



Parks & Open Space

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PARKS & OPEN SPACE ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEETING

Time/Date of Meeting: 6:30 p.m., Thursday, Jan. 27, 2022

Location: Virtual Meeting

TO:	Parks & Open Space Advisory Committee
FROM/PRESENTER:	Jon DeCoste, Elk Management Coordinator
AGENDA ITEM:	Elk and Vegetation Management Update
ACTION REQUESTED:	Recommendation to the BOCC

Background: Boulder County Parks and Open Space (BCPOS) has been implementing elk management in two areas of the county to address non-migrating elk populations that are causing resource damage on valuable natural landscapes at Ron Stewart Preserve at Rabbit Mountain and Red Hill. This management includes using licensed, approved hunters to attempt to harvest elk from open space properties to reduce the refuge created on our open spaces. This is our annual update on elk management, including numbers and movement of elk and the progress on meeting our plan objectives.

Red Hill

The fall of 2021 marked the second season of elk management of the Red Hill herd on open space properties around US Highway 36, a part of Heil Valley Ranch, and on BCPOS agriculture leases east of Haystack Mountain.

The season ran from August 16, 2021 to October 30, 2021, with the intent to harvest and influence non-migratory elk before migratory individuals arrive later in the season. Additionally, we are continuing the targeted use of hunters from this program to assist with elk damage on BCPOS agricultural leases through January 31, 2022.

Similar to 2020, we continued to engage with neighbors, residents, and commuters throughout year; we held one concerned neighbor meeting in August, continued to update the public regarding the hunt on social media and through mailings, and met with various tenants and neighbors in the Red Hill elk management area to discuss elk damage issues and general concerns. We also placed one lighted road sign on US Highway 36 to warn southbound commuters of potential elk crossing.

This year, we effectively implemented the changes requested in June by the Elk Management Team by adding an additional parking spot to the eastern hunt area allowing access from the north, reducing the number of hunters per week, and restricting archery hunting to the hunt area west of Highway 36.

Harvest Overview

- 1) Total participants: 31
- 2) Total harvest on BCPOS: 10 (32.3% success – this does not include harvests on BCPOS agriculture leases after the hunt concluded on October 30, 2021)

- 3) Total post-hunt harvest on leased BCPOS: 2 (*current as of January 18, 2022)
- 4) Harvest data from the subunit will be available from CPW in February 2022 (the subunit includes both the Rabbit Mountain and Red Hill herds).

In 2021, the Red Hill herd was counted three times during the summer, with a high count of 89 individuals; this is down from a high count of 108 in 2020. So far, we've also completed two of four winter surveys, with a high count of 336 individuals counted on December 14, 2021. Our objective is to maintain a migrating elk herd, with no more than 25 summering individuals.

Since we haven't reached our objective, we would like to request approval for the continuation of the elk management plan for Red Hill for three more years. This extension would operate under the same time parameters, regulations, and objectives as originally approved and adopted under the adaptive management strategy.

Ron Stewart Preserve

On January 30, 2022, Parks and Open Space will conclude the 5th year of hunting at the Ron Stewart Preserve at Rabbit Mountain (RSP/RM) and surrounding properties utilized by the resident elk herd. Hunting around RSP/RM continued to move animals away from congregating on open space, dispersing the herd and contributing to the overall herd size reduction. The current season lasts from September 20, 2021 through January 30, 2022, with weeklong hunting breaks over Thanksgiving and Christmas.

We successfully implemented the changes requested in June by the Elk Management Team to allow lethal hazing on open space agricultural properties experiencing elk damage east of RSP/RM. This change resulted in one additional harvest and increased hunting pressure on the resident herd, which helped to minimize damage caused by the elk by encouraging the herd to move through the landscape instead of seeking refuge in one area.

The program also increased its collaboration with the Native American group on Indian Mountain, with the hunt coordinator facilitating the collection of donated elk ivories and hides from our hunters; these will be used to teach such cultural practices as traditional tanning and ceremonial drum making.

Harvest Overview 2021-2022 (*current as of 1/18/22)

- 1) Total participants to date: 43
- 2) Total harvest on BCPOS: 12 (27.9% success)
- 3) Harvest data from the subunit will be available from CPW in February 2022 (the subunit includes both herds).

Recent counts of the elk herd conducted in November and December had a high count of 73. There will be two more counts this winter in January and February. Our objective for this herd is 30 elk using RSP/RM if they are not migrating (non-migrating elk stay here in the summer months), 70 if they are migrating. Although there were no official summer herd counts in 2021, staff observations from June had a high summer count of over 70 animals utilizing RSP/RM.

Since we haven't reached our objective, we would like to request approval for the continuation of the Elk and Vegetation Management Plan for Ron Stewart Preserve at Rabbit Mountain for two additional years after the 2022-2023 season concludes. This extension would operate under the same time parameters, regulations, and objectives as originally approved and adopted under the adaptive management strategy.

Decision Requested:

Approval of extending the Red Hill Elk Management Plan for three more years as staff has described.

Combine the approvals for Red Hill and Ron Stewart Preserve so BOCC is making decisions at the same time for both renewals. Both of these renewals would be based on meeting the plan objectives and would scale down interventions as soon as objectives are met.

*These requests would extend the overall BCPOS elk management program for both areas through the 2024-2025 season.

POSAC Action Requested

Recommendation to the Boulder County Commissioners for approval of the Elk and Vegetation Management Plans for Ron Stewart Preserve at Rabbit Mountain and Red Hill, as described above and as further described by staff at the POSAC meeting.

Suggested motion language: I move approval of extending the Ron Stewart Elk and Vegetation Management Plan and the Red Hill Elk and Vegetation Management Plan through the 2024-2025 hunting season as staff has described.