Abstract: Elk (Cervus canadensis) in Idaho have increased since 1976. These population increases have been followed by increased tag sales, hunter harvest and elk damage complaints from landowners. Attempts to resolve depredations have included special depredation hunts, haystack paneling, scare devices and hazing, baiting and feeding, and issuing kill permits.

Impromptu depredation hunts were totally unsuccessful while one scheduled depredation hunt was successful. A law was passed in 1984 increasing each elk, deer and antelope tag by $1.50 with the income earmarked for depredation and emergency winter feeding.

HISTORY AND STATUS

Idaho has long been a major elk-producing state and populations have increased substantially during the past 6-8 years. Wildlife managers are very aware that sportsmen frequently refer to "the good old days". I suggest that in Idaho, 1984 is "The Good Old Days".

Historically, either-sex hunting was the rule statewide with seasons in many areas extending into early December. In 1975, general hunts south of the Panhandle were changed to bulls-only and have remained under this rule to date with the exception of controlled hunts.

The highest elk harvest recorded statewide was 17,064 animals in 1968 (Figure 1). That total included 8,708 bulls and 8,356 cows. In 1958, 1960 and 1961, the harvest exceeded 16,000 animals each year. There were 7,909 (48%), 7,280 (44%) and 8,392 (51%) cows in the harvest, respectively, during those years.

In 1976, the statewide harvest bottomed out at 4,135 animals and included only 827 cows. In 1983, there were 13,076 total animals harvested. This included 10,143 bulls (77.6%) and 2,933 cows (22.4%). This is more bulls than has ever been taken in any previous year.

Since 1976, the year following initiation of bulls-only hunting, statewide harvest has increased significantly. The Department developed overall policy plans in 1978 with the following three goals: 1) rebuild elk numbers to approximately 1965 level; 2) rebuild allowable harvest to approximately 1965 level; and 3) meet 1990 demand at greater than current success rate. Historic estimates were that the 1965 statewide elk population was 81,000 and in 1975, we estimated 50,600 elk statewide.
Fig. 1. Tag sales and harvest levels for Idaho elk populations, 1935 - 1984

*Nonresident elk hunting fees went from $13.80 to $175.00
Resident elk tags went from $3.00 to $8.00
MANAGEMENT PLANS

In 1981, we developed the "Elk Species Management Plan - 1981-1985" and in that document, the estimated 1981 statewide population was 90,325 and the projected 1990 population was 109,635 with a harvest of 8,165. These numbers, which were larger than 1975 estimates, were probably a result of it being a second effort at estimating populations and because better information was available in some areas.

The 1983 harvest of 13,076 elk was about 60% above the 1990 goal. The Species Plans will be rewritten in 1985 for the 1986-1990 period.

The outlook for continued increases is good-to-excellent if we can permanently resolve the problems associated with depredations as populations increase. There were many problems this winter which our regional personnel did an excellent job of resolving. The Department uses panels or fences to protect hay stacks; hazes animals; baits animals; and has tried depredation hunts. Even with the timely job our personnel did this winter, there was legislation proposed to force us to pay for depredations. This legislation failed to pass.

DEPREDATION PROBLEMS AND ACTIONS

During November, 1983, we received numerous depredation complaints from landowners who grow winter wheat in our management unit 11A. Within one week, we were able to develop season structures for 15 consecutive 6, 7 or 8-day controlled either-sex depredation hunts with 20 permittees in each hunt beginning November 19, 1983 and ending March 2, 1984. We advertised for applicants for 13 days, received 5,154 applications and conducted the drawing on November 9. The Commission waived the two-year waiting period for receiving a controlled hunt permit. A numerical list was developed as names were drawn and individuals were called to notify them when and where to pick up controlled hunt permits and where the hunt area was located. Names and phone numbers of landowners who would allow hunting were also furnished each permittee.

Two major problems developed prior to the hunt opener. The landowners decided their problems were not adequate to allow hunters to trespass, and Nez Perce Indians in the area began to hunt elk in the area in response to publicity about the hunts. The Indians probably were the major influencing factor on the landowners as several confrontations regarding trespass were reported.

During the first seven-day hunt segment, 15 permittees took part and harvested one adult cow elk. All subsequent hunts were postponed on the basis that the landowners would contact us where problems with elk depredations developed; we would then call the next group (designated number) of people on the hunt list to go hunting. The landowners demanded they be able to pick the hunters and that no more than five hunters be allowed at one time. We agreed on the reduced number of permit hunters but did not consider anyone not drawn for the permit hunt list. We did
not hear from any landowner through the March 2 closing of the hunt so, in effect, all hunts were cancelled after the opening segment.

During normal 1983 big game seasons development and setting Region 1 personnel requested an elk hunt with 25 either-sex permits in management unit 1 adjacent to the Canada boarder. This hunt was proposed specifically to curtail elk damaging winter wheat fields. The hunt was set for December 1-31 and limited to private property only in a small portion of management unit 1. Permittees harvested 19 animals of which there were 15 bulls and 4 antlerless animals. Ten of those 15 bulls were five point or larger. Although the hunt turned into somewhat of a trophy hunt, there have been no complaints about the hunt nor subsequent elk damage complaints.

Region 1 has recommended 50 antlerless elk permits for the same area for December 1984 in an attempt to stabilize the population and to help remove the depredation problem. Recommendations for antlerless-only permits in many other units are being recommended in an effort to stabilize or reduce populations in many other management units.

Beginning in December, 1983, heavy snows fell across all of the state south of the Salmon River. By the first of January, elk had moved to low elevation areas and began causing depredations on haystacks, livestock feeding areas, ornamental vegetation, and some winter wheat. We tried to scare elk away from problem areas with Zon guns, repellent mixtures, helicopter and snowmobile hazing. We also used hay to bait animals away from public areas. Haystacks and stack yards were protected with wood panels, wire panels and fences.

In some areas, feeding sites were developed and elk were hazed from problem areas to these sites. The animals were fed until snow conditions allowed them to return to natural food sources which was as late as mid-April in some areas.

High voltage electric fences were tried in some areas with no success. Groups of elk would simply force the lead animals in a group through the fence.

There were about 30 thousand panels placed around haystacks in the winter of 1983-84.

Two individuals who have established tree nurseries in wooded areas in north Idaho made numerous complaints this winter about both elk and deer eating their trees. After many attempts to resolve the complaints, the Department issued a kill permit to an individual. This is the first time a kill permit has been given to an individual and it is not known what problems this precedent will cause in the future. Another request has been received from a neighbor of this individual. During the first two weeks, he killed one spike bull.

The Department has also issued kill permits to our personnel but few or no animals have been killed to date.
Feeding to eliminate depredations has caused problems - road kills, train kills, fence damage, harassment by snowmobiles and cross-country skiers, dog and other predator problems.

The Department spent about $540,000 from December 1 through April on feeding and depredations. The total directly related to depredations was about half that amount.

A bill to increase the price of all elk, deer and antelope tags was passed, effective 1984. This money (about $350,000 per year) is earmarked for emergency winter feeding and depredation control. It will provide our Department with a source of funding to alleviate depredations.

Another law enacted by the 1984 legislature provides that the Director may establish depredation hunts without Commission approval.

During the past five years, as elk populations increased, depredations on crops on private property have also increased. The winter of 1983-84 was one of the most severe on record in the southern one-half of the state and depredation problems rose to an all-time high. Department personnel were able to resolve most complaints quickly and most landowners involved were satisfied with our effort. The Department is also developing a statewide depredation plan. When this is completed with input from virtually every group of landowners and sportsmen plus as many individuals as possible in conjunction with the new revenue source, we hope to continue to increase elk populations and eliminate the depredation problems they cause.