
THE DICHOTOMY OF CONSERVATION – MANAGING ELK IN THE WILDLAND/URBAN INTERFACE OF MISSOULA , MONTANA

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The Missoula Valley in western Montana is home to nearly 800 wintering elk (*Cervus elaphus*), including the North Hills, Evaro, Jumbo, O'Brien Creek and Miller Creek herds. With the City of Missoula as the hub, the Valley has experienced substantial human population growth over the last 30 yrs. This increased growth and subsequent development has consumed and fragmented wildlife habitat and placed additional recreational demands on adjacent public lands. Wildlife biologists with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks have worked cooperatively with local governments, federal agencies, land trusts, other non-governmental organizations, and the general public to conserve and protect important elk winter range and habitat connectivity within the wildland/urban interface of the Missoula Valley. From a biological perspective, we have been extremely successful in managing for the persistence of elk populations. However, protecting winter range adjacent to and fragmented by human development has additional management challenges and costs. Since 1980, the North Hills elk herd has grown an average of 11 percent per year, with a 48-percent growth rate occurring between 2000 and 2007. Without an effective harvest, this population is expected to double in less than seven years. To protect elk winter range and to continue to keep elk wild, wildlife biologists have needed to become more creative with their management and conservation strategies. This presentation discusses those strategies, as well as the dichotomy of conserving elk winter range and managing elk on human developed landscapes.