish and Game, developed a survey to learn why people hunt elk in Idaho, what they consider to be a quality hunt and their opinions on how elk are managed.

The survey was sent to a random sample of 2011 elk hunters, and it was available to all hunters on the Internet. The University of Idaho summarized the results, and the final report is nearing completion.

Hunters clearly stated their two most important desires: Being able to hunt every year, preferably with family and friends; and seeing a harvestable elk.

Fish and Game reviewed the survey results and has been developing proposed goals and strategies to manage elk populations. Fish and Game plans to seek comments on these goals and strategies from elk hunters and the public this spring.

Proposed goals to meet those desires include providing a diversity of hunting experiences, managing elk populations to maintain general season hunting, to enhance mature bull hunting, and helping hunters match locations with their expectations.

Also being considered is expanding hunting opportunity to allow hunters to hunt in two or more general season zones at a higher cost but only for a single elk.

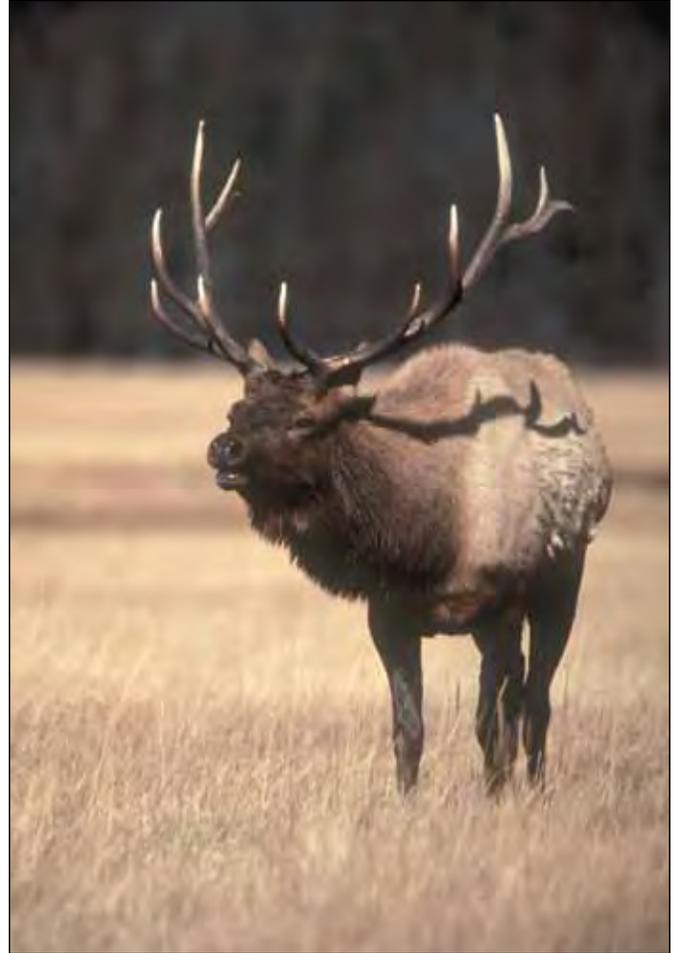
To improve alignment of game management units with how elk use them and management goals, the plan would reconfigure some elk zones. The Teton zone would be absorbed in adjacent zones, the Smoky Mountains and Bennett Hills zones would be combined, and the Owyhee–South Hills zone would be split into two zones.

Population objectives would increase elk numbers in seven zones, maintain cow numbers in 18 zones and bull numbers in 19 zones, and decrease cow numbers in three zones and bull numbers in two zones to resolve agriculture concerns.

Predator management would be tailored to the needs of specific zones and may include such strategies as more liberal black bear and mountain lion seasons, increased outfitter quotas on predators and targeted removal of wolves in specific areas.

New strategies to decrease depredation while maintaining or increasing elk populations will be developed. Elk damage to commercial crops in some area is a real problem.

Another way to increase game numbers would be to increase capacity of habitat to support elk. The plan would propose strategies to work with land managers to preserve and restore habitat, such as improving corridors between summer and winter range.



IDFG photo

In back-country zones and other areas where predation is an issue, predator management plans would be linked with the elk plan.

The revised elk management plan, when completed and adopted, will provide direction based on public preferences and wildlife populations.

The goal is a plan that will be responsive to changes and will incorporate biological and resource realities, public input and desires, and involvement and approval of the Idaho Fish and Game Commission.

Wildlife management plans generally run 10 years, or until revisions are needed. The new plan will reflect the current status and trends of elk populations by elk management zone and population objectives over the next 10 years based on scientific data and public comment.

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Survey Shows Preferences, Portrait of Idaho Elk Hunters

The most important things to Idaho elk hunters are being able to hunt every year, and seeing a harvestable elk.

That was the conclusion of a survey sent to a random sample of 2011 elk hunters in the summer of 2012 by University of Idaho researchers.

The goal of the survey was to gather information about the view of elk hunters in Idaho, who they are, their preferences, motivations, decisions where to hunt and opinions about elk management issues.

Information from the survey along with biological data and upcoming public comment opportunities will help shape how Fish and Game manages elk in the future.

The survey was mailed to 6,200 hunters, and 2,786 responded:

- Most have hunted elk in Idaho every year for at least seven years.
- Most traveled on foot.
- Most hunted with a rifle.
- One-third hunted with a bow.
- Most hunt in the same zone every year.
- Most prefer a zone close to home, or a general hunt zone they can hunt every year.
- Half think elk numbers have declined in the past 10 years.

Top reasons for hunting were:

- Just being outdoors and seeing elk in a natural setting.
- Being close to nature.
- Viewing scenery.
- Being with friends.
- Doing something with family.

When choosing where to hunt the top five choices were places where:

- They could hunt every year.
- They had access to public lands.
- They had the best chance of harvesting an elk.
- There were no wolves.
- There were few other elk hunters.

Most of the respondents found three restrictions to improve quality and size of elk acceptable:

- Making some zones foot and horse access only.
- Managing the use of motorized vehicles for hunting.
- Choosing a single weapon for the entire elk season.

The average elk hunter has lived in Idaho 33 years, is almost 50 years old and has hunted elk in Idaho for more than 20 years.

The final results of the survey will be posted on the Fish and Game website when the report is completed.

Elk Hunts, Population Status at a Glance

Hunter success rates averaged across the state:

Year	Elk hunters	Harvest	Success
2001	77,700	19,500	25%
2002	90,900	18,400	20%
2003	92,500	18,400	20%
2004	99,500	20,800	21%
2005	98,900	21,500	22%
2006	99,400	20,400	20%
2007	86,000	19,100	22%
2008	84,100	16,000	19%
2009	87,000	15,800	18%
2010	76,800	17,500	23%
2011	74,600	15,200	20%

Elk Status – January 2013

Cow elk populations:

- 10 zones within objectives.
- 11 zones above objectives.
- 8 zones are below objectives.

Bull elk populations:

- 9 zones within objectives.
- 11 zones above objectives.
- 9 zones are below objectives.



Elk population estimates are based on aerial counts.

IDFG photos

Idaho Fish and Game Policy

Idaho wildlife management policy is set by seven volunteer commissioners. The Idaho Fish and Game Commission's policy decisions are based on research and recommendations by the professional staff of the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, and with input from the governor's office, the state Legislature, hunters, anglers and the public.



Timeline for Elk Plan Development

- April – June 2012: Conduct survey of hunter opinions.
- July 2012: Commission review of survey results.
- September – December 2012: Develop proposed goals, strategies, and/or options with rationale and expectations.
- January 2013: Idaho Fish and Game Commission review of draft proposals and options.
- February – April 2013: Public review of management direction and strategies.
- April – June 2013: Revise proposals based on public input, prepare draft plan.
- July 2013: Draft plan presented to Commission.
- July – August 2013: Public review of draft plan.
- November 2013: Commission action on the plan.
- March 2014: Implementation during big game season setting.

Public Involvement

Once Fish and Game develops goals and strategies, public comment will be solicited through public meetings and online. Comments may also be submitted to wildlife managers at regional offices. To track the elk planning progress, go online to <http://fishandgame.idaho.gov/elkplanning>. Look for updates over the next month and for opportunities to participate.



Biologists capture an elk calf. *IDFG photo*



Elk numbers have decreased in some areas while increasing in others. *IDFG photo*

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nutrition, hunter harvest, weather, and elk damage to crops.

The effects of these factors are evident.

The effects of the severe winter in 1996-97 in north-central and north Idaho linger, while elk numbers in southern, eastern and much of western Idaho have continued to increase over time.

In some of these areas in southern, eastern, and western Idaho elk damage to commercial crops is a problem and affects elk management. Elk habitat in north-central Idaho has aged, and its potential has been reduced. Meanwhile, the primary predators of elk, including black bears, mountain lions and wolves, have increased over the past two decades.

In areas where elk are doing well,

hunting seasons take full advantage of the harvestable surplus, while in areas where predation is keeping numbers low the best course is to manage predators and reduce antlerless harvest.

Understanding the factors that affect specific elk populations is key to developing the appropriate management course.

Revisions being considered are based largely on a survey of Idaho elk hunters in the spring and summer of 2012, and in part on changes in habitat, predation and agricultural depredation conflicts.

The revised plan will be made available for public review and comment this summer before it is considered for adoption by the commission in November.