

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The re-establishment of elk in South Dakota is a wildlife management success story, as today several thousand wild elk roam free, primarily in the Black Hills forested region along with several smaller herds occupying prairie and agriculture landscapes. Public demand for elk hunting and viewing opportunities is strong and continues to increase. According to a public opinion survey completed in 2013, 93% of elk hunter applicants and 62% of landowners prefer to see the elk population increase over the next five years.

This management plan provides important historical background and significant biological information for the formulation of sound elk management. Current elk survey methods and management tools are presented, along with a thorough discussion of objectives and strategies to guide management of this important resource into the future. This plan is intended to guide managers and biologists over the next five years, but should be considered a working document that will be amended as new biological and social data provide opportunities to improve management of elk resources in South Dakota.

The Black Hills population goal (excluding Custer State Park and Wind Cave National Park) is 7,000 elk, ranging from 6,000 to 8,000 depending on habitat conditions. South Dakota Game, Fish, and Parks will adjust elk hunting licenses to gradually increase elk populations to this goal by 2019. The current population objective for Custer State Park (CSP) is 800, ranging from 700-900 elk. These goals were developed from the thorough analyses of elk population data, available habitat resources on public land, private land depredation issues, and substantial input from a wide variety of publics with an interest in elk management in South Dakota. While considering numerous factors that may impact population performance (e.g. available forage, drought, harvest, predation, human disturbance and landowner tolerance), SDGFP will adopt harvest strategies that will progressively allow the elk population to reach these population goals.

Winter aerial surveys will occur every 3-4 years to assess population status and provide information about wintering elk densities and distribution in the Black Hills of South Dakota. Elk residing in the Black Hills are known migrators and often gather in large concentrations during winter months on established wintering grounds; approximately 75% of all elk counted during 2013 aerial surveys were observed in the Jasper fire burn area. Estimates of elk distribution in other seasons (i.e., spring, summer, fall) remain unknown, therefore elk management units will be managed to increase, maintain, or decrease elk populations. Management unit direction will be based on an annual collection and evaluation of biological data, population performance models, habitat conditions, and social data.

Population objectives for prairie elk units will also be specific to management unit direction and elk populations will be managed to abate substantial agricultural damages on private property while at the same time providing recreational hunting opportunity. Management directives

(increase, maintain, decrease) will be based on a qualitative assessment for each prairie elk unit and will be evaluated annually.

The management of elk and their habitats can be complex for wildlife and habitat managers. While not an exclusive list, the following topics were discussed during the plan development and include: habitat; additional forage since the 1997 Black Hills National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan; depredation; inter-state and tribal coordination; prairie elk management; elk-vehicle collisions; hunting regulations; disease; captive cervid game farming; predation management; multiple use; and mining, energy development and transmission. These challenges and opportunities serve as the foundation for the objectives and strategies outlined in the plan and will be addressed to ensure this plan is successfully implemented.

To achieve these population goals, the following objectives have been identified: 1) Maintain, manage, and protect existing elk habitat throughout the Black Hills; 2) Manage for biologically and socially acceptable elk populations in each elk management unit within the Black Hills, CSP, and Prairie units of South Dakota; 3) Manage elk populations in the Black Hills and CSP for quantity and quality recreational hunting opportunities, with an emphasis in CSP on view ability for visitors to the park; 4) Engage and collaborate with the public to manage elk populations and maintain acceptable "elk unit management directions"; 5) Cooperatively work with private landowners to resolve elk depredation to growing crops, stored-feed supplies, and private property; 6) Monitor and evaluate risk and impact of disease in wild elk herds in South Dakota; 7) Provide the public with access to private and public land for quality hunting opportunities; 8) Evaluate research and management needs and prioritize frequently; 9) Promote public, landowner, and conservation agency awareness of elk and habitat management issues of highest conservation concern; and 10) Provide opportunities for public involvement in elk management. Time-specific and measurable strategies have been identified to ensure these objectives are delivered and achieved.

The "*Elk Management Plan for South Dakota, 2015-2019*" will serve as the guiding document for decision making and implementation of actions to ensure elk populations and their habitats are managed appropriately, addressing both biological and social tolerances, while considering the needs of all stakeholders. SDGFP will work closely with private landowners, Black Hills National Forest, Wind Cave National Park and sportsmen and women to overcome the challenges and take advantage of opportunities regarding the future management of elk in South Dakota.