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Informing natural resource policy: clearwater basin elk

AT A GLANCE

Recent research on elk in the Clearwater River Basin changes the paradigm for management.

The Situation

The elk herds of the Clearwater River Basin in north-central Idaho were historically some of the largest in North America creating an economic boon for rural economies through sport hunting and the guides and outfitting businesses that supported it. However, in recent decades the number of elk have plummeted harming local economies, as well as curtailing the heritage of many individuals and families that hunted the forests of the basin for decades, both for the challenge of the hunt, as well as to provide a local source of protein.

The factors that have been identified as causes of this decline are complex, and interlinked, they include changes in forest habitat, harsh winters and increased predation pressure. Biologists having been trying to understand the relative contribution of these factors and how to address them to restore elk populations in the Basin.

One such effort is the Wildlife Habitat Restoration Initiative (WHRI) which is focused on understanding elk nutrition and habitat needs. Developed and administered by the Clearwater Basin Collaborative (CBC), the WHRI was funded and implemented by various partners including the U.S. Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Idaho Department of Fish and



Elk herd grazing.

Game, Washington State University, and the National Council for Air and Stream Improvement (NCASI).

This research has changed the paradigm for elk habitat management in the basin by pointing to the signal importance of summer range for elk (over winter range as was previously thought), as well as identifying what forest habitats will create the greatest forage benefit for elk if subjected to vegetation management. The study confirms that not every acre is of equal benefit to elk and identifies the locations where landowners and managers can focus their management for the greatest benefit to elk populations and other disturbance dependent wildlife species.

Given the path-breaking nature of these research findings it was important to get the information in front of

land managers and the public interested in forest management and wildlife policy to pave the way for implementing these findings in the Basin. Many of the findings are consistent with other recent research in forest ecology and resilience that points to the need for greater efforts at restoration of historic conditions including the need for more early-successional habitat and structural complexity in interior forests.

Our Response

In collaboration with the Clearwater Basin Collaborative, UI Extension in Clearwater County planned and conducted a two-night webinar series entitled *Clearwater Basin Elk: History, Research and Management* that featured presentations on the findings of the new research as well as the history of elk in the basin and plans for incorporating these findings in state elk management plans and the revised Forest Plan for the Nez Perce Clearwater National Forest. Presenters included James Peek, professor emeritus, University of Idaho College of Natural Resources, John and Rachel Cook, NCASI; Michael Wisdom, U.S. Forest Service-Pacific Northwest Research Station, Kevin Labrum, Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forests, Zachary Swearingen and Clay Hickey, Idaho Department of Fish and Game. The program was co-hosted by Bill Warren, UI Extension and CBC co-chair, and Tera King, Idaho Forest Group and CBC co-chair.

Program Outcomes

There were 107 registrants for the program with 82 attending the live webinar and 54 views of the video online after the event. Attendees completing evaluations

reported from 28-60% gain in knowledge, depending on topic, with an average gain of 46%. An overwhelming 90% reported that they would likely use the information in their management. Attendees represented almost 2 million acres of land either owned or managed. Given the webinar format there were many out-of-area attendees including individuals from other states.

Comments included:

“Killer presentation-discussion... the full course meal. In depth, comprehensive historical to current. Great representation across partners-agencies. Nice integration of management implications stemming from research findings. Applaud all the Clearwater Basin elk and habitat experts who gave up their evenings to share their knowledge. This time slot makes programs like this accessible to many. Look forward to future webinars.”

“Everything about this program was valuable to me in the regard that I'm from Wisconsin and have little experience managing western habitat types and western big game species.”

“A massive thank you to the panel members and for CBC/U of Idaho Extension for setting this webinar up. Very good job by all participants and the organizers.”

“Thanks for organizing this! I'm busy writing an article for Bugle magazine at RMEF on this topic, and this webinar was extremely helpful.”

FOR MORE INFORMATION

William Warren, Associate Professor & Extension Educator • University of Idaho Extension, Clearwater County • 208-476-4434

• williamw@uidaho.edu

43-21-wwarren-basin-elk • 10/21