

3/15/14

A Guide to Idaho's 2014 Elk Plan



Photo courtesy Larry Graves

Rocky Mountain elk are Idaho's premier big game animal. Idaho's diverse habitats and a population of approximately 107,000 elk offer a wide array of elk hunting opportunities. The new revised elk management plan seeks to maintain this diversity of opportunities while maintaining a biologically sustainable elk population for all Idahoans to enjoy.



Don Seitz, Columbia, MO - 2010 Super Hunt Winner

1999 Elk Plan ➤ A Review

The 1999 elk management plan addressed both the need to manage hunter numbers and distribution as well as the management of growing elk populations in some parts of the state. As elk hunters know, this plan introduced the A/B Zone Management concept, which was designed at a time when there were over 100,000 elk hunters in the state. This system allowed for better management of hunter distribution and choice of weapons across the state, largely because of concerns about pressure on adult bulls in some areas. It also created 28 Elk Management Zones, which were later expanded to 29 zones.

Since implementation of the 1999 elk plan, the A/B tag system has been successful in redistributing hunters to eliminate congestion in specific areas. It has also provided greater management flexibility, giving hunters a diversity of hunting and harvest opportunities. However, since the 1999 elk plan was adopted 15 years ago, new issues have emerged that affect Idaho's elk management.

These include:

- Declining elk populations in Idaho's backcountry
- Well-documented impacts of wolves and other predators on elk
- Increased numbers of elk in agricultural areas
- Decline of suitable elk habitat in conifer-dominated forests
- Expansion of noxious weeds and other related habitat issues.

2014 > A Revised Plan

The 2014 revised elk plan establishes goals that Fish and Game, working with elk enthusiasts, will achieve over the next ten years. Overall, the goal of the plan is to maintain or increase current elk populations across most of the state using the following strategies:

- Zone-level elk population objectives
- Identify specific limiting factors affecting elk numbers in each management zone
- Outline strategies and performance objectives to address limiting factors

Fish and Game will engage numerous partners in elk management, including the Governor's office, elected officials, federal and state agencies, conservation organizations, private landowners, hunters and other Idahoans interested in elk. Working together with these committed partners to improve elk management in Idaho will help ensure the overall success of this new plan, meeting the intent to "be responsive to elk hunter desires and expectations, and maintain biologically sustainable elk populations."



Elk Populations > Past and Present

An historical perspective of elk numbers in Idaho is helpful in evaluating current and future management of these animals.

Pre-settlement >

Historically, elk numbers in Idaho were lower than they are today. Accounts from the 1804 - 1806 Lewis and Clark expedition as well as from trappers during the height of the fur trade, suggest that elk populations were scattered and only locally abundant in the northern portions of the state. Elk numbers in eastern Idaho appeared stable in the mid-1800s, but were reduced by unregulated hunting in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Elk, along with deer, moose and antelope were heavily utilized for food by miners, trappers, loggers, and other settlers.

Early 1900s >

European settlement brought abrupt changes to Idaho's landscape. In southern Idaho, settlers brought in millions of sheep, cattle, and horses. To protect livestock, predators such as black and grizzly bear, mountain lion and wolf were aggressively removed through unregulated harvest. By the early 1900s, wolves had been largely eliminated from the state. Extreme overgrazing combined with fire suppression turned perennial grass ranges



into shrub fields. This significant habitat change combined with unregulated hunting probably resulted in fewer elk in southern Idaho.

Northern Idaho experienced similar landscape changes. However, the impact was probably more positive for elk. Extensive wildfires created a patchwork of grass, shrub fields, and forested habitats favored by elk. After the large wildfires of 1910, local elk populations were supplemented with elk from Yellowstone National Park. In addition, timber harvest also contributed to changing large forested landscapes to more open habitat. Under these conditions, elk flourished in northern Idaho.

Mid 1900s ➤

The 1960s saw the peak of elk populations in north-central Idaho. The grass and shrub habitats created by wildfire and timber harvest earlier in the century shifted into more mature forest habitats less favorable to elk. Changing timber management along with fire suppression encouraged the re-establishment of conifer forests. This further reduced the shrub and grass habitats available to elk.

In the 1970s, declining elk herds were affected by an increase in hunter numbers



and easier hunter access. This resulted in restrictive seasons to reduce the vulnerability of struggling elk herds to harvest. By 1976, either-sex elk hunting throughout most of Idaho was replaced by antlered-only hunts. These restrictions allowed elk populations to rebound by the late 1980s and more antlerless opportunities were again offered to hunters.

The mid-1900s also saw continued suppression of black bear and mountain lion populations. However, predators still affected elk populations in some areas.

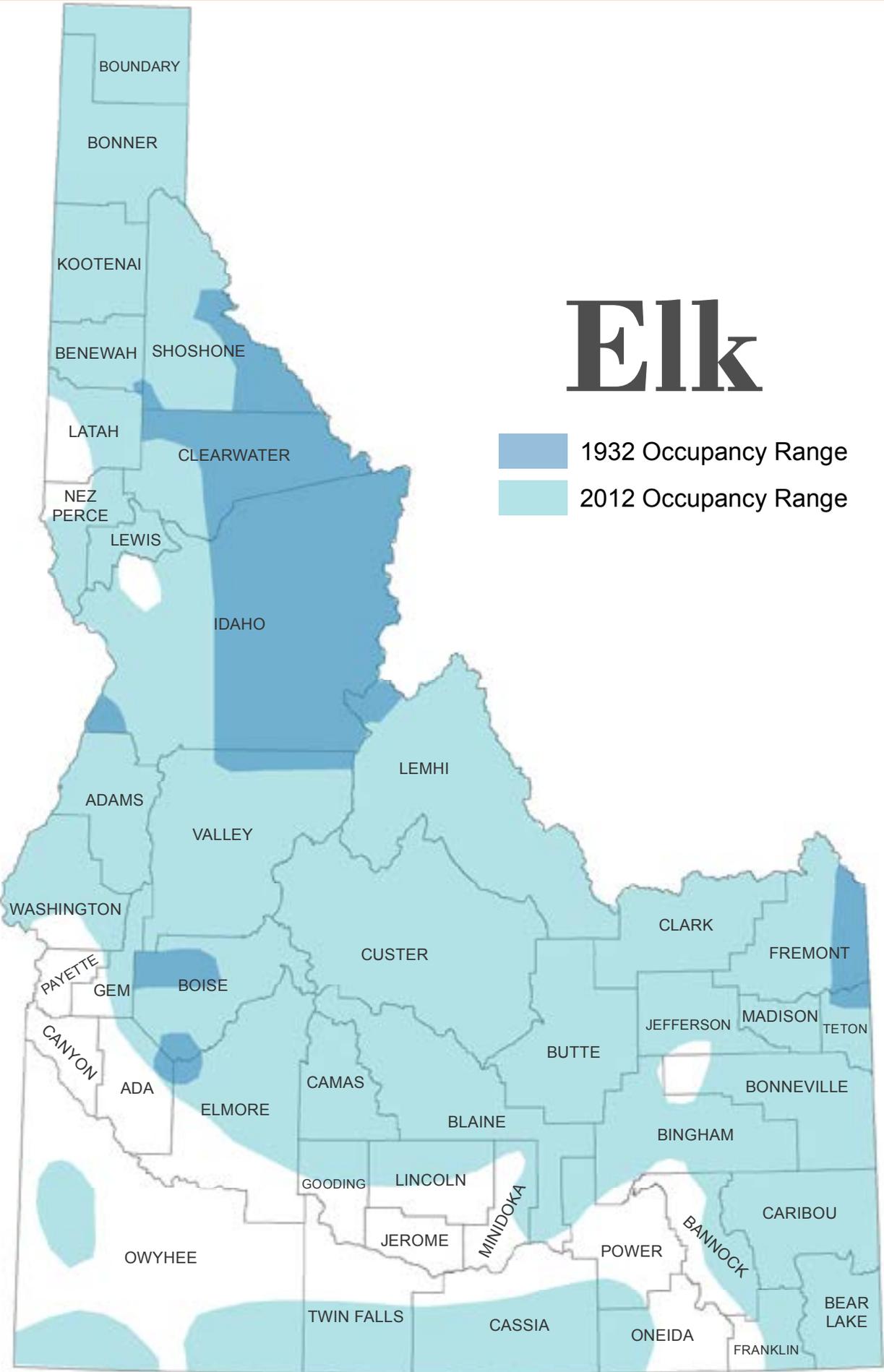
Late 1900s ➤

In the mid-1990s, portions of northern Idaho witnessed another downturn in elk numbers. Declining habitat, black bear and mountain lion predation, and the local impacts of back-to-back hard winters in 1996 and 1997 all played a role. Elk predation by black bear and mountain lion increased as a result of harvest restrictions on these predators during the 1970-1990s. This allowed black bear and mountain lion populations to grow during the late 1900s. Wolves were reintroduced into Idaho by the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1995 and 1996. During this same general timeframe, expanding wolf populations in southern British Columbia and northwestern Montana were pioneering

habitat in Idaho. Wolf predation along with that of black bear and mountain lion further accelerated elk declines in some areas.

While elk populations in northern Idaho struggled, those in much of southern Idaho actually increased during this same period. Changes in grazing practices that promote grass production and farming practices that favor resting farmland helped create favorable elk habitat. In addition, continued timber cuts created early habitat stages needed by elk enabled southern Idaho elk populations to grow to all-time record highs during the latter half of the 1900s. Currently, elk populations in the southern part of Idaho are limited more by social concerns than by habitat. In total, Idaho's elk population is now estimated to be about 107,000 animals.

Elk



“Hunter input was important in developing a 2014 revised elk plan.”

Meeting Hunter Expectations >

Elk are managed for the benefit of all Idahoans, many of whom are hunters that eagerly look forward to the annual elk hunt. Because of their keen interest, Fish and Game contracted with the University of Idaho in 2012 to conduct a survey of Idaho elk hunters. The purpose of the survey was to better understand their motivation for elk hunting and what they desired in an elk hunting experience. Almost 2,800 elk hunters, representing all 29 elk zones, participated in the survey. Survey answers were evaluated at both zone and statewide levels.

For most elk hunters, the social experience of gathering with friends and family is the most important reason given for elk hunting. Other hunters indicated that putting meat on the table or harvesting a mature bull was important. Regardless of the reason for hunting, the common threads that define a quality elk hunting experience for Idaho hunters are the ability to hunt elk every year and seeing harvestable elk.

As a follow-up to the 2012 survey, Fish and Game used a variety of means to gather additional input from elk hunters. These included on-line chats; two on-line surveys via the Fish and Game website; a second mailed survey, public meetings and open house events. Hunters were asked to provide their input on zone objectives and strategies as well as discuss their interest in hunting multiple zones.

Hunter input was important in developing a 2014 revised elk plan that builds on the successes of the 1999 plan and the current Idaho model. The plan will continue to offer over-the-counter elk tags that provide annual opportunity for family and friends to hunt together as well as increasing awareness of and enhancing opportunities for interested hunters to hunt mature bulls in controlled hunts. Survey results show that this model is well-supported by Idaho residents. Also included in the 2014 plan are some new ideas to increase elk hunter satisfaction including:

- Examining ways to expand hunter opportunity to include hunting in more than one general tag season (over-the-counter) hunt area.
- Creating a tool to help hunters identify the type of hunt they are seeking such as hunting with friends and family, an antlerless hunt or a quality bull hunt.

New Statewide Elk Management Direction ➤

The new revised 2014 elk plan contains a set of proposed statewide objectives. These are based on elk hunter survey input, recent aerial surveys, current elk populations and the potential for herd growth in some areas. Proposed objectives include would:

- Continue to offer general-season elk hunting opportunities by managing elk populations, managing predator populations, and improving elk habitat.
- Work to enhance mature bull hunting opportunities.
- Help elk hunters select hunting areas that meet their desired hunting experience.
- Maintain the A-B elk tag system while allowing for adjustments to meet the needs and interests of today's hunters.
- Implement measures to reduce elk-caused crop and property damage.
- Develop better methods to increase public participation in elk management decisions.
- Reduce the potential for disease to affect elk or livestock.
- Increase public knowledge and understanding of elk biology, management, and hunting.



Zone Management Overview ➤

Fish and Game will continue to manage elk using the now-familiar zone management system. This system allows elk to be managed by taking into consideration a variety of variables known as limiting factors. These factors include things like habitat quality, weather, predation, hunter harvest and the need to minimize elk damage to crops or property in agricultural areas. Limiting factors influence the number of elk that a given management zone can support. Often, several limiting factors impact elk populations at once and can prevent an elk herd from increasing or limit the ability of wildlife managers to maintain elk numbers at levels desired by hunters.

Fish and Game identified potential limiting factors in each proposed elk zone using flight surveys, long-term elk population trends, changes to available habitat, reported agricultural damage, known or suspected causes of elk declines such as disease, predator populations, and other data. The severity of the limiting factors identified was classified as low, moderate, or high.

The most common limiting factors were identified as agricultural damage, predation and habitat. Severity of these limiting factors varies across elk zones. This information is used within the 2014 plan to develop objectives that will sustain healthy elk herds and provide diverse elk hunting opportunities for each zone.

North and Central Idaho > Backcountry Zones

As a whole, backcountry zones have experienced large-scale declines in elk numbers over the last 20 years. Limiting factors that impact these zones include both predation and poor quality habitat. Furthermore, the ability to improve elk populations in these zones is hampered by limited access due to remoteness and federal

land use restrictions. To recover these populations, a long-term commitment to habitat improvement is required as well as a clear link between the 2014 elk plan and predation management plans. In most instances, the 10-year management direction for backcountry zones involves stabilizing elk populations in those zones, and then beginning the

slow process of rebuilding the herds. Fish and Game will continue to commit resources and personnel to support habitat projects and reduce predator numbers in these zones. It will also continue to work with land managers, hunters, and other interested groups to accomplish the long-term goal of increased elk populations in these backcountry areas.



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Predation Management >

Predation management is an important elk management tool for rebuilding elk populations limited by predators.

Determining whether predation management will benefit elk populations requires a complex analysis of a variety of factors. Some of these factors include the level of predator and prey populations; the health of prey species; logistical considerations for management; and social and economic considerations. As a general rule, predation management can increase elk populations when:



- An elk population is not limited by habitat.
- Predators are a primary source of elk herd declines.
- Significant numbers of predators can be removed economically.
- Predator removal efforts are conducted at the optimal time of year.
- Predation management efforts are focused at the appropriate scale.

The primary predators of elk in Idaho include wolves, mountain lions, and black bears. Current predation management efforts utilize hunting to manage black bears, mountain lions, and wolves. Idaho currently has some of the most liberal predator hunting seasons and methods in the lower 48 states. Spring and fall seasons for black bears include the use of bait and pursuit by hounds. Mountain lion seasons allow the use of pursuit hounds. Wolf harvest consists of long hunting seasons and trapping in some areas. The following harvest strategies and tools are available to impact predator populations;

- General seasons with harvest quotas
- General seasons without quotas
- Decreased tag prices
- Multiple tags
- Trapping (for wolves)
- Baiting (for black bears)
- Use of hounds (black bears and mountain lions)

These harvest strategies and tools, either alone or in combination, allow wildlife managers to better manage predator populations and achieve elk population management objectives. Additionally, predators are also removed by USDA Wildlife Services in situations where human safety or livestock depredations are concerns.

In some cases, when predators are significantly impacting elk or other big game species, wildlife managers may recommend tools in addition to public harvest. These tools are outlined in the Idaho Fish and Game Commission's 2000 Policy for Avian and Mammalian Predation. This policy serves to guide Fish and Game's

implementation of predation management activities in addition to hunter harvest when predation is significantly affecting wildlife populations. Specific information on predation management plans is available at: <http://fishandgame.idaho.gov/public/wildlife/?getPage=325>.

The Future ➤

Elk populations and Fish and Game are facing new and ever-changing opportunities and challenges including the return of wolves to the landscape; continued instability of elk herds in the backcountry; elk population expansion in southern Idaho; habitat changes; declining elk hunter numbers; the increased importance of the social aspects of hunting to elk hunters; and Idaho's own changing human population. The 2014 revised elk plan is a continued effort by Fish and Game to address these challenges both broadly at the state level and more specifically at the management zone level. It will also provide direction and specific elk management objectives for the next 10 years.

Managing Idaho's elk will increasingly be a collaborative effort between Fish and Game and all Idahoans who care about elk. Fish and Game is committed to establishing and maintaining collaborative working relationships with these stakeholders to look for ways to increase hunter satisfaction, maintain current hunting opportunities, and work together to manage elk populations for the benefit of all. The 2014 elk plan will help direct this work as Fish and Game and others actively implement on-the-ground actions to benefit Idaho's elk.

A Guide to Idaho's 2014 Elk Plan

Our Mission ➤

All wildlife, including all wild animals, wild birds, and fish, within the state of Idaho, is hereby declared to be the property of the state of Idaho. It shall be preserved, protected, perpetuated, and managed. It shall only be captured or taken at such times or places, under such conditions, or by such means, or in such manner, as will preserve, protect, and perpetuate such wildlife, and provide for the citizens of the state and, as by law permitted to others, continued supplies of such wildlife for hunting, fishing and trapping.



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