

16. MOUNT ST. HELENS ELK HERD MANAGEMENT PANEL – BRIEFING

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
Decision Page.....	<i>i</i>

“GREEN SHEET”

Meeting: June 6-7, 2008

Agenda Item 16: Mount St. Helens Elk Herd Management Panel – **Briefing**

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Presented By: Sandra Jonker, Wildlife Program Manager, Region 5
Weyerhaeuser Corporation Representatives
SW Land Access Coalition Representatives

Background:

In November 2006, the Department released the Mount St. Helens Elk Herd Plan, which outlines the history, current status, and future management goals to successfully sustain the elk herd in this area. The elk herd was estimated at about 12,500-13,000 animals. The goal of the agency is to balance the Mount St. Helens elk herd numbers with the available habitat. As outlined in the plan, to accomplish this, the herd will need to be reduced by 20% to reach approximately 10,000 animals. This will be done by providing an increased number of available antlerless special permits over a five-year period in the 13 Game Management Units (GMUs) within the elk herd area. The proposed number of permits approved by the Commission on April 7, 2007 is a substantial increase from previous years; however, these recommendations are guided by our Elk Herd Plan and annual population monitoring information for the entire herd. Using all the current and available information, the Department is approaching this goal to reduce the population in an effort to responsibly manage the herd at sustainable levels for the future.

The proposed number of permits was determined by incorporating information from annual elk surveys, harvest data, and hunter success rates for the different hunter types. On average the hunter success rate can range from 15-45% depending on location (sometimes much higher in certain GMUs such as 524 and 556), weapon type, and season. Therefore, the number of animals taken will vary depending on these different factors and this information is taken into account when setting seasons and permit levels. The Department is distributing the permits across user types to provide for recreational opportunity for all user groups, while still striving to meet the population objectives set forth in the Elk Herd Plan.

The average number of cow elk harvested over the 2003-2006 period including general season, special permit season, and damage hunts combined across the 13 GMUs within the elk herd (GMUs 505, 520, 524, 550, 554, 556, 560, 564, 568, 572, 574, 578, and 388) is around 800 animals. Assuming a 75% survival rate to reproductive age and a 50/50 calf sex ratio, approximately 1200 cows would need to be harvested annually to keep the population stable in this area. Therefore, to start reducing the population we will need to harvest additional numbers of antlerless elk.

The 2007/2008 hunting season was the first year in implementing this effort to reduce the Mount St. Helens herd. The preliminary 2007 draft data indicate that the harvest in general was successful across the different GMUs encompassing the Mount St. Helens elk herd and that this effort is starting to address the herd reduction goal. There was a severe winter this year and the impact of winter severity is an additional factor that is considered when evaluating the herd population level. As mentioned above, increased special permit levels will continue over the next several years to accomplish the herd reduction goal for the Mount St. Helens elk herd. The special permit levels have been adjusted slightly this year to address concerns that came from the 2007 season, such

as crowding and success. During this time period, efforts to enhance and restore available habitat and forage for elk are underway as well and plans are in place to continue these efforts. All of these steps intended to bring the herd and available habitat into balance for sustainable management.

During this 2007/2008 hunting season an immense cooperative effort came together between many volunteer organizations, Weyerhaeuser St. Helens Tree Farm and WDFW to provide additional motorized access during the week to the majority of Weyerhaeuser land during the special elk permit seasons. Thanks to the detailed hard work of all the participants, we had a very successful first year with approximately 85% of the St. Helens Tree Farm opened to additional weekday motorized access for hunters. This additional access facilitated hunter harvest of elk during special permit as well as general hunts. This effort was an example of how by working together we were able to coordinate and implement a complex program successfully that addressed items such as number of volunteers needed, access points, safety buffers around logging operations, number of vehicles, sign-up database, communication strategy, radios, signs, mileage reimbursement, policy, etc. Hunters were responsive and appreciative of this effort and the opportunity it provided. The volunteers did a terrific job and provided feedback that they enjoyed the experience. We would like to thank everyone for their cooperation, patience, creativity, and all their amazing hard work at accomplishing a safe and successful first year: Weyerhaeuser, South West Land Access Coalition, Cowlitz Game & Anglers, Eyes In The Woods, WA State Archer Association, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Yacolt Burn Sportsmen Club, Vancouver Wildlife League, WA State Bowhunters, and WDFW staff.

This first year of the Mount St. Helens Land Access Program was a “work in progress” and we all learned a lot through the process. Using all the feedback and taking into account all the lessons learned, we are excited about improving the program and look forward to implementing another successful year with all the participants.

Policy Issue(s) you are bringing to the Commission for consideration:

None, briefing only.

Public involvement process used and what you learned:

The Mount St. Helens Land Access Program effort was illustrative of working directly with the public to achieve common goals. Department staff worked directly with Weyerhaeuser and the volunteer organizations and their members to first discuss the best approach to achieve this land access goal and, second, to train volunteers and implement the land access program on the Mount St. Helens tree farm. This process allowed dialogue among participants and creativity in finding resolutions to a complex initiative. Providing a platform for feedback developed a strong rapport of cooperative partnerships among the volunteers, Weyerhaeuser, and WDFW.

Action requested (identify the specific Commission decisions you are seeking):

None, briefing only. This is a Commission request from the November 2-3, 2007 Commission meeting.

Draft motion language:

Briefing only.

Justification for Commission action:

Briefing only.
