

Elk Advisory Committee meeting notes, 7-13-13

Ho-Chunk Executive Building, Black River Falls

Attendees:

Kevin Wallenfang, chair, WDNR Wildlife Management
Allen Jacobson, WI Conservation Congress
Dan Storm, WDNR Science Services
Ralph Fritsch, WI Wildlife Federation
Rich Kirchmeyer, WI Bow Hunters Assc.
Kris Johansen, WDNR Wildlife Management West Central District
Peter Bakken, WDNR Forestry
Laine Stowell, WDNR Elk Biologist
Jonathan Gilbert, GLIFWC
Jon Schweitzer, Jackson Co Forestry and Parks
Kurt Haas, WDNR Law Enforcement
Jeff Morden, RMEF (proxy)
Kathy Moe, USFS
Ken Jonas, WDNR Wildlife Management Northern Region
Karen Karash, Ho-Chunk Nation Wildlife Biologist

Notes submitted by Scott Roepke and Sam Jonas, WDNR Wildlife Management

Guests:

Mark Post, USFWS
Tina Warner, Ho-Chunk Nation
Robert Mann, Ho-Chunk Nation

Committee Restructuring

This is the first meeting after the committee member restructuring. The restructuring occurred to streamline the workload of department staff and to include new partners on the committees. The advisory committee protocol that was provided to committee members indicated that there would be no university representation, yet the elk committee includes UWSP professor Tim Ginnett. Not immediately known why the exception was made, Kevin will provide the reasoning behind this addition. Other experts can attend if invited by the chair.

Translocation Update

The Governor's budget has passed which included language to waive the 5-year health testing requirement on individual animals, and now allows the importation of elk into the state. In addition to addressing road closures and the use of wild elk only, it also moved the start of the

elk season from mid-September to mid-October as was recommended by this committee last year. The budget bill included language that there will be more oversight by DATCP to minimize disease risks. Other rule changes that are in the works in Administrative Code include: zone changes (to include the expanded zone) and the consolidation of the current core and buffer ranges in Clam Lake into one combined zone as outlined in the amended elk management plan.

Kevin, Tom Hauge, and Gundy have been talking to the Kentucky Dept of Fish and Wildlife and have sent an official letter of request for elk. KY would like to exchange elk for grouse (15 grouse/elk) and are currently planning some grouse habitat improvements. Gundy has met with their commissioner and we have received a formal letter back from KY indicating that they are willing to work with WI. We have a letter drafted from Gundy ready to go back to KY. KY's commission is meeting Aug 16 to discuss this exchange. Their Dept staff is putting together a grouse mgt plan, which may be presented to their board in November. We are hoping for a definite answer about receiving elk by late December. Matt Moroney and Mike Bruin have met with DATCP to discuss transportation/disease testing protocols.

If everything goes smoothly, we can expect elk as soon as May 2015. KY is still obligated to VA for 50 elk in 2014, and MO is done with their translocation. We are no longer able to get more than 50 elk per year and have made a request for 150 total elk. Scott Walter has been working on a grouse trapping plan that includes using 23 work units across the northern part of the state during the peak of cycle (2017-2020). Jon stated that the exchange of grouse should not cause concern for the Chippewa Tribes within the ceded territory and suggested that they would appreciate an opportunity to be involved in the process of trapping if they choose. The department will offer this opportunity at an upcoming Voigt Task Force meeting.

KY cannot trap until after the close of all elk hunting seasons (day after MLK Day) and have stopped trapping each year by Feb 1 to allow time for disease testing and quarantine (90 days). We'd prefer not to compete with other states for elk during the timeframe that we are trapping

Kevin is working on fine-tuning the elk reintroduction budget. MO is putting together a summary document of everything they've done over the last 3 years and will provide that summary to us. KY staff does most of the work during the trapping season. MO staff was there to help transport and during health testing. We will likely do the same. All of the caretaker equipment was removed – trailers, equipment, cameras.

Tennessee's Land Between the Lakes is no longer being considered because despite having a very wild herd that is untouched by the managers, they would be considered a captive herd (high fenced 700 acres).

Jane Riley and Kevin have met with Ho-Chunk Nation, Jackson County Wildlife Fund, Jackson County Forestry and Parks, and RMEF to start pulling together agreements. We are also revising a MOU with the Forest Service and GLIFWC. RMEF is likely to have two MOUs, one for the

funding contribution and one for the harvest tag raffle. RMEF will be hosting a habitat partner event in Clam Lake Sept 6-8 which Kevin will attend to discuss various updates.

Elk numbers split – BRF/CL

The elk plan amendment included arguments that the Black River herd should start with a minimum of 75 elk over. The committee unanimously agreed that this should be the minimum starting population if we receive 150 total elk from KY. During the first year of translocation, the committee voted that 30 elk should go to BRF while 20 go to Clam Lake. It was suggested that the majority of the bulls should go to BRF as some bulls do not successfully breed at a younger age and Clam Lake currently has an excess of bulls. There was discussion about putting more than 30 elk in BRF during the first year to help that herd establish itself faster (minimize predation impacts). However, the committee agreed that translocating some elk to Clam Lake would be beneficial in improving the genetic variation in the CL herd, to stand by the commitment we have with partners that have been involved in the CL reintroduction, and that starting with a modest number in BRER may be beneficial if issues arise. This would provide us more opportunities to learn from mistakes and adjust future releases based on what we learn. Holding 50 elk in one pen may also present challenges, especially for pregnant cows. We will present the 30/20 split to the Wildlife Policy Team for their decision.

The ojibwe tribes would consider any removal of elk from CL a “harvest”. We could potentially exchange yearling bulls from KY for adult bulls from CL to get better productivity. Jonathan felt that the ojibwe tribes may be ok with this and could be discussed in the future.

KY has not documented CWD within their deer or elk herds, having tested over 22,000 deer and over 500 elk since 2002.

We have not discussed release sites in BRER. A single holding pen will cost ~ \$8000 for materials. We will take this matter up at the next meeting.

Assisted dispersal

The draft assisted dispersal document has been edited with input from GLIFWC. The newest draft also included some new language that Kevin pulled from notes from a 2011 sub-committee meeting. Jonathan raised concern that the Department is abandoning the remaining two assisted dispersal sites in the National Forest and that the original assisted dispersal report drafted in 2011 was an agreement with the tribes. Therefore, the old sites should be used prior to using any new sites in the expanded range. Jonathan believes the new assisted dispersal document and site selection in the expanded range seems to change this. Several committee members expressed that there was no obligation or agreement to use all of the sites on the national forest before using any new sites. The expanded range offers much better habitat, and in the interest of doing what is best for the elk herd these new sites should be used if more beneficial. The Department will present changes plans for 2014 to the VITF in September

The location of the sites on the national forest was selected using a model of elk habitat suitability including habitat, roads, land use, and wolf packs. With the new expanded range those sites may not rank as high as they previously did. They were only a list of sites and their attributes, not an agreement that they had to be used for assisted dispersal. We could re-rank all of the sites together (national forest and new expanded range sites) and see which ones rise to the top. Assisted dispersal sites could also be used as release sites for elk that are brought in from KY although spring road closures will need to be considered if large trucks will be transporting elk from KY

The draft Communication Guidelines for Assisted Dispersal is a long-term outline not necessarily intended to exclude the two remaining sites that have not been used on the National Forest or to provide exact guidelines for assisted dispersal efforts. The site selection of future release sites is a separate issue. Discussion about the old sites occurred prior to the elk range expansion to include favorable habitat on state and county forests. The habitat improvements on the National Forest that were intended to occur haven't happened yet. Jonathan also raised concern that there are issues between the DNR and the national forest (road closures, lack of habitat). Kevin will be contacting Dan Eklund to address any issues. The NF has been conducting more timber removal and has plans in motion for more which will all be beneficial to the Clam Lake herd. If timber harvest occurs in these areas, future assisted dispersal attempts are expected to be more appealing on NF sites.

The committee edited the Guidelines for Assisted Dispersal (attached)

2013-14 assisted dispersal

Laine indicated that there are enough elk in the appropriate age and sex class to move this winter. (10 candidate males and 11 candidate females) Laine, Ken, Jonathan, and Dan Eklund will meet to review the new and previously-selected sites, and recommend what they feel is the best site for this winter's effort. The outcome will be included in an update to the VITF.

2013 spring calf search update

Because of the late green up in 2013, we expected bad news in terms of productivity. However, more females than males were found (13 females 10 males). There has been no bear predation to date. Currently there are 12 surviving females, 8 surviving males. Mortalities were related to poor nutrition or health. Elk that need to be necropsied should be shipped to Madison as soon as possible.

Calf searching 2014/volunteer opportunities

After 15 years, continuing to radio-collar calves during the spring of the year may result in little useful data and is time/cost intensive. Rather than collaring calves in spring, we should be able to determine cow:calf ratios during winter trapping or through other methods such as trail cameras.

The committee voted unanimously to suspend calf searching indefinitely in the Clam Lake area.

One of the main benefits of calf searching was the public involvement opportunities that it provided. Discontinuing calving will result in a lost opportunity to involve the public so it will be important to find other ways to we keep people involved and supportive of the program. Opportunities may exist to use volunteers for trail camera surveys or wildlife habitat improvement projects.

USFWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program

Mark Foss (USFWS, territory covers Jackson Co.) spoke to the committee. The Partners program can assist and possibly help fund any entity on habitat management projects (ex. pulling fence, herbicide for invasives, etc.). They would love to help with anything they can.

Research

Laine believes the information collected from the trail camera survey is more useful than the aerial flight or harem counts that were conducted this past fall/winter.

Population modeling continues to be an important research need. Dan Storm (new ungulate research scientist) provided a handout and some thoughts on future research needs. Those potential research needs included the development of a sightability model (aerial survey), elk/deer competition, and multiple research questions in BRF. Collared elk in BRF may provide adequate data to address several questions. Elk/deer competition in central forest may be a possibility if the deer research project moves to the central forest. Dustin Bronson (forest research ecologist) may become involved. A habitat evaluation may be appropriate in Clam Lake, looking at occupied vs. unoccupied range, but not necessary in BRF because we do not know where the elk will reside and the Black River state forest and Jackson County have good habitat data currently.

Dan is also looking into integrated population modeling. There is a group at UW exploring these techniques. This could drive monitoring to see what data we need for future modeling. Research currently has little to no money available. Dan would like more input from the group on research needs.

Monitoring elk in BRF –

40% of the new biologist's duties will be designated for elk. Karen said that Ho-Chunk Nation will be able to provide assistance and various resources (staff, equipment, etc) when available. We are anticipating/hoping that UWSP will have graduate projects in mind. The BREH will likely need intensive monitoring for 3-4 years post-release. Release site selection in BRER will also be a research need but that can be addressed later.

CWD testing

Approximately 75 deer were sampled in both CLER and BRER in 2012. Testing will occur again in 2013 at a level that will provide a 95% confidence level that the disease exists at less than 2% prevalence. It was suggested that samples could be collected from tribal shot deer in the CLER and local staff will work with GLIFWC to make this happen.

Population modeling

We will need a defensible population estimate moving forward, especially with an elk hunt on the horizon. This means we will need to come up with an accurate pre-calving population so that we are confident we will reach 200 during the calving season. There are a significant percentage of mortalities between March 15 and mid-May. On average, 11% of mortalities occur during this time period. The development of an elk population estimate should be a top priority for Dan Storm and Science Services. Dan will address the committee at the next meeting with thoughts on a population estimate.

The UWSP trail camera survey is anticipated to be completed by March 2014.

Elk hunt 2014

In anticipation of an elk hunt in the next few years, an elk hunter education workshop will be developed, a draft of the elk hunting regulations has been put together, and the application has been created on the ALIS system. If tribal hunters need to partake in the hunter education, the department will work with GLIFWC to coordinate. It is estimated that there are approximately 77 bulls in the herd last year. Tribal hunters would likely register their elk in a similar way that they register deer.