

NINEMILE EMU
(Hunting Districts 201 and 203)



Description: This 1,055-square-mile EMU lies west of Missoula and borders the southwest boundary of the Flathead Indian Reservation. The Lolo National Forest (LNF) administers the majority (about 60%) of the EMU, and Plum Creek Timber Company (PCT) owns approximately 15%. The quality and quantity of winter range forage is declining, as shrubfields, created by the wildfires in the early 1900s, become more decadent with age and are invaded by conifer reproduction. Wolves are now established in the Ninemile and Fish Creek areas, where they may have reduced calf recruitment and affected elk distribution.

Public Access: Public access remains good because of the public lands and because PCT allows free public hunting on its lands. Roads constructed for timber harvest and the BPA Powerline pathway provide access to most of the unit. Road construction on public lands has been minor since 1992. Although construction of logging roads has increased on corporate timberlands, PCT has effectively gated most of its roads, reducing vehicular access substantially in many areas since 1992. The Block Management Program has opened blocks of private land to hunting access in the Ninemile and Fourmile areas. Most portions of the EMU offer opportunities for day hunts by vehicle, by horseback, or on foot.

Elk Populations: Numbers of elk observed on post-season aerial trend surveys increased dramatically from 1980 to 1990 (Figure 1). Since then, observed numbers of elk have been relatively stable, and approximately 1,600 elk are observed during fixed-wing aerial surveys of this EMU. Sex/age ratios have not been collected since the early 1990s in this EMU because of budget constraints.

Recreation Provided: During 1999-2001, this EMU provided an annual average of 14,482 days of hunting recreation to 2,193 elk hunters annually, compared to about 26,000 hunter days and 3,900 hunters in the early 1990s. This decline may be the result of implementation of the brow-tined bull regulation (since 1995) and the unusually warm, dry fall seasons since 1998. Winter, spring and summer elk viewing opportunities are available in several areas, including excellent elk viewing in Lolo Creek, Ninemile Creek, and Nemote Creek.

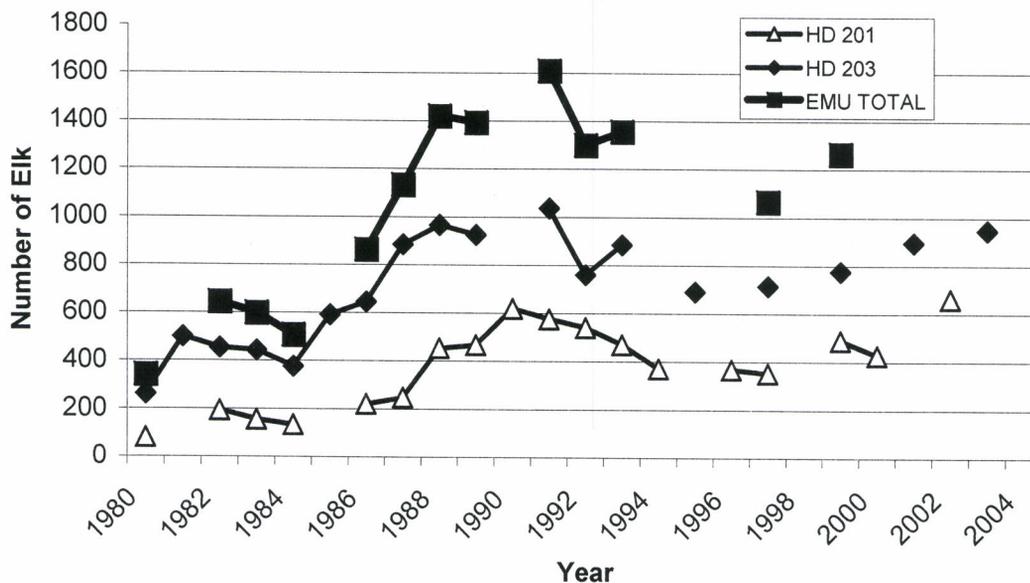


Figure 1. Number of elk observed during post-season aerial trend surveys in HDs 201 and 203, Ninemile EMU, 1980-2004.

Annual Elk Harvest: During 1999-2001, hunters harvested an average 134 elk (83 antlered and 51 antlerless) annually, compared to about 300 elk (200 antlered and 100 antlerless) annually during the early 1990s. Although elk numbers are comparable to previous highs in the late 1980s and early 1990s, fewer hunters, the brow-tined bull regulation (implemented in 1995) and the warm, dry hunting seasons are likely responsible for lower harvests in recent years. Because of the brow-tined-bull regulation, nearly 100% of the bull harvest is comprised of BTBs. About 25% of the harvested bulls have 6 or more antler points on at least one side.

Accomplishments: FWP cooperated with the Lolo National Forest, in facilitating a land exchange that protected approximately 3,500 acres of elk winter range in the O'Brien Creek area from residential development.

FWP and private landowners cooperated in addressing conflicts involving elk on private land in the St. Regis, Tarkio and Ninemile areas. A combination of tools was used to direct hunters and increase harvests in those areas. The Fourmile Creek portion of HD 201 has additional antlerless permits for the general hunting season to control local elk populations. A late season damage hunt was employed in Nemote Creek.

Block Management insured continued hunter access in Fourmile and Ninemile Creeks, where 1,949 acres of private land are enrolled.

FWP cooperated with the Lolo National Forest to control of noxious weeds on winter ranges in Pardee, Eddy and Madison and O'Brien Creeks. FWP also cooperated with LNF in prescribed

burning projects to rejuvenate shrubfield winter ranges in Mill, Pardee, Deep, Burdette, Petty and O'Brien Creeks.

Management Challenges: The future disposition and management of hundreds of thousands of acres in Plum Creek Timber ownership may result in a serious threat to hunting access and elk population management in the Ninemile EMU . PCT lands have historically been open to the public, and hunters tend to take this privilege for granted. However, in recent years PCT has been marketing parcels for sale, and PCT may not be a longtime landowner in this EMU. The loss of hunting access on PCT lands, and possible concurrent loss of elk habitat, would eliminate significant public hunting opportunities for elk in this heavily hunted EMU.

Residential subdivisions continue to be developed on or near elk habitat, particularly near Lolo, Missoula, Frenchtown, and Huson. In some cases, such subdivisions have restricted public access to hunting elk and have contributed to chronic elk damage complaints in those areas. In other cases, winter range productivity has been reduced by housing developments. We expect this trend to continue.

Calf:100 cow ratios in nearby EMUs have declined steadily over the past decade, and recruitment in this EMU probably has declined also. Although deteriorating winter range quality may contribute to this, public concern has centered on the potentially increasing role of predation in the past decade.

The restoration of wolves to western Montana is an emerging factor in elk population management. In the Ninemile EMU, where at least three wolf packs are now established, we anticipate some level of additive elk mortality with more wolf packs, which would necessitate a corresponding reduction in antlerless elk permits.

Use of OHVs, particularly 4-wheelers, for hunting and retrieving elk has increased significantly during the past decade. Increasingly, hunters complain of 4-wheelers illegally accessing areas behind closed gates. This may be not only a social and legal problem, but 4-wheeler use may also contribute to increased bull harvest in some areas, displacement of elk to areas where they are less accessible to hunters, soil erosion, and spread of noxious weeds.

Winter range forage productivity is threatened by conifer invasions of shrubfields and grasslands, aging shrub plants, and weed invasions of grasslands. Continued declines in forage productivity may lead to lower calf recruitment, lower elk populations, and greater elk use of private lands.

Population Monitoring: We conduct biannual elk trend counts during spring greenup with fixed-wing aircraft in HDs 201 and 203. During these surveys, we also record percent bulls in the population. As budgets allow, we sample bull:100 cow and calf:100 cow ratios during late winter by helicopter.

SUMMARY OF PUBLIC COMMENT

In 1992, public comment was supportive of providing a diversity of elk hunting experiences. Some believed elk numbers should be increased, while others thought that elk numbers should be reduced to thwart increasing game damage incidents. The public also expressed a desire for better opportunities to harvest older bulls and supported increased efforts to protect elk security through additional road closures.

Based on recent comments at meetings and in individual conversations, the 1992 summary still accurately reflects the range of public views. However, now there is an increased concern about wolf predation relative to the possible effects on elk populations and hunting opportunities, an increased desire for higher elk numbers, and increased opposition to new road closures, particularly those on PCT lands. Also, concern has been expressed about the effects on elk populations of deteriorating winter range conditions resulting from lack of fire and old clearcuts becoming revegetated with timber.

MANAGEMENT GOAL

On publicly accessible lands, maintain current elk population levels, provide a diversity of elk hunting experiences, and offer opportunities for a maximum sustainable annual elk harvest. In areas of chronic game damage, facilitate increased involvement of local communities in developing elk population objectives, and, where possible, decrease elk population levels with hunting regulations that increase hunter effectiveness in harvesting elk and increase landowner tolerance for hunters on their properties.

HABITAT OBJECTIVES

- 1) Develop cooperative programs that encourage public and private land managers to maintain 662,400 acres of productive elk habitat.
- 2) Maintain at least 80% of existing elk habitat security.

HABITAT MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

FWP will provide technical assistance and cooperate with the Lolo National Forest and other public and private landowners/managers to:

- Improve vegetation diversity and increase forage carrying capacity of winter ranges by prescribed burning, weed management, and timber harvest. Facilitate conifer encroachment reduction, shrub stimulation, and weed management projects already underway in Eddy Creek, Deep Creek, Petty Creek, Ninemile Creek, O'Brien Creek and Fish Creek.
- Maintain open road densities at current levels.
- Identify and open selected roads where increased hunter access might reduce crop depredation by elk.

- Maintain elk security so that elk harvest is distributed throughout the hunting season, with no more than 40% of harvested bulls taken during the first week of the general season.
- Review subdivision and other development proposals and provide input relative to elk management to local government authorities responsible for development approval.
- Review timber sales, road management, and other projects on public lands that might affect elk populations and elk hunting opportunities.
- Acquire conservation easements from willing landowners on elk range at greatest risk of permanent habitat loss due to future development or other factors.
- Work with private and public entities to protect important elk winter ranges from residential development (e.g. Lolo Creek, Albert Creek, Fish Creek, Petty Creek and Deep Creek).

GAME DAMAGE STRATEGIES

FWP will:

- Attempt to manage game damage through adjustment of numbers of general season antlerless permits.
- Use A-9/B-12 "B" licenses for a second antlerless elk in portions of the district with chronic crop depredation
- Increase antlerless harvest in chronic depredation areas by establishing portions of districts with extra antlerless permits, by adopting special early and late season damage hunts, and by establishing special permits for private lands only.
- Pursue efforts to increase the carrying capacity of winter ranges on USFS lands adjacent to chronic problem areas.

ACCESS STRATEGIES

FWP will:

- Identify important points of access to public lands and provide access recommendations to the appropriate land management authority. Access programs will generally be designed to allow vehicle access to the boundary of USFS lands with non-vehicular traffic allowed beyond that point.
- Identify opportunities for additional Block Management projects and walk-in areas
- Identify opportunities to provide points of access through private lands to public lands through the Access Montana program
- Work with public and private entities to protect lands from land exchanges and/or developments that would exclude lands from public hunting.

POPULATION OBJECTIVES

- 1) Maintain the number of elk observed during post-season aerial trend surveys within 20% of 1,550 elk (600 elk in HD 201, 950 elk in HD 203).

- 2) Maintain at least 10 bulls:100 cows observed during post-season helicopter surveys (if budgets allow these surveys), or at least 7% antlered bulls in the total elk observed.

POPULATION MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

- Prescribe antlerless harvest equal to estimated calf recruitment rates for elk populations not responsible for chronic crop depredation.
- Focus elk population reductions where game damage problems exist, rather than reducing numbers uniformly across the EMU.
- Utilize the brow-tined bull regulation to maintain a minimum number of breeding bulls.

REGULATION PACKAGES

Six-week brow-tined bull/antlerless elk archery regulation EXCEPT, see Restrictive Regulation for antlered elk.

Antlerless:

Note: Between 1990 and 2002, the number of antlerless permits issued for this EMU varied from 150 to 725 corresponding to the 1,150 to 1,700 elk observed during fixed-wing aerial surveys during the same period.

The Standard Regulation is: limited antlerless permits (100-375 in HD 201 and 100-450 in HD 203 varying with the post-season aerial trend count) during the 5-week general season.

The Standard Regulation will be recommended if: the total number of elk observed during post-season aerial trend surveys are between 480 and 720 in HD 201 and between 760 and 1,140 in HD 203.

The Liberal Regulation is: 1.) increased numbers of antlerless permits (more than 400 in HD 201 and more than 500 in HD 203) OR; 2.) brow-tined bull/antlerless regulation during a portion (up to the full 5-weeks) of the general season with limited antlerless permits or A-9/B-12 antlerless licenses (B-tags) valid during the rest of the season (antlerless permits and A-9/B-12 licenses may be valid to 1 January).

Liberal Regulation 1.) (above) will be recommended if: the total numbers of elk observed during post-season aerial trend surveys are more than 720 elk in HD 201 and more than 1,150 elk in HD 203 .

Liberal Regulation 2.) (above) will be recommended if: after 2 years of application of Liberal Regulation 1.) (above) the total number of elk observed during post-season aerial trend surveys remains more than 720 elk in HD 201 and more than 1,150 elk in HD 203 .

The Restrictive Regulation is: limited antlerless permits (less than 100 each in HDs 201 and 203) valid for a portion of the district or portion of the season.

The Restrictive Regulation will be recommended if: the total numbers of elk observed during post-season aerial trend surveys are less than 480 elk in HD 201 and less than 760 elk in HD 203 for 2 consecutive survey years.

Antlered:

The Standard Regulation is: 5-week general season brow-tined bull regulation.

The Standard Regulation will be recommended if: at least 7% of total elk observed during post-season aerial surveys are bulls or, at least 10 bulls:100 cows are observed during post-season aerial surveys.

The Restrictive Regulation is: unlimited permits for antlered bulls. ARCHERS WILL ALSO BE REQUIRED TO APPLY FOR UNLIMITED PERMITS.

The Restrictive Regulation will be recommended if: the % bulls observed during post-season aerial trend surveys is less than 7% (or bull:100 cow ratios are less than 10:100) for 2 consecutive years in both HDs OR, calf:100 cow ratios are less than 20 calves:100 cows for 2 consecutive years.