

The Elkhorns Working Group Newsletter



Message from the Chair

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Special points of Interest

EWG meetings for 2014 will be held on 3/6, 5/1, 7/3, 9/4 and 11/6. The public is always welcome!



Dalmatian toadflax along Maupin Creek, Elkhorns

The Elkhorn Working Group (EWG) is pleased to provide our readers with a newsletter. It's been some time since we have provided you our readers with updates and happenings from the EWG. We have been busy and call your attention to our newsletter topics.

The EWG is a diverse group of members who care to volunteer their time to give recommendations to the managing agencies involved in the island mountain range known as the Elkhorn Mountains. New members to the EWG are Josh Pallister, Grant Bronk, Joe Cohenour, Ron Marcoux and Trudy Dawson. Each of these new members bring their skills and insights into play at our bi-monthly meetings and help formulate collaborative recommendations to managing agencies. We welcome them to the EWG.

Elkhorn Restoration Committee

The Elkhorn Restoration Committee (ERC) has been at work in the Elkhorns since 2011. ERC has its roots as a subcommittee of EWG with the goal of developing a site specific project to accomplish restoration opportunities identified in the Elkhorn Vegetation Study. Because of the scale of such an undertaking, it soon became apparent that a broader group would be needed to accomplish this endeavor. As a result, a new citizen's group was formed under the umbrella of the Montana Forest Restoration Committee (MFRC).

The goal of ERC is to work with agency staff, organizations, and other interested parties to develop site-specific proposals for landscape restoration in the Elkhorns.

EWG and ERC entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in order to establish a framework of cooperation and communication to collaboratively work together to identify restoration opportunities in the Elkhorn Mountains.

EWG and ERC are committed to fostering

We have formed a complimentary group named the Elkhorn Restoration Committee (ERC) to work on site-specific restoration recommendations to managing agencies. We have also spent lots of time advocating, planning and securing grant funds and helping to implement weed control in the Elkhorns.

Each August we receive a pay back for our volunteerism, a field trip into the great outdoors of the Elkhorn Mountains. We describe some of those trips and outcomes in this newsletter.

Finally, we encourage you to follow us on Facebook, our new online format. This will be our last paper copy newsletter. Thank you for your continued support and input. Stay in touch and follow us on Facebook!

David Brown, Chair

the stewardship of public lands and surrounding communities by promoting sustainable land management through collaborative, place-based initiatives. Both groups share interests in supporting place-based land management initiatives that encourage working across boundaries.

EWG and ERC believe that the ERC is a complimentary and supportive addition to the management of the Elkhorns and the work of the EWG.

The EWG and ERC share membership in order to facilitate communication and restoration opportunities. EWG's focus is generally broader and related to policy and mountain range wide issues and opportunities. ERC is focused on a particular piece of ground in order to realize the goals and objectives of both the MFRC and EWG.

For more information on ERC visit <http://www.montanarestoration.org/elkhorns-committee>

What is a Weed?

In 1914, Ada Georgia described a weed as “as plant that is growing where it is desired that something else shall grow”. To many homeowners, dandelions are weeds. But there are several native species of dandelions in Montana (although, those on your lawn probably aren’t native!). The point is not all weeds are created equally.

There are the useless, non-invasive weeds. For example, take asparagus. Asparagus is an exotic plant that has escaped cultivation and now grows wild; it’s hardly invasive and does not displace other plants and it’s delicious!

There are useful and invasive plants like sweet clover that is often used in revegetation projects. And, finally, there are the useless and invasive species. These are the species that we generally think of when we talk about weeds. Knapweed, Dalmatian toadflax, and leafy spurge are all examples of exotic plants known as

Why Should I Care?

Noxious weeds threaten the habitat of wildlife by altering natural communities. Noxious weeds can wipe out the native vegetation for nesting, food, and cover needed by

noxious weeds.

So, what is a weed? In 1999, President Clinton signed Executive Order 13112 to prevent the introduction of invasive species and provide for their control to minimize the economic, ecological, and human health impacts caused by invasive species. The order defined an invasive species as “an alien species whose introduction does or is likely to cause economic or environmental harm or harm to human health.”

Invasive species spread quickly and outcompete native plants, yet have very few redeeming qualities. These species can lead to reductions in forage production and species diversity and lead to increases in soil erosion. And they are widespread in the Elkhorns.

Noxious weeds are one of the major threats to the natural environment. Major weed invasions change the natural diversity and balance of ecological communities. These changes threaten the survival of many plants and animals because the weeds compete with native plants for space, nutrients and sunlight.

EWG’s War on Weeds

As part of the Elkhorn Vegetation Study completed in 2006, EWG identified several recommendations for noxious weed control in the Elkhorns. These include:

- Fall annual updates on the ‘state of the weeds’ should be provided to the Elkhorn Working Group by all parties engaged in weed management in the Elkhorns.
- All parties engaged in weed management in the Elkhorns should actively seek funding to pursue weed treatments in areas already identified. Funding would be used to assist agencies and counties in weed treatments.
- All parties engaged in weed management in the Elkhorns should actively pursue weed control in known locations concentrating efforts along roads and at trailheads (e.g. spray and pull). Mapping of unmapped weed locations can occur simultaneous to treatments.
- All parties engaged in weed management in the Elkhorns should monitor weed treatment effectiveness and utilize results to determine need for follow-up treatments and to ensure that funding is available for the follow-up treatments.
- All parties engaged in weed management in the Elkhorns should explore opportunities to develop a permanent fund for long-term weed treatments.
- All parties engaged in weed management in the Elkhorns should map weed infestations in the Elkhorns.

To that end, EWG has successfully competed for more than \$130,000 in grants to treat hundreds of acres of noxious weeds in the Elkhorns. Funds were used to treat weeds in Muskrat and Nursery Creeks in the southwestern Elkhorns,

Crow Creek in the southeast, and several areas in between. Treatments included both chemical application as well as biological control and addressed both front country and back country weed infestations. The objectives of these weed treatments included:

- Controlling and eliminating weeds on elk summer and winter range;
- Improving forage production for livestock grazing in the Elkhorns;
- Controlling and preventing the spread of weeds in the front country and backcountry meadows, parks, and trails.

EWG has also volunteered in weed spray days in Jefferson and Broadwater Counties that are coordinated through county and federal agencies.

EWG is committed to improving the overall health of the Elkhorn Mountains by improving grassland communities and slowing the spread of noxious weeds which benefits wildlife in the Elkhorns. This also provides foraging opportunities for livestock in the Elkhorns which is essential for several ranchers who rely on the Elkhorns for their livelihood. Improved grasslands



Cheat grass



Leafy spurge

Study of Elk Response to Mountain Pine Beetle Mortality in the Elkhorns Proposed by EWG

As part of EWG's collaboration with ERC, we undertook the development of a monitoring proposal in conjunction with federal and state agencies. This proposal, *Elk Response to Changes in Habitat Including Intensive Insect Caused Mortality to Conifers and Management Responses to that Outbreak* is designed to evaluate the effects of the mountain pine beetle infestation on elk distribution and habitat use. This proposal is currently being discussed with Fish, Wildlife, and Parks and the Forest Service. Funding the study will be a key issue and EWG is prepared to assist in the fund raising once project details have been finalized.



Elk on Kimber Ridge, Elkhorn Mountains

Beginning in 2006, a major epidemic of mountain pine beetle began affecting pine forests in much of western North America. By 2009, an estimated 9 million acres in Wyoming, Montana, Colorado and Idaho had been infested. It is estimated that over the next 10 years 100,000 trees will fall daily resulting in major impacts to the landscape. As fuel accumulates on the ground, fire danger and severity could increase, merchantable timber could be lost, wildlife travel could be impeded, and hunter opportunities diminished.

While insect infestations have occurred in the past the sheer magnitude of these impacts hasn't been witnessed in recent times. Land management agencies as well as communities adjacent to forests impacted by these infestations are struggling to develop management strategies to deal with these issues.

In the Elkhorn Mountains over 70,000 acres have been impacted by the mountain pine beetle epidemic with wide ranging impacts to the wildlife that inhabit the mountain range. This is a concern for the Elkhorn's elk population which is one of the more known populations in the West, primarily because of the "spike" hunting regulation that has been in effect since 1987. That regulation allows harvest on a general license of non-branched yearling bulls with harvest of older bulls being regulated by limited drawing. The regulation has resulted in an increased bull ratio and a significant increase in older bulls in a population where few

existed.

Elk have been studied extensively in the Elkhorn Mountains. Between 1982-1992, Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks and the Helena National Forest conducted a long-term study on the elk population focusing on seasonal distribution and bull ecology. These data will be used to predict seasonal habitat use by elk prior to the mountain pine beetle outbreak. Current habitat use will be based on the collection of new telemetry data which will be used to determine if elk distribution and habitat selection has been altered by tree mortality associated with the mountain pine beetle outbreak.

The specific objectives of this proposal include:

- Develop a habitat selection model for elk based on existing telemetry data collected pre-pine beetle outbreak.
- Conduct a new telemetry study to determine changes in distribution compared to original telemetry study and correlate possible changes to changes in forest structure associated with the beetle outbreak.
- Evaluate elk nutritional resources in the Elkhorns and evaluate the effects of beetle-infestation on elk nutritional resources.
- Based on changes in distribution documented by the modeling efforts, make recommendations where it may be appropriate to implement restoration efforts to promote recovery of effective hiding cover/security and based on scientific literature propose management actions to accomplish those efforts.



Tree mortality associated with the mountain pine beetle in the North Elkhorn Mountains

- Monitor through the use of new telemetry data any avoidance or selection for areas undergoing or have undergone restoration efforts.
- Document change in hunter use of effected habitats and hunter effectiveness at harvesting elk compared to pre-outbreak.
- Evaluate if beetle infested forests function as elk security, and how this may or may not change as trees begin to fall.
- Summarize elk distributions in the Boulder Valley area using the 1982-1992 dataset and the new dataset to address local concerns regarding changes in elk distributions within this segment of the herd.

Elkhorn Working Group Members

Darrell Baum - *Winston*
Dave Baum - *Winston*
David Brown - *Helena Valley*
Dave Kirsch - *Jefferson Co.*
Denise Pengeroth - *Helena National Forest*
Josh Pallister - *Helena*
Jeff Palister - *Boulder*
Brud Smith - *Boulder Valley*
Tom Williams - *Radersburg*
Charles Tuss - *Butte Bureau of Land Management*
Jim Crichton - *Helena*
Carolyn Lewis - *Boulder*
Howard Burt - *Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks, Bozeman*
Grant Bronk - *Helena*
Joe Cohenour - *East Helena*
Andy Burgoyne - *DNRC, Helena*
Todd Verrill - *MT Army National Guard, Helena*
Ron Marcoux - *Helena*
Trudy Dawson - *Boulder Valley*

For more information, contact Fish, Wildlife, and Parks Helena Area Office at 495-3260.

Elkhorn Notes

Follow us on Facebook!
<https://www.facebook.com/EWGInfo>

Elkhorn Restoration Committee meets the second Tuesday of every month. For more information call Al Christophersen (439-0197) or Tom Williams (266-5760).

For more information on the Elkhorns, and the Elkhorns Working Group visit the website!

<http://www.fs.fed.us/r1/helena/elkhorns/>

Field Notes

The EWG is not all about work. Each year we try to have at least one or two fun days out in the Elkhorns touring various projects or monitoring existing conditions.

We had a great turnout and beautiful weather for an August 29th 2011 field trip in the north Boulder Valley. This western edge of the Elkhorns has its own beauty with forested slopes dipping into the north valley and the clear mountain streams of Rawhide, Muskrat, Sloans, and McCarty Creeks making their way to the Boulder River. Its proximity to Boulder mandates a clear balancing act for citizens and managers as more and more humans interact with the public land in this part of the Elkhorns. Jeff Pallister an EWG member led the tour giving an overview



Dalmatian toadflax in Nursery Creek

of weed encroachment in the north valley and Nursery Creek area. This area, burned over in 2000, has seen tremendous growth of noxious species like the Dalmatian toadflax in the photo. In the past EWG has been helpful in situations like this in applying for additional weed control funding through regional RAC grants. The group proceeded to McCarty Creek where Sam Samson gave an overview of a cooperative effort between the Forest Service and local citizens on National Trails Day to rebuild a section of the McCarty Creek Trailhead. This is a heavily used point of access into the National Forest which had fallen into disrepair. Local citizens were able to reconstruct the perimeter fencing and replace gates as well as signage with the materials and tools supplied by the Forest Service. No outing is complete without good food. The group's last stop was at the home of EWG member Carolyn Lewis for cool beverages and grilled buffalo burgers with all the fixings.

Biocontrol was the main topic of our 2012 field trip, set in the east side of the Elkhorns.



Scott Dunning demonstrating biological control along Indian Creek

The day started with a presentation by Scott Dunning along Indian Creek. The group then proceeded to the Mud Spring area to view a successful burn on a private section owned by Jackie Smith. Sharlene Sing of the Rocky Mountain Research Station and Diane Johnson of the Helena National Forest explained the work being done along Slim Sam Creek to implement and monitor beetle control. Sandwiches and beverages were enjoyed by all at the Jenkins Gulch Bridge on Crow Creek. Not even a flat tire could stop the group from proceeding on and learning all we could. The weather cooperated with fair skies and warm temperatures.

Our Aug. 2013 field trip was a tremendous success with close to 40 attendees. The setting, along the beautiful southwest edge of the Elkhorns, provided the backdrop for an informative day and included presentations from the Forest Service, Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks, a game warden, geologist, local ranchers, and county weed coordinators. "I thought today's field trip was one of the best ever," said Terry Minow, a local rancher. Topics discussed were: an upcoming game damage hunt for elk in the Boulder Valley, a recently successful weed spraying project in the Dry Creek area, how the Forest Service calculates dry fuels in the forest for determining overall fire danger, the role of volcanics in the Elkhorn geological time line, and a talk by Dave Sabo (District Ranger Butte/Jefferson Ranger District) praising the EWG for the work we do in bringing all interested groups together for the health and wellbeing of the Elkhorns.

The Smith Ranch provided the venue for a delicious late luncheon. With the Elkhorn Mountains providing the backdrop most of the guests agreed it had been a day well spent.