

E-26 HMP Draft Executive Summary

GMU's: 68 and 681

Land Ownership:

12% Private, 58% USFS, 24% BLM, 5% CO State, 1% Other

Post Hunt Population:

2008 Objective 3,500 - 4,500

2017 Estimate 3,400

2019 Preferred Objective 4,000 - 4,800

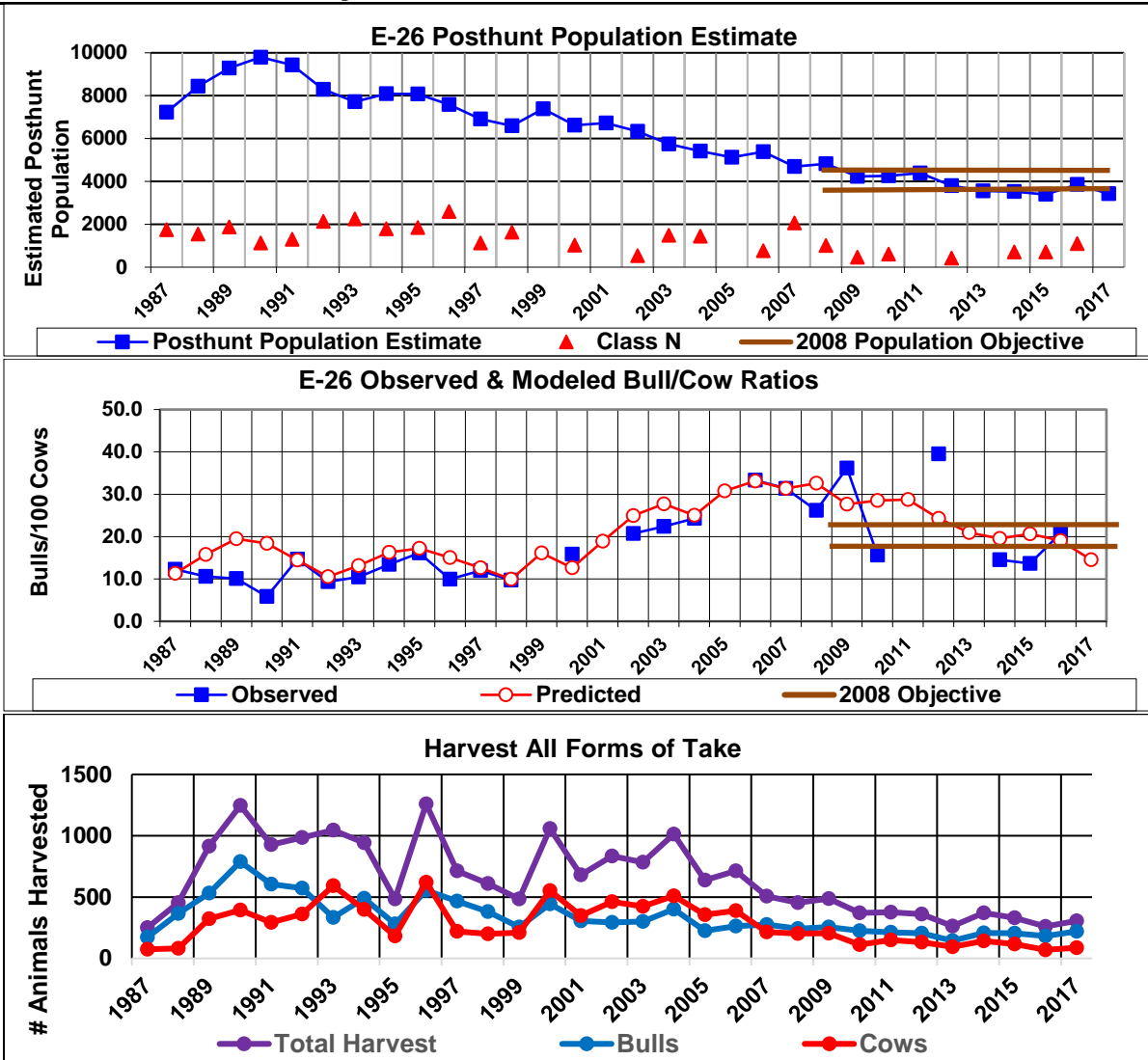
Post-Hunt Sex Ratio:

2008 Objective 18 - 22 Bulls : 100 Cows

5-Year Observed Average 20 Bulls : 100 Cows

2017 Estimated 15 Bulls : 100 Cows

Expected Sex Ratio 18 : 22 Bulls : 100 Cows



E-26, the Saguache Elk Population, is located in the northern portion of the San Luis Valley in Colorado. The DAU is bounded by the continental divide on the north and west side, on the south by Carnero Creek and County Road G, and on the east by Colorado Highway 285. E-26 is approximately 1,047 square miles (or approximately 670,000 acres) and encompasses primarily Saguache County. Land ownership composition in this unit is comprised of 12% private, 58% U.S. Forest Service, 24% Bureau of Land Management, Colorado State land 5% and 1% other. E-26 consists of Game Management Units (GMU's) 68 and 681. Both Game Management Units have been managed as over-the-counter bull hunting units. In addition, both units had generous numbers of antlerless licenses in 1990s during regular and private land only seasons. Either sex tags were employed in the first rifle season from 2003 to 2007.

The E-26 population was increasing during the late 1980's. In 1990, the population reached an estimated number of approximately 9,700 animals. At this time, wildlife managers began efforts to control the growing population by increasing the number of antlerless elk licenses because this was considered to have been above the social tolerance and habitat carrying capacity. Increased harvest aimed at cows began in 1989 and continued through 2006 with the intent of reducing the population to acceptable levels. The high antlerless harvest was reduced in 2006 as fewer elk were being located. Even with the reduced harvest rate, the population continued declining. This downward trend brought the elk herd to its lowest level in 2015. In 2008, the preferred population objective was set at 3,500-4,500 elk, which at the time expressed a desire to maintain the current population, based on elk population model estimates at the time, and curb the downward trend.

Since 1987, sex ratios have averaged 18.0 bull : 100 cows. The 5 and 3 year modeled average, overall bull ratios have been 19 and 16 bulls : 100 cows, respectively. At the same time, the sex ratio objective was set at 18-22 bulls : 100 cows, continuing to allow for hunter opportunity.

Harvest success in E-26 seems to be mostly influenced by weather and elk distributional movements. Bull harvest from 2008 to 2017 averaged approximately 210 with a high of 256 in 2009 and a low of 144 in 2013. Antlerless harvest since 2008 has ranged from 78 in 2016 to 231 in 2009 with an average of 147.

E-26 Significant Issues.

From the public input perspective, the major issue facing the majority of respondents is the desire for having more elk on the landscape. From an environmental perspective, the main limiting factor for this herd is the winter range conditions and forage availability. According to the Rio Grande National Forest, forage availability on summer range is not likely to be a limiting factor, having received new information from their ecological condition assessment. Water availability and forage affects the amount of quality habitat available for elk year round. Increased recreational activity in E-26 may also reduce useable habitat for elk. Depleted habitat resources could negatively influence elk recruitment and survival. As a result, elk and other ungulates, including mule deer and pronghorn could be forced onto irrigated agricultural land with abundant forage and water resources. This movement onto private land had caused game damage issues in the past. Colorado Parks and Wildlife has the ability of addressing these issues, if they should arise, through redistribution efforts using dispersal applications for effected landowners.

Management Alternatives

Three alternatives for E-26 were considered for post-hunt population size and sex ratio objectives:

Population Objective Alternatives	Expected Bull Ratios
3,200 to 3,800 (Population remain the same)	18 to 22 bulls : 100 cows (Remains the same)
3,600 to 4,200 (Approximately 10%-20% population increase)	
4,000 to 4,800 (Approximately 20%-40% population increase) - Preferred	

Draft Preferred Alternative:

Population - The responses received thus far from public involvement processes, including feedback from partner agencies, suggest that the majority support increasing the elk population in GMU's 68 and 681. The preferred alternative is a **population objective of 4,000 to 4,800** elk, which allows for an increase in the population by 20-40%, but also maintains realistic expectations for bull hunting opportunity, being an OTC unit, and landscape carrying capacity pressures.

Expected Sex Ratio - This herd has been managed as an over-the-counter unit since 1987. The expected sex ratio based on the existing season structure is 18-22 bulls per 100 cows. If the season structure were to change expected bull harvest then a possible change could be expected in the expected bull ratio. These ratios would remain the same as the previous Herd Management Objectives set in 2008, which would allow for ample hunting opportunity in limited seasons, 1st and 4th rifle seasons.

Strategies for Achieving the Preferred Objectives:

Population – To increase the population by 20-40%, antlerless harvest will need to be reduced by more than 90% to allow for herd growth. Reductions would occur during all available cow seasons. However, game damage licenses would still be offered, if necessary, to reduce agricultural depredation issues should they arise.

Herd Composition –Any changes that could be expected to occur in the sex ratios in E-26, would entail changing the license season structure throughout the unit. It has been proposed that the same expected sex ratio remain in place as what had been set as a preferred alternative in 2008.

Strategies to Address Management Concerns:

Elk Population Levels and Demographics – CPW is in the process of conducting research projects in different areas of the state of Colorado, in an effort to understand elk recruitment (pregnancy and birth rates, neonatal survival and cause of death), to assist in determining differences in elk numbers from what they had been in the past. E-26 is an over-the-counter unit that provides ample bull hunting opportunity but this could cause overcrowding of hunters in the field. CPW will attempt to work with as many hunters as possible to encourage different areas to be hunted, in an attempt to prevent hunter-crowding issues, but this could be extremely challenging, considering the number of hunters.

Elk Distribution and Movements – Winter range is a limiting factor, especially with increasing human pressure, and extreme weather condition changes. Habitat improvement and restoration efforts have been implemented by the Forest Service to address significant beetle kill on summer and winter range. More elk should be located as they become attracted to the availability of quality forage and water resources, and as hunters become more aware of changing elk distributional patterns and cover requirements.

Damage to Agriculture – This would be addressed by game damage claims through game damage and dispersal licenses and the HPP Committee, should this become an increased issue. The Forest Service and BLM are actively involved with habitat improvement projects that should help in attracting elk away from agricultural lands.

Increasing Year-round Recreational Disturbance – CPW is working with partnership federal agencies to address increasing OHV usage, particularly during spring, summer and fall periods, as well as increasing winter snow-machine usage on winter range.

Diseases – There is continued surveillance for CWD as well as any other diseases.