



Parks & Open Space

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PARKS & OPEN SPACE ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEETING

Time/Date of Meeting: 6:30 p.m., Thursday, March 27, 2025

Location: Boulder County Courthouse
1325 Pearl Street, Third Floor, Boulder

TO:	Parks & Open Space Advisory Committee
FROM/PRESENTER:	Jon DeCoste, Mac Kobza, Stefan Reinold, Dave Hoerath
AGENDA ITEM:	Elk Management Plans Reauthorization and Status Update
ACTION REQUESTED:	1) Red Hill Elk Management Plan needs to be reauthorized for three more years. 2) Ron Stewart Preserve at Rabbit Mountain Elk and Vegetation Management Plan needs to be reauthorized for three more years, although hunting will be paused. If hunting is necessary again, staff will seek BOCC approval.

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 (8 years) and Red Hill (5 years). 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 2024-2025 update on elk management, including numbers and movement of elk and the progress on meeting our plan objectives. We will also be discussing the following actions moving forward: changing the hunt boundaries for Red Hill to address safety concerns from neighbors on the west side of US 36; exploring the use of rifles in the Red Hill hunt area to improve hunter success and limit wounding loss; and pausing hunting for the foreseeable future at Ron Stewart Preserve at Rabbit Mountain based on meeting management plan objectives.

Red Hill

The fall of 2024 marked the fifth 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 agricultural leases east of Haystack Mountain.

The season ran from August 19, 2024, to November 2, 2024, 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 mitigate elk damage on BCPOS agricultural leases through January 31, 2025.

As in past years, we continued to work with private landowners in the area experiencing damage caused by this herd, often facilitating assistance from local Colorado Parks & Wildlife officials.

Highway safety in this area continues to be an issue. In 2024, BCPOS staff worked with consultants and other local governmental organizations to develop a comprehensive plan for improving safety in this area by exploring wildlife crossings, fencing, and other measures to address this concern.

Elk collar movement data from the Red Hill Elk Management Plan was an integral part in the development of this study.

Red Hill Harvest Overview

- 1) Total participants: 23
- 2) Total harvest of BCPOS: 15 (65.2% success – this does not include harvest on BCPOS agricultural leases after the hunt concluded on November 2, 2024)
- 3) Total post-hunt harvests on leased BCPOS: 3

2024 saw the highest harvest success in the program's 5-year history, however large numbers of resident elk in the Red Hill area continue to persist despite the efforts of our program. The program has been largely successful in mitigating resource damage to BCPOS properties by moving elk around the area through hunting pressure and harvest success. Unfortunately, many these resident elk have moved further east in the county and continue to cause issues to other BCPOS tenants and private landowners in the area. Summer elk counts from 2024 put the number of resident elk well outside the target of 25 individuals (n=57, n=47). These counts are also likely an undercount because we weren't unaware of many individuals that crossed the diagonal highway until later in the season after we finished our surveys.

Resident elk continue to use the federal property at Table Mountain and adjacent City of Boulder parcels south of Nelson Road as refuge from hunting pressure—causing extensive property damage in this area to neighboring landowners. Another development we saw this past year was a significant number of elk moving across the Diagonal Highway (US119) onto irrigated agricultural properties east of the highway and causing substantial damage to corn and other crops in the area. CPW estimates that they will be paying \$36,000 in damage to crops caused by this herd.

- As in past years, the hunt management team continued to coordinate with BCPOS tenants to allow hunters access to their leased properties when elk were present and causing damage to hay and other infrastructure. In 2022, CPW and BCPOS facilitated the installation of a stackyard fence to protect the tenant's hay. Despite these efforts, we sent six hunters to the property to help mitigate the damage in 2024-2025. We also worked with CPW to obtain vouchers to assist on this property once we had exhausted our hunters for 2024—a necessity caused by the high harvest success this season.

Ron Stewart Preserve

On January 31, 2025, Parks and Open Space concluded the 8th year of hunting at the Ron Stewart Preserve at Rabbit Mountain (RSP/RM) and surrounding properties utilized by the resident elk herd. The season started on October 2, 2024, and ran through January 31, 2025, with week-long breaks built in each month for holidays and to allow the park to stay open to the public for longer periods of time.

This past season, elk were largely absent from Ron Stewart Preserve. Despite this, CPW still paid out \$11,000 in game damage last year—largely to one agricultural producer in the area. Resident elk are no longer using Rabbit Mountain as a safe refuge from hunting pressure to maraud nearby farms and ranches under cover of darkness. Instead, this small resident herd is mostly staying on private property, where hunting pressure is limited and sporadic in this area.

- The hunt management team continued to offer support to our tenants east of Ron Stewart Preserve by providing hunters to their leased properties to address elk damage on an “as

needed” basis. This past season, elk damage in this area was minimal and no hunters were needed on these properties.

Ron Stewart Preserve Harvest Overview

- 1) Total participants: 24
- 2) Total harvests: 1 (4.2% success)

At this point in the history of the elk management program at RSP/RM, it is prudent to reflect on the program’s goals when first approved over eight years ago: reduce elk numbers at Rabbit Mountain to 30-70 individuals, limit damage caused by elk to the fragile natural resources on the property, assist the surrounding landowners experiencing game damage issues, and reduce elk-vehicle collisions along US 66. Using these metrics, this program has been largely successful in these goals. For most of the year, elk are so scarce in the area that CPW struggles to find animals for their classification counts. Long-term shrub monitoring efforts led by BCPOS staff has shown significant improvement to the once over-browsed mountain mahogany stands on the south end of Rabbit Mountain. Areas that had once been overutilized by the elk, making them susceptible to cheatgrass and other noxious weeds, are now flourishing with native grasses and forbs. We still have game damage issues in the area, but less than what neighboring landowners experienced in the past. Unfortunately, highway safety continues to be an issue in this area, with elk and other wildlife regularly crossing US 66 to access the St. Vrain riparian corridor to the south.

Action Proposed by POS Staff

Approval of extending the Red Hill Elk Management Plan through the 2027-2028 season.

BCPOS staff, in consultation with CPW, recommend keeping the Red Hill Management plan in place, and continuing the hunt program for the next three years with slight modifications.

- Staff recommend limiting hunting on the west side of US 36 to the area immediately south of the North Pointe neighborhood. Neighbors in this area have regularly raised safety concerns about the hunt adjacent to their property; after five years of hunting here, we’ve had no harvests and virtually no hunters in this area and therefore recommend removing it from all future Red Hill management hunts.
- BCPOS staff, with support from CPW, also recommend exploring the use of rifles for this program.
 - Between both programs, we have eight seasons of safe and successful hunting on county open space.
 - The use of rifles would increase hunter success and likely reduce wounding loss—an issue we generally only see at Red Hill with the use of muzzleloaders and shotguns.

Approval of extending the Ron Stewart Preserve at Rabbit Mountain Elk and Vegetation Management Plan through 2027-2028.

- BCPOS staff, in consultation with CPW, recommend no hunting at Rabbit Mountain for the foreseeable future.
- Staff recommend keeping the management plan in place to assist BCPOS tenants experiencing elk damage to their crops in areas adjacent to Ron Stewart Preserve.
 - Keeping the plan active will allow us to resume hunting when the herd numbers begin to increase. Being proactive will allow us to keep the herd size from rapidly

expanding again. County staff, in collaboration with CPW, will continue to conduct annual herd counts to stay on top of the situation. Given the overall trends we've been seeing with this herd, it will likely be several years before hunting resumes at Rabbit Mountain. Future hunting will also likely be at the lower levels we have utilized over the last few seasons.

- Any resumption of hunting at Rabbit Mountain would still need commissioner approval.

*These requests would extend the overall BCPOS elk management program through the 2027-2028 season.