In 1990, the Oregon Fish & Wildlife Commission designated the Sled Springs Game Management Unit (UNIT 57) as Oregon's first "Management Demonstration Area". The Sled Springs Management Demonstration Area, or "MDA" for short, is intended to be a special area in which game managers, the hunting public, and land managers can all work together to develop better methods for managing elk populations and habitat cooperatively. The Sled Springs MDA is aimed at enhancing: 1) the distribution and composition of elk herds; 2) hunter success; 3) hunting opportunities on public and private lands; 4) landowner-hunter relationships; and 5) hunter satisfaction with game management programs. We hope that as we successfully address these issues in the MDA, we can also provide guidance to improve elk management throughout the state.

The MDA concept grew out of the Blue Mountains Elk Initiative, a partnership of public and private organizations dedicated to improving management of elk populations and elk habitat. The primary cooperators in the Sled Springs MDA are the Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife, Hancock Forest Management Inc., and the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest. For more information, contact the Blue Mountains Elk Initiative, 1401 Cekeler Lane, La Grande, Oregon, or the Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife, 117 20th Street, La Grande.

"Adaptive management" is the rule in the MDA. Adaptive management involves regular modification of management practices, followed by monitoring, to identify superior strategies to solve specific problems. Because adaptive management is used here, you will notice year-to-year changes in regulations that are somewhat unique to this area. Because the MDA is a cooperative venture, we'll make an extra effort to keep you informed of the monitoring results. The following graphs give a brief history of the Sled Springs elk herd, and illustrate some of the management problems being addressed.

Elk are difficult to census. Aerial surveys are conducted in late March or early April when elk congregate in open areas. The number of elk that are seen during these surveys changes from year to year. This annual variation results from fluctuations in weather patterns and elk sightings, as well as fluctuations in the elk population itself. It is not possible to count all the elk, so biologists must develop correction factors for estimating the actual population's size from the census data. This graph illustrates the difference between the number of elk sighted each year and the estimated size of the total population. It also shows that advances in census technique have reduced the annual variation in the counts over the years. This facilitates more precise population estimates which, in turn, facilitate more precise management of the elk herd and harvest.

Pregnancy rate is typically high for elk in Sled Springs, but calf recruitment has trended downward for several decades. Recruitment is the ratio of calves to cows in early spring, and this ratio reflects survival of calves over their first year of life. As such, recruitment is more important in calculating allowable harvest than is the pregnancy rate. Unfortunately, declining recruitment is typical of most elk populations in northeastern Oregon, and it has seriously reduced hunting opportunity over time. Fewer surviving calves means fewer elk to hunt. Low recruitment may result from low calf-ratio, poor nutrition, and increased predation. Research is needed to identify the real cause and management solutions. (*Measure 18 banned the use of dogs and baits hunting cougar or bear.)

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE SLED SPRINGS ELK HERD?

Hunters collect biological samples from harvested animals. These samples include teeth and reproductive tracts. These samples are used to determine the herd's age structure and its pregnancy rate. The more samples hunters provide, the more accurately these parameters can be calculated, and the better the herd can be managed. There are also many radio-collared animals in the MDA. If you harvest one of these collared animals, please return the collar and ear tags to a biologist or collection barrel.

Landowners manage the elk habitat. Only 17% of the Sled Springs MDA is public land. The remaining 83% is owned and managed by private farmers, ranchers, and foresters. Most elk live on these private lands, often at the financial expense of the landowner who must pay taxes and generate profit to stay in business, in addition to covering dry-to-day costs. In the Sled Springs unit, most of the public hunting occurs on private lands. Managing elk at the current level (about 2,150 animals) would not be possible without the continued profitability and generosity of private landowners. So give them the credit they deserve for the contributions they make to your hunting opportunity.