Elk by Prescription

The “Management Objective” Process

How many elk are enough? What population level best fits an area when all factors are considered? Those questions and more drove the process when the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) began to develop elk management objectives (MOs) more than a decade ago.

Oregon’s first elk MOs were adopted in December 1981 by the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission. These covered 28 Big Game Management Units (BGMU) in eastern Oregon. In 1986 the initial MOs were reevaluated and, after commission-adopted revisions, established an end-of-winter Rocky Mountain elk population objective of 52,700 elk for the 28 areas east of the Cascades.

The MOs were based on late winter surveys and took the following criteria into consideration:
• Population survey data from the previous decade
• Computer population modeling
• Damage caused by elk on private property
• Desires for hunting opportunity
• Habitat capacity

No management objectives were established in western Oregon or in some central and eastern Oregon units for several reasons. These included inadequate census records in some units, elk herds expanding to new areas in some parts of the state, and active elk transplant programs that were underway in other areas.

The current process to establish an elk population MO for each management unit began with the Commission’s adoption of an Oregon Elk Management Plan in 1992. Among other things, the plan calls for development of statewide elk MOs by 1997. In 1993 the Oregon
Legislature accelerated this process by directing ODFW to develop elk MOs for all areas of the state by 1995.

What is an “MO”, and how is it used?

Simply put, an MO is the number of elk in a Elk Management Zone (EMZ) that fits habitat availability while remaining compatible with primary land uses. Big game management units are the long-established units shown on maps in the big game hunting regulations. EMZs are either portions or combinations of these units developed when necessary based on elk use and movement patterns. Information on elk use in Oregon is improving steadily through management studies using ear tags, collars and radio telemetry.

Each MO considers the department’s statutory obligation to prevent the serious depletion of wildlife, provide optimum recreational and aesthetic benefits, and to regulate elk and the public enjoyment of elk in a manner compatible with primary land uses. In areas where elk winter mainly on private lands, landowner desires and damage to private property are critical factors which influence the MO.

In areas dominated by urban or agricultural uses, elk are determined to be not compatible with existing land uses. These heavily populated urban or agricultural areas are designated as Elk De-emphasis Areas (EDAs). In these areas no management actions to enhance elk populations are taken, and the management focus is to minimize elk numbers. This can be difficult since these areas often provide poor access for hunters to help control populations. Where elk winter mainly on private lands, tolerance of elk is a critical factor. Some landowners are more accepting of elk than others. The tolerance levels of landowners and their neighbors must enter into setting MOs.

A MO is a dynamic number that needs occasional adjustment as habitat changes, population data improves, or when elk damage or landowner tolerance shifts. As more accurate population estimates develop through new techniques, changes to MOs will reflect revised population estimates, even though this may not mean a change in “real” elk numbers. The Fish and Wildlife Commission reviews elk MOs at least every five years, and revises numbers based on the best information available and after thorough public review.

Elk population census is done during the winter, after most hunting seasons finish. ODFW considers the population to be at MO if the annual estimate is within 5 percent of the adopted MO. To reduce impacts of weather-related census errors, decisions on action needed to adjust a population are based on a three-year running average. Once an elk population reaches MO, antlerless hunting is the best
management tool available to maintain that level. Although a MO directs the overall population level within a geographic area, ODFW recognizes that elk are not distributed evenly throughout an area. Thus continued response to specific damage situations is necessary in addition to management meant to influence overall population within a unit or zone.

Public Involvement

Public involvement played a vital role in the development of the Elk Management Objectives. The 11 month long public involvement process began with department staff drafting a set of proposals to be used as a tool to solicit involvement and comment.

This first draft of proposals were reviewed by focus groups who represented the timber industry, livestock and agricultural interests, sports groups, public and private land managers and tribal representatives. These groups made recommendations which were incorporated into a second draft of proposals.

The revised proposals were made available to the public for comment during a series of 22 statewide meetings. Other issues were identified and brought back to the focus groups for final analysis. The final draft was made available at seven statewide public meetings and forwarded to the Commission for adoption.

Key themes and issues resulting from the public involvement process included:
- ODFW ability to effectively address elk damage.
- ODFW ability to keep populations at MO and concerns about impacts on private lands if elk numbers are allowed to increase.
- Effects of more elk on the forage base.
- Lack of universal agreement with the concept of elk de-emphasis areas.
- Questions about the accuracy of current population estimates.
- Desires by sports interests for increased elk and hunting opportunity.
- Landowner concern about the opposition by some hunters to antlerless harvest which is the only effective tool for controlling elk numbers.

More detailed information about the MO process and about each individual elk management area is available in a publication entitled Oregon’s Elk Population Management Objectives. This is an addendum to the 1992 Oregon Elk Management Plan and is available from the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife on request.