



ELK CONSERVATION AND MANAGEMENT PLAN

December 2018

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There are four subspecies of elk in North America. Three occur in California, one of which, the tule elk, is only found here. Prior to non-indigenous settlement, it is estimated the elk population in California was more than 500,000 animals. Elk inhabited most parts of central and northern California extending into Oregon. During this time, indigenous people managed and utilized elk for food, clothing and tools. Non-indigenous settlement decimated California's elk populations. By 1872, only a few tule elk remained in the San Joaquin Valley. With the financial support of hunter tag fees, the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act (Pittman-Robertson Act – excise tax on sporting arms and ammunition) the Department of Fish and Wildlife (Department), conservation organizations and hunters were able to restore elk to the landscape across California. Through the conservation of suitable, connected habitats and active management including translocation, elk populations have rebounded and are now extending their range into previously occupied areas and beyond. Elk population growth since 1970 has been significant and California now supports approximately 5,700 Roosevelt elk, 1,500 Rocky Mountain elk and 5,700 tule elk.

Elk populations are recovering but will never reach historic levels due to permanent loss of habitat. Maintaining positive trends, in light of an increasing human population, will require minimizing loss of currently occupied habitat to development or conversion to other land uses. Conflicts have arisen with expanding human and elk populations, which have become significant in some areas. Loss or damage to property, public safety, and public health concerns caused the California State Legislature to act. In 2003, Fish and Game Code Section (§) 3952 was adopted and requires the Department to develop a statewide approach for management of elk. Fish and Game Code §1801 is the Department's Conservation of Wildlife Resources Policy, to encourage preservation, conservation and maintenance of wildlife resources under the jurisdiction and influence of the state. This section also provides objectives for the policy that include:



- Providing for the beneficial use and enjoyment of wildlife
 - Perpetuating all species for their intrinsic value
 - Providing aesthetic, educational and non-appropriative uses
 - To maintain diversified recreational uses
 - To provide economic contributions
 - To alleviate economic losses
- Characteristics and geographic range of each elk subspecies within the state, including Roosevelt elk, Rocky Mountain elk, and tule elk
 - Habitat conditions and trends within the state
 - Major factors affecting elk within the state, including, but not limited to, conflicts with other land uses
 - Management activities necessary to achieve the goals of the plan and to alleviate property damage
 - Identification of high priority areas for elk management
 - Methods for determining population viability and the minimum population level needed to sustain local herds
 - Description of the necessary contents for individual herd management plans prepared for high priority areas

Fish and Game Code §1802 gives the Department jurisdiction over the conservation, protection and management of fish, wildlife and native plants, and the habitat necessary for biologically sustainable populations of those species. Fish and Game Code §3952 directs the Department to develop a state-wide elk management plan, consistent with the Conservation of Wildlife Resources Policy, and maintain sufficient elk populations in perpetuity, while considering the following:





The Department is committed to developing and maintaining an effective, positive and cooperative relationship with California federally recognized Tribes (Tribes) regarding elk management. The Department and Tribes share authority to regulate the take of elk, with Tribes having authority on tribal lands and the Department over the remainder of the state. In order to achieve the goals regarding California's elk populations, innovative management actions and collaboration will be required, and guidance from a statewide elk management plan (management plan) is necessary to help mediate competing and conflicting interests. This elk management plan is designed to address these goals and objectives and assure the conservation, protection, restoration, enhancement and reestablishment

of California's elk populations and habitat. This is critical to providing cultural, scientific, educational, recreational, aesthetic and economic benefits for present and future generations of Californians.

The management plan describes historical and current geographic range, habitat conditions and trends, and major factors affecting Roosevelt, Rocky Mountain and tule elk in California. It identifies, delimits and describes high priority areas for elk management, referred to as Elk Management Units (EMUs) and establishes broad conservation and management objectives. The 22 EMUs collectively comprise the current known distribution of elk in California with few exceptions. The EMU plans are living documents with objectives focused on priori-

ty actions within a geographic area and are subject to change by the Department as additional information is gathered.

These plans can be updated independent of the main plan and other individual EMUs. Documents specific to each EMU (see Appendix E) contain information for high priority areas under the following headings: Description of EMU, Elk Distribution and Abundance, Management Goals, Objectives and Actions, Herd Viability, Summary of Annual Harvests, Unit Highlights, and Unit Specific Research. The management plan also considers methods of assessing elk population viability. The Department is committed to funding and staffing actions to achieve the goals of the EMUs.

Management activities to achieve plan goals generally emphasize maintaining and improving habitat conditions on public and private land. EMU documents identify specific management objectives and actions, along with who is responsible for those objectives and actions. Where it is (or may become) necessary to alleviate property damage and public health and safety problems within an EMU, regulated hunting is the recommended primary method of population control, followed by capture and translocation of surplus animals as resources allow when regulated hunting is infeasible or ineffective.

A draft management plan was made available for public review from November 28, 2017 to January 29, 2018. The Department received over 200 comments on the draft during the comment period. The Department edited the draft based on public input, and then received additional independent scientific peer review from wildlife agencies of four other states (Colorado, Oregon, Utah and Washington) prior to finalizing the draft.

This conservation and management plan provides guidance and direction to help set priorities statewide. The plan establishes general policies, goals and objectives, on a statewide scale. Individual EMU documents address issues specific to the unit and establish population objectives and future management direction.

Although the Department has statutory authority and primary responsibility for wildlife management in California, partnerships with other organizations and agencies have assisted with elk management in the past and will be increasingly important in the future. This plan emphasizes that sharing of resources and collaboration with all parties interested in elk conservation and management will be essential to managing California's elk populations into the future.

