

**Wisconsin DNR Elk Advisory Committee**  
**Meeting Summary for October 27, 2015**  
Hayward DNR Service Center, Hayward, WI

**Attendees**

Kevin Wallenfang, WDNR Wildlife Management Big Game Ecologist, Committee Chair  
Ken Jonas, WDNR Wildlife Management Upper Chippewa Area Supervisor  
Laine Stowell, WDNR Sawyer County/Clam Lake Elk Biologist  
Kris Johansen, WDNR Wildlife Management West Central District Supervisor  
Scott Roepke, WDNR Jackson County/Black River Elk Biologist  
Dan Storm, WDNR Science Services Ungulate Researcher  
Sawyer Briel, WDNR Communications Specialist  
Jonathan Gilbert, GLIFWC Wildlife Section Leader  
Allen Jacobson, Conservation Congress  
Richard Kirchmeyer, WI Bow Hunters Association  
Jon Schweitzer, Jackson County Forestry and Parks  
Lou George, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation  
Dan Eklund, US Forest Service  
Karen Sexton, Ho-Chunk Nation Wildlife Biologist  
Tami Ryan, WDNR Wildlife Health Section Chief

**Committee members not in attendance**

Kurt Hass, WDNR Jackson County Conservation Warden  
Peter Bakkan, WDNR Black River State Forest Property Supervisor  
Kevin Marquette, WI Wildlife Fund  
Tim Ginnett, UWSP Professor  
Mike Zeckmeister, WDNR NOR Wildlife Supervisor (replacing Ken Jonas)

**Guests**

Lindsey Long, WDNR State Veterinarian  
Carrie Nelson, USFS Great Divide District Wildlife Biologist  
Mike Watt, WDNR Science Services Ungulate Researcher  
Kurt Flack, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation

**Introduction**

The Chair thanked everyone for their time and attendance at the meeting. Everyone present introduced themselves to the room.

**Herd and Habitat Updates**

Laine Stowell stated that based on camera images and staff observations the Clam Lake elk appear to have had a very successful breeding season in 2014, resulting in an estimated 34-38 calf born in 2015. Cows of breeding age recovered from difficult 2013-14 winter conditions well, especially without calves to suckle through the fall of 2014 and winter of 2015.

Additionally, the winter of 2015 was mild with a WSI in Winter of 46, resulting in projected above average calf survivorship for the general elk population and the animals involved in the assisted dispersal efforts of 2015.

Several elk/wildlife openings were created in the Flambeau River State Forest (FRSF) and Sawyer County Forest. These projects created 45-47 acres of openings planted with orchard grass, timothy and clover.

Mortality rates have been low over the past year which is consistent with the mild winter weather conditions. However, the majority of mortality events involved calves. Because newborn calves were not collared in the spring of 2014 nor 2015, true mortality rates are under-represented when compared to previous years of data.

The 2015 Meyers Farm assisted dispersal animals moved a lot immediately after release in April, but returned to the acclimation pen for the September rut.

The population estimate for the Clam Lake elk herd (Clam Lake, Butternut, Moose Lake and Winter groups) is approximately 140-160 elk.

Scott Roepke described the habits and movements of the Black River elk herd since release from the quarantine pen on August 20, 2015. Most of the elk have remained near the pen. There were incidents of elk in a cranberry bog. Hazing tactics were used over several occurrences. There remains strong local public support for the elk reintroduction. Scott reviewed the plan to communicate the elk's presence to deer hunters and land users. Billboards are now up in the area and additional signage is planned. Local staff is also putting up elk/deer posters and will be visiting deer hunting camps before the opener.

There have been a few incidents where collared wolves have been documented near the elk, but for the most part the wolves are leaving them alone.

### **Partner Updates**

Jon Schweitzer has been working with local DNR staff to notify the public of the presence of elk in the Jackson County forest and surrounding area. Jackson County forestry staff has begun a buckthorn removal/mitigation project with funding from RMEF, County Conservation and Fish and Wildlife funds. Staff are also expanding an elk/wildlife opening that will be similar to the field at the quarantine pen. Aerial spraying for phragmites was approximately 95% effective.

Allen Jacobson says the Jackson County Wildlife fund will continue to assist with elk reintroduction efforts. The annual fundraiser event is in November.

Jonathan Gilbert reviewed the recent Voigt Task Force meeting where Mike Zeckmeister, WDNR Northern Region Wildlife Supervisor attended and presented information pertaining to

recent and future reintroduction efforts. Gilbert felt it was a good meeting that stimulated discussion about elk habitat, population estimates, etc. There was concern that Clam Lake is not currently the focus of the reintroduction. The goals for attending and presenting at the meeting were accomplished.

Lou George says the RMEF fundraising efforts are finishing strong in 2015. The annual calendar sale is underway.

Karen Sexton confirmed that the Ho-Chunk Nation will continue support for elk reintroduction with funding and field operations. She recently was successful in acquiring an annual budget allocation specifically for elk management activities.

Dan Eklund stated that the Forest Service has completed work on approximately 75 acres of wildlife openings and 65 acres of trail within the Clam Lake elk range. Staff are continuing to work on timber salvage sales primarily in the Moose Lake area. The Black Torch Project seems to be expanding. The 2016 budget has not been approved and therefore funds for a quarantine pen are not secured. The US Army National Guard may be able to help with construction of the pen. Eklund outlined how the Good Neighbor Authority allows more timber sales to be completed on National Forest property.

Kevin Wallenfang added that several DNR and Forest Service staff attended the annual RMEF Bugle Days event in Clam Lake in September. The presentations were, overall well received by the public in attendance and Kevin emphasized that we are committed to the elk project and its success.

### **2016 Elk Reintroduction Logistics**

Kevin shared that the 2015 reintroduction debrief meeting with the DNR Secretary's Office went well. Lodging, vehicle rental and other logistics for 2016 are underway. Kevin shared project expenses from 2015 and projections for 2016. Trapping, health testing and transportation crews are being assembled. All participants will undergo training on December 17<sup>th</sup> in Eau Claire. The Forest Service will provide a staff member for the trapping crew. GLIFWC will likely provide personnel for 2017 efforts. A work crew will precede the trapping crew to repair/modify the quarantine pen in early December. Trapping is expected to begin January 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2016.

### **Elk Monitoring**

Dan Storm reviewed the camera survey projects in the Clam Lake and Black River elk ranges. After deployment, cameras are checked four times annually. Pictures are encrypted for protection. Some logistics are being modified to accommodate what has already been learned, mostly about camera placement and equipment use. So far, about one million images have

been captured. Staff will begin sorting through images. Data will be used to support population estimates generated by several statistical models.

Dan described the effectiveness of the radio telemetry collars and how they work. He also shared information about other state agency large ungulate collaring projects.

The committee discussed the importance of the location data provided by the collars and potential back up devices in the event a collar fails or goes off-air. The committee also discussed how elk and wolves are interacting based on radio collar locations from both species.

### **2015-2016 Wisconsin Winter Trapping Plans**

Laine Stowell stated that assisted dispersal within the Clam Lake elk range will not happen in 2016. The elk groups do not have a sufficient number of target animals for relocation. He also said there is a significant number of radio collars that are reaching the end of their expected battery life. To replace these collars would require winter trapping efforts in Clam Lake.

The committee discussed the positive and negative aspects to re-collaring these animals and the goals for the number of individuals in the population that should maintain on-air collars.

**Decision Item: The committee agreed to recommend that the Clam Lake elk herd does not need to be trapped for the purpose of replacing collars during the winter of 2015-2016.**

Scott Roepke reviewed the importance for the entire Black River elk herd to retain on-air radio collars. An elk trap has been purchased and is ready to mobilize.

The committee discussed the benefits of trapping Black River elk and the optimal time to conduct trapping activities.

**Decision Item: The committee agreed to recommend that winter trapping should take place to collar the two uncollared calves and replace malfunctioning collars. The details of when and where this will take place will be determined by elk program staff and the DNR health team.**

### **Herd Health**

Tami Ryan summarized preparations for 2016 Kentucky trans-located elk. The health team is using what was learned last year to improve health testing and hauling protocols. The committee discussed ideas for reducing elk exposure to ticks and potential treatments for tick borne illness. No decisions were made, and this topic will continue to be explored by Wildlife Health.

### **CLER Quarantine Facility**

Kevin provided background on a sub-committee (Eklund, Gilbert, Zeckmeister, Stowell, Wallenfang, Nelson, Martin) tour of potential locations for a quarantine facility within the Clam Lake Elk Range and the criteria that they considered. Laine Stowell provided aerial photos and pen design layout on each potential site.

The Meyers Farm site located in the Flambeau River State Forest has a mild, 3-6% slope with a good ratio of open to forested land. There is an all-weather road for good access, and potential processing facility location is flat with very little slope in the approach. The site has adequate drainage and little site preparation would be needed. The access road is being gated. There are extensive timber sales in the area. The elk released here in spring 2015 are regularly using this area which would allow Kentucky and Wisconsin elk to intermingle soon after quarantined animals are released.

The second potential site is known as the Job Corp site on the Chequamegon National Forest a few miles northwest of the Town of Clam Lake. It has fairly mild topography; however there may be a spot that could have standing water in the spring. There is an all-weather, partially paved road for access. However, the road is used to access a nearby lake and as a ATV/snowmobile trail. Dan Eklund stated that site preparation needs may be extensive as there is a concrete slab with two feet of overburden on most of the site. Because of budgetary challenges, there is no Forest Service funding to pursue at this time. He has reached out to the US Army National Guard Engineering Battalion for potential assistance with construction and expects a reply in early November. There are timber sales relatively close to this location. This site is on the fringe of currently occupied elk home range.

A third site at the old ELF line headquarters site was considered, but was ruled unacceptable by the subcommittee and therefore not considered by the greater committee.

Sites were evaluated based on elk use, recreational activity and trails, logging activities, access roads, site preparation requirements, recent elk mortality locations, topography, soil composition, gates, availability of electricity, proximity to county roads, DNR offices/staff availability, and nearby storage facilities.

### **Decision Item: The committee agreed to recommend the CLER quarantine facility be built at the Meyers Farm site within the Flambeau River State Forest.**

Construction will need to begin in the summer/fall of 2016 to receive animals in winter 2017. It is hoped that we can recycle as much material from the BRER facility as possible, and that construction costs will be significantly less than the Jackson County facility. While RMEF has offered to cover costs, partners will continue to be sought to complete construction.

**Other Topics**

Jonathan Gilbert summarized the details of the tribal night hunting decision and gave an overview of participation expectations.

Congratulations to Ken Jonas on his looming retirement!

Adjourned at 3:00 pm

Notes submitted by Christine Priest, WDNR Assistant Big Game Ecologist