

Colorado Parks and Wildlife
Habitat Partnership Program
Montelores



DISTRIBUTION MANAGEMENT PLAN



Approved - Colorado Parks and Wildlife Commission: **May 7, 2020**
This plan is valid for 10 years from approval date.

2020- 2030

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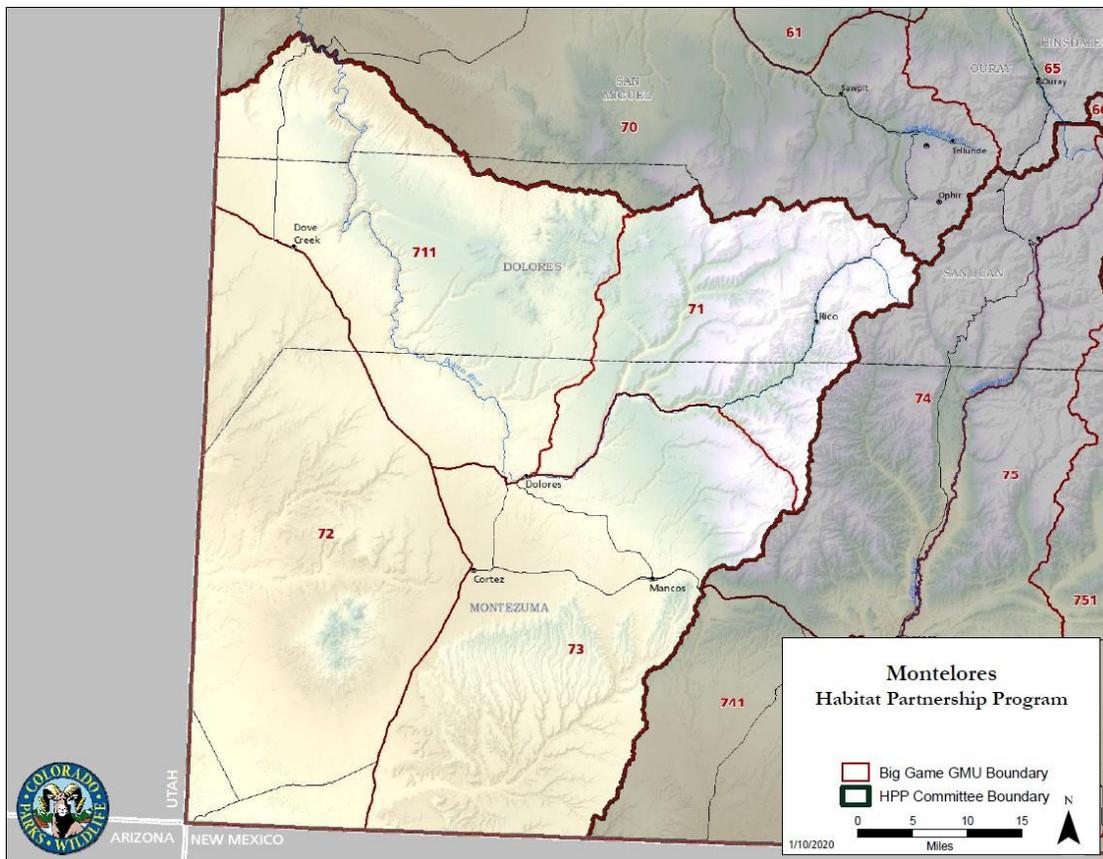
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Montelores Habitat Partnership Program committee was formed in 1997 to help implement strategies that support healthy wildlife populations while minimizing big game conflicts with agriculture, which is a key part of the local economy. The committee area includes significant agricultural operations on a mix of private, federal, and state lands; and consists of a variety of habitat types. Over the last several decades, the area has experienced human population growth and its associated activities, including residential development and recreation. These changes have impacted big game population numbers, distribution, and the quality and connectivity of big game habitat, resulting in ongoing and new wildlife conflicts with agriculture on public and private lands.

The committee has identified impact areas where the majority of conflicts occur; however, projects may be implemented wherever the committee believes they will reduce or eliminate big game conflicts and assist CPW in achieving management objectives. Operating guidelines have been established to help direct funding decisions and project implementation, and to ensure that the committee's policies and procedures are clear and consistent for all applicants. Management strategies relative to the committee's objectives have been developed, and most projects will fall into the prescribed categories for big game conflict resolution or management objectives. The updated budget guidelines reflect the desired funding allocation and prioritization of projects.

MAP OF MONTELORES HPP AREA



COMMITTEE MEMBERS

- | | |
|---|-----------------------------|
| 1. Eldon Simmons, livestock grower representative | Started HPP Term: Aug. 2002 |
| 2. George West, livestock grower representative | Started HPP Term: Mar. 2015 |
| 3. Tanner Young, livestock grower representative | Started HPP Term: Nov. 2015 |
| 4. John Sheek, sportsman representative | Started HPP Term: July 2004 |
| 5. Nathaniel West, BLM representative | Started HPP Term: May 2012 |
| 6. Ivan Messinger, USFS representative | Started HPP Term: Feb. 2013 |
| 7. Andy Brown, CPW representative | Started HPP Term: Nov. 2015 |

INTRODUCTION

Colorado's continued human population growth has dramatically expanded the rural-urban interface, and placed increasing pressure on its wildlife. As more wildlife habitat is converted to human-dominated landscapes and the amount of winter range is reduced, conflicts between people and big game increase, particularly those with agriculture. Agriculture is a key economic driver for the area, with nearly 70% of private lands within the committee area involved in agricultural operations. It is important to the people of Montezuma and Dolores Counties to have both a thriving agricultural industry, and healthy sustainable wildlife populations.

To help mitigate big game conflicts, particularly those with fencing and forage, the Wildlife Commission and the Division of Wildlife created the Habitat Partnership Program (HPP). HPP committees have a great deal of discretion concerning project funding choices, and the freedom to form creative partnerships, explore new ideas, and leverage funds with cooperators for maximum benefit. The Montelores HPP committee was appointed in 1997, and has been successful in resolving many big game conflicts and improving relationships with landowners and other partners.

This Distribution Management Plan (DMP) will help the committee prioritize management strategies that deal with both existing and new big game conflicts, as well as progressively respond to new challenges in distribution and game management objectives due to the ever-changing social, biological, and economic environments that exist within the committee area.

HPP ORIENTATION

HPP was initially started to resolve fence and forage conflicts caused to agricultural operators by deer, elk, pronghorn and moose. While the law governing HPP was broadened in 2002 (“...reduce wildlife conflicts... assist in meeting game management objectives”) in 2017 the State Council and the NW Region Manager reaffirmed the intent and focus of HPP.

This direction provides for HPP participation, whether by local committees or the State Council, to be limited to those conflict resolution projects or game management objective projects that involve deer, elk, pronghorn and moose.

HPP STATUTE - (C.R.S. 33-1-110)

(8) (a) The habitat partnership program is hereby created to assist the division of parks and wildlife by working with private land managers, public land management agencies, sports persons, and other interested parties to reduce wildlife conflicts, particularly those associated with forage and fence issues, and to assist the division of parks and wildlife in meeting game management objectives through duties as deemed appropriate by the director.

(b) The director, with the approval of the commission, shall have the authority to appoint a "habitat partnership committee", referred to in this section as a "committee", in any area of the state where conflicts between wildlife and private land owners and managers engaged in the management of public and private land exist.

(c) A committee shall consist of the following members: One sports person who purchases big game licenses on a regular basis in Colorado; three persons representing livestock growers in the area of the state in which the committee is being established; one person from each of the federal agencies that has land management responsibilities in such area of the state; and one person from the Colorado division of parks and wildlife. All persons on any such committee shall be residents of the state of Colorado.

(d) The duties of a committee are the following:

(I) To develop big game distribution management plans to resolve rangeland forage, growing hay crop, harvested crop aftermath grazing, and fence conflicts subject to commission approval;

(II) To monitor program effectiveness and to propose to the council changes in guidelines and land acquisition planning and review as appropriate;

(III) To request for the committee, on an annual basis, funds from the council consistent with the distribution management plan developed by any such committee;

(IV) To expend funds allocated by the council or acquired from other sources as necessary to implement distribution management plans;

(V) To make an annual report of expenditures and accomplishments of the committee to the council by August 15 of each year;

(VI) To nominate a person to act as a representative of agricultural livestock growers or crop producers to the habitat partnership council for the area of the state where such committee is organized;

(VII) To reduce wildlife and land management conflicts as the conflicts relate to big game forage and fence issues and other management objectives.

(e) The committee shall be authorized to procure from land owners, land managers, or other providers, materials or services necessary for carrying out activities identified in the distribution management plans pursuant to subparagraph (IV) of paragraph (d) of this subsection (8); except that all such procurements shall be certified as within the scope of the activities and funding levels authorized in such distribution management plans before any such procurement may be authorized.

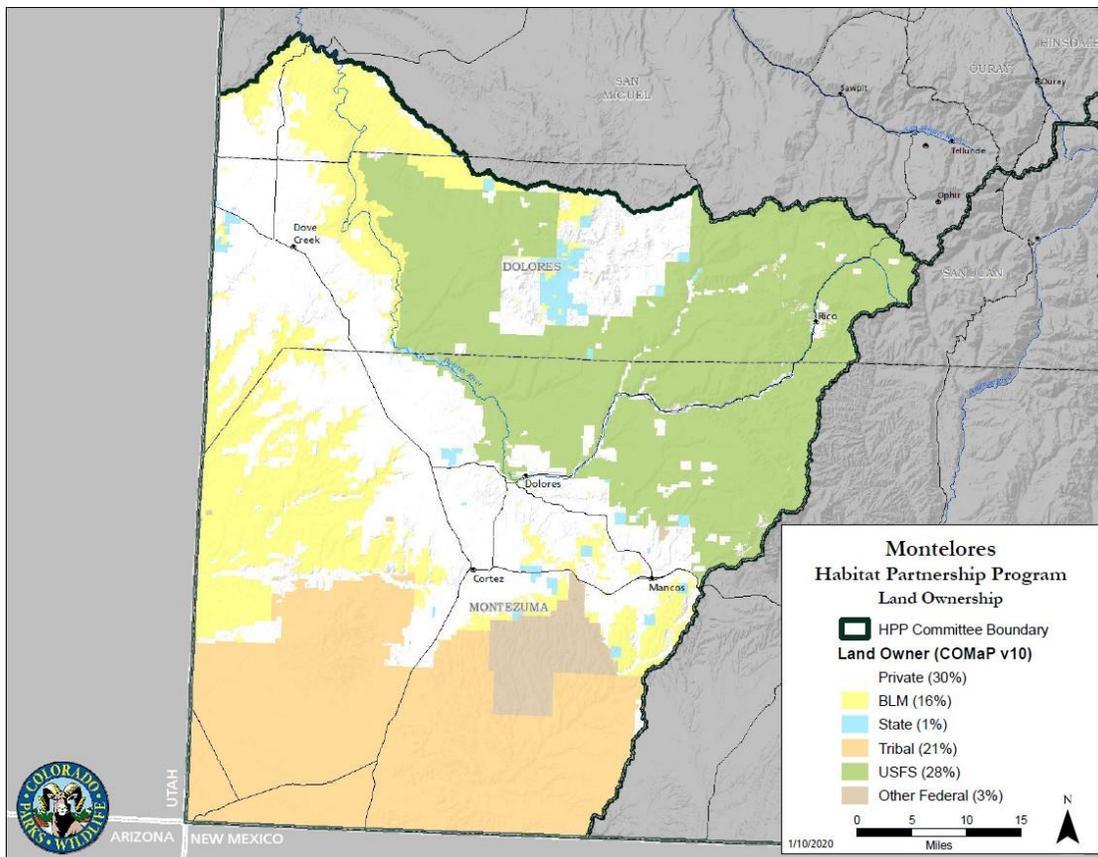
COMMITTEE OBJECTIVES

1. Encourage an atmosphere of partnership between private landowners, wildlife managers, habitat managers, and users of wildlife resources.
 - a. Ensure appropriate local involvement in identifying management problems and recommending solutions to these problems.
 - b. Consider and integrate ecological and social values, and the desires of stakeholders, in HPP and CPW planning and decision-making processes.
 - c. Ensure that private land habitat issues are considered in management plans for big game populations.
 - d. Develop working partnerships with organizations and groups that deal with big game habitat and conflict issues.
 - e. Increase landowner awareness and participation in HPP.
2. Improve habitat conditions to ensure healthy and sustainable rangelands in a manner that is sufficient to maintain big game herds at population objectives and lessens grazing pressure by big game on private agricultural lands.
 - a. Conduct habitat management projects that will attract and hold big game away from identified conflict zones.
 - b. Implement grazing management strategies that will sustain cattle grazing and big game use.
 - c. Focus on long-term protection of critical big game habitats.
3. Improve elk distribution and harvest to minimize conflicts with local agriculture producers and to provide a quality hunting experience.
 - a. Cooperate with CPW, land management agencies and conservation organization to better understand seasonal migration patterns, habitat use, etc. of elk and mule deer using collaring studies in GMUs 71, 711, 72 and 73.
 - b. Develop management strategies using best scientific information available and collaring study data. In cooperation with District Wildlife Managers (DWMs) prioritize funding for projects that will favorably affect elk movement and holding patterns, particularly during fall and winter to meet objectives.
 - c. Develop management strategies to address growing season conflicts caused by resident (non-migratory) and migratory elk and mule deer on croplands.
4. Minimize damage caused by big game on private agricultural lands, thereby increasing landowner tolerance.
 - a. Encourage public and agency input into the Montelores Distribution Management Plan update through appropriate outreach efforts.
 - b. conflicts between big game and private landowners.
 - c. Help implement Distribution Management Hunts to disperse conflict animals from private properties.

5. Improve big game habitat, distribution, and population sizes in accordance with CPW game management objectives.
6. Increase effectiveness of habitat manipulation projects and implement a landscape-scale philosophy by increasing the scope and connectivity of projects.
 - a. Solicit and coordinate habitat treatments which incorporate public and private land, creating a link between past and future treatments on a landscape scale.

AREA DESCRIPTION

The Montelores group is contained geographically within CPW Game Management Units 71, 711, 72 and 73. It is bounded on the west by the Colorado-Utah state line; on the south by the Colorado-New Mexico state line; on the east by the Montezuma-La Plata county line extended north to the Dolores-San Juan county line; on the north by the Dolores-San Miguel county line; diverging from the county line along Disappointment Creek to the confluence with the Dolores River, then northwest along the Dolores River to the confluence with Summit Canyon Creek and southwesterly along Summit Canyon to the Utah line. The area contains portions of the San Juan River drainage basin and the upper Dolores River drainage basin in Dolores County and a portion of San Miguel County. The area contains approximately 2,047,250 acres.



HABITAT DESCRIPTION

Elevations range from over 14,000 feet in the La Plata Mountains, along the northeast boundary near Rico, down to around 5,000 feet in the southwestern corner of the area, near the Four Corners. The committee area can experience extreme weather events, including extended droughts and heavy snowfall. Vegetation is dependent on the elevation. From the highest elevations to the lowest in descending order are alpine tundra, spruce-fir conifer, mixed aspen-conifer, ponderosa pine-Gambel oak, piñon-juniper, sagebrush-grassland, and northern desert shrub. The mountain shrub habitat type occurs on both private and public lands and is composed primarily of serviceberry, antelope bitterbrush, mountain mahogany, squaw apple, and black sagebrush. This habitat type is limited within the Montelores planning area to elevations between 6,500 and 8,500 feet. These mountain shrub habitats in proximity to agriculture production areas form a transitional community of plants and wildlife. The proximity of highly palatable forage to security areas constitutes a high degree of winter use by big game animals.

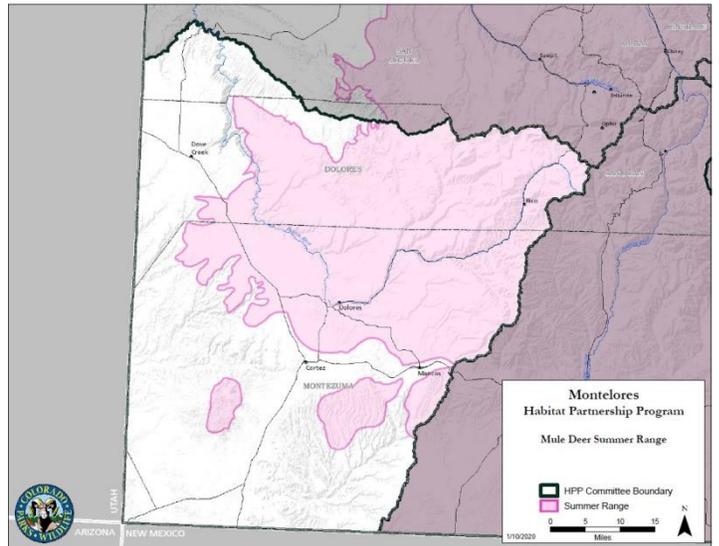
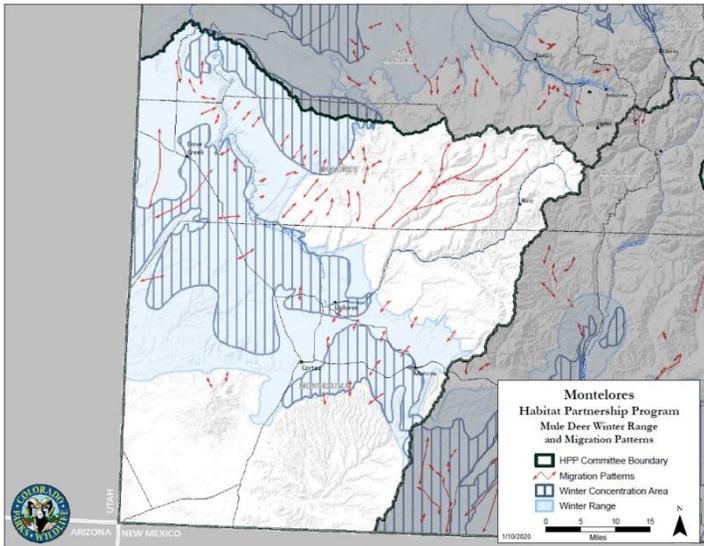
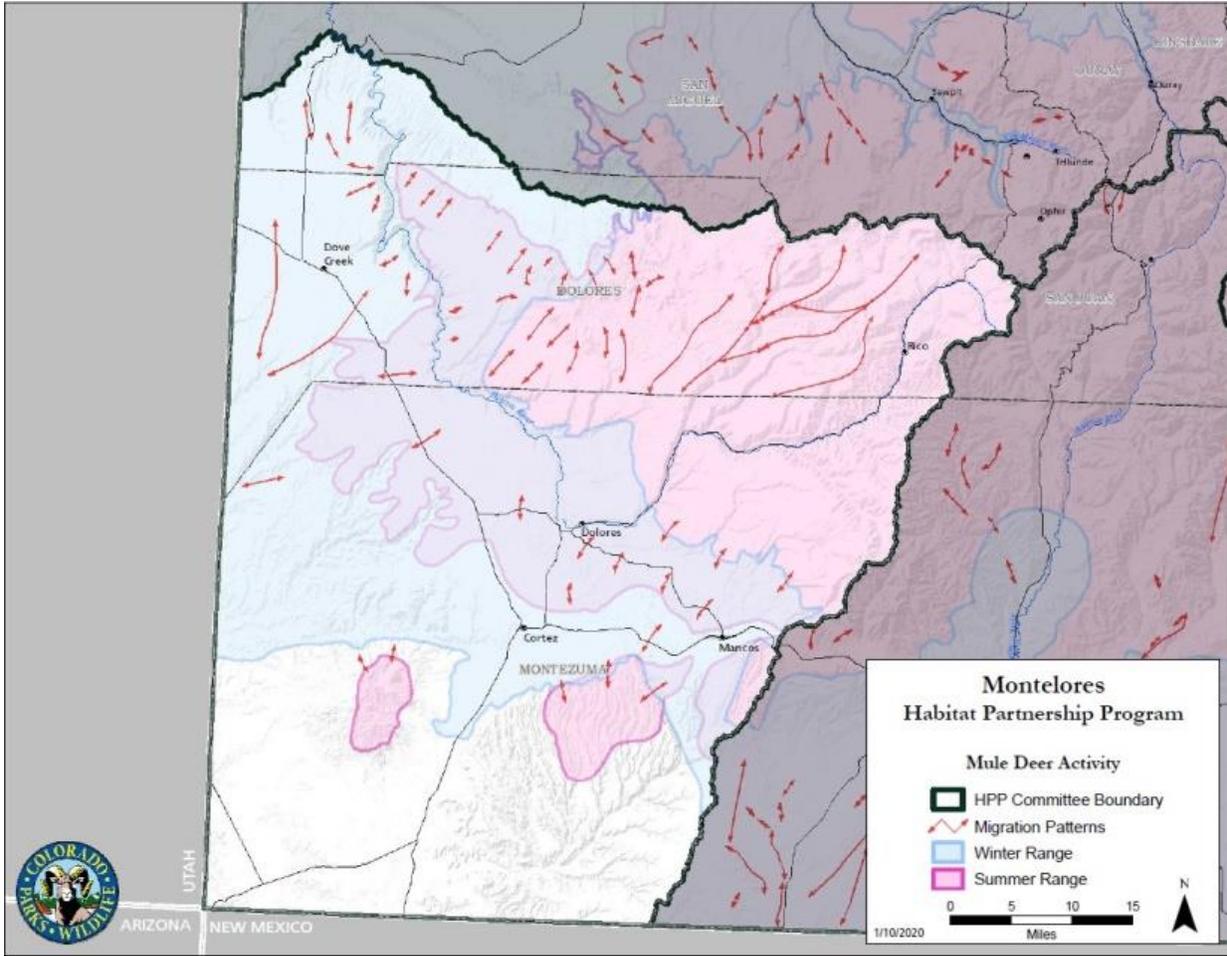
BIG GAME POPULATION SUMMARY

The Montelores HPP area includes big game data analysis units (DAUs) E-24, D-24 and D-29. Deer and elk populations are currently at or slightly below population objectives.

DEER - Deer population numbers were much higher in the 1950s and 1960s than they are today. Historically, over 60,000 deer were located in the Montelores HPP area. Liberal hunting seasons and bag limits in the 1960's reduced the population, and several hard winters during the 1970's may have kept the population from recovering to historic levels. In the 1990's and early 2000's, deer populations reached their lowest population size. Recovery is just now being seen. With human population growth and development encroaching into deer habitat, it is unrealistic to expect populations to reach the levels that were seen at their peak.

The current deer management plans were adopted in 2014. The Mesa Verde DAU (GMUs 72 and 73) is currently within the management objective. The Groundhog DAU (GMUs 70, 71 and 711) population is just under the management objective. Both populations are slowly growing.

DEER RANGE MAPS



ELK - Historical records indicate that in the 1970s, elk numbers increased along with the statewide trend. Elk populations peaked in the early 2000's and were above management objectives. Aggressive harvest decreased populations at that time. Since 2006, cow harvest in GMUs 71, 72, 73, and 711 has decreased, and current cow tag allocations are very low. Distribution of elk is still higher in **GMU 70** and opportunity to harvest cows is more liberal than in other portions of the DAU. Low recruitment of elk in this DAU, and across southern Colorado, is a major concern. Calf ratios for E24 have been in the low 20's:100 cows for several years. This rate of recruitment is not sufficient to sustain a population. Hunters have expressed concerns over decreased number of elk, specifically in GMUs 71, 73, and 711.

ELK RANGE MAPS

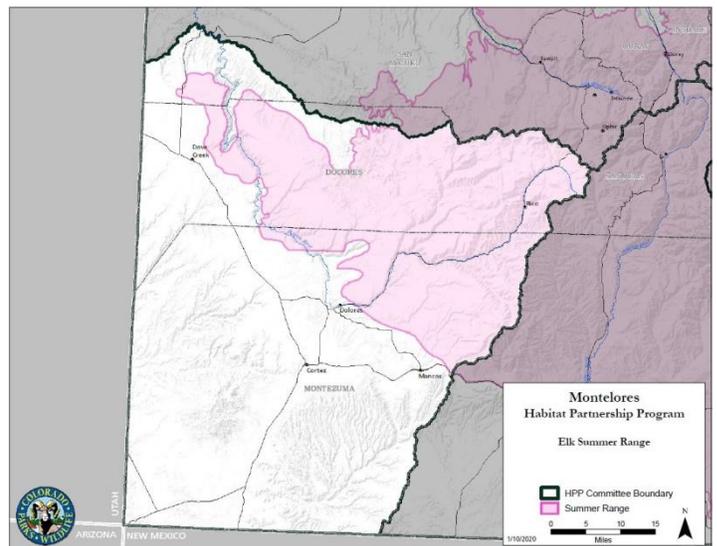
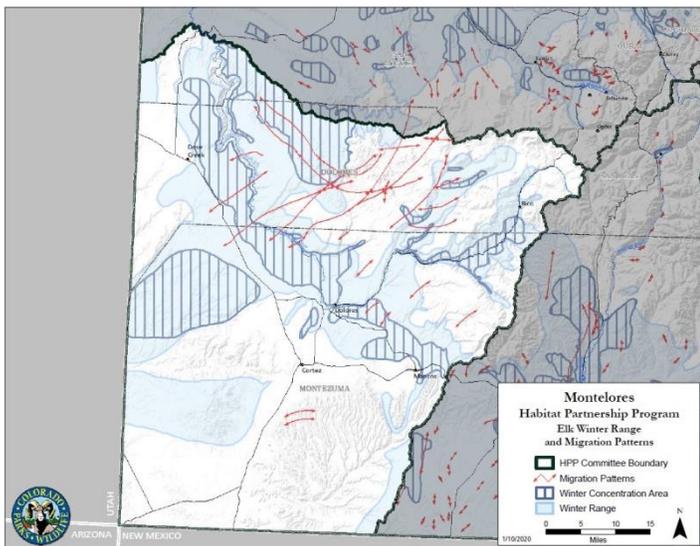
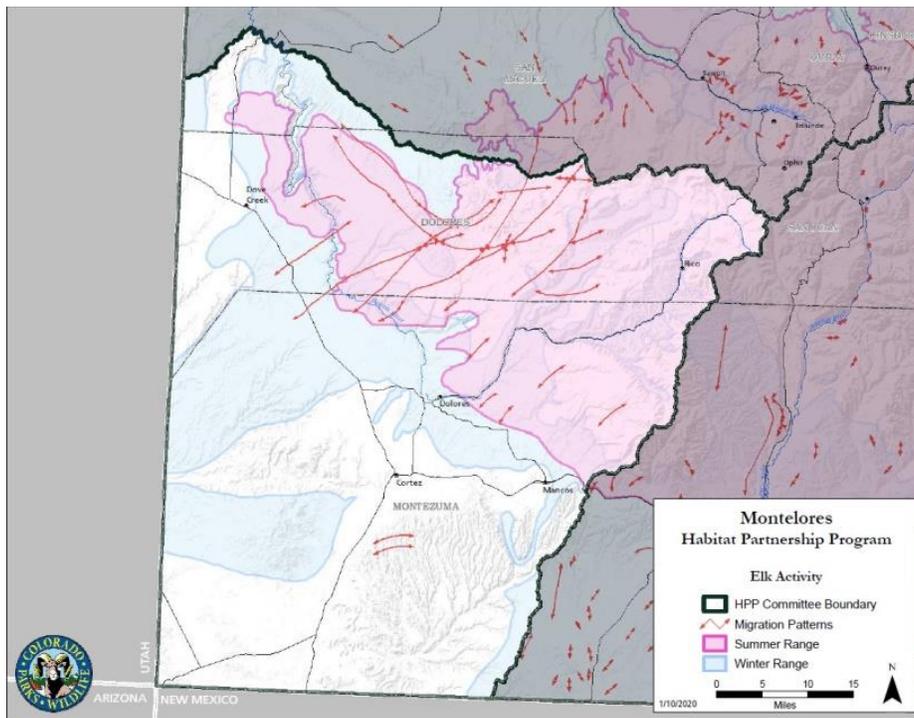


Table 1. Data Analysis Unit Summary for Montelores HPP Area

Management Herd	1990s Population Average	2000s Population Average	2010 - 2018 Population Average	Current Population Management Objective
Deer - Groundhog (D24)	25,600	24,200	15,700	15,000-19,000
<i>Game Management Units: 70, 71, 7111</i>				
Deer - Mesa Verde (D29)	9,200	7,800	6,400	5,500-7,000
<i>Game Management Units: 72, 73</i>				
Elk - Disappointment (E24)	18,200	20,900	18,100	17,000-19,000
<i>Game Management Units: 70, 71, 72,73, 711</i>				

IMPACT AREAS

Conflicts within the Montelores HPP area exist due to a variety of factors. Over the last century, people have converted nearly 200,000 acres of native vegetation and wildlife habitat to irrigated and non-irrigated cropland within the committee area. Most of this conversion occurred in the sagebrush-grassland habitat type. In addition, the urban-rural interface is expanding into the rural area at an accelerated rate. Land subdivision and its associated infrastructure of roads and utilities have significantly impacted the habitat type, quality and use; as well as the migratory patterns of big game, particularly in important winter ranges. Expanding recreational pressure also drives big game conflicts. The scope and timing of recreational activities, especially winter recreation, changes big game movement patterns and redistributes animals onto private lands, resulting in damage to forage and fences and creating refuge issues. Finally, much of the important habitat in the area is entering late succession stages, resulting in old, decadent vegetation that provides limited benefits for big game.

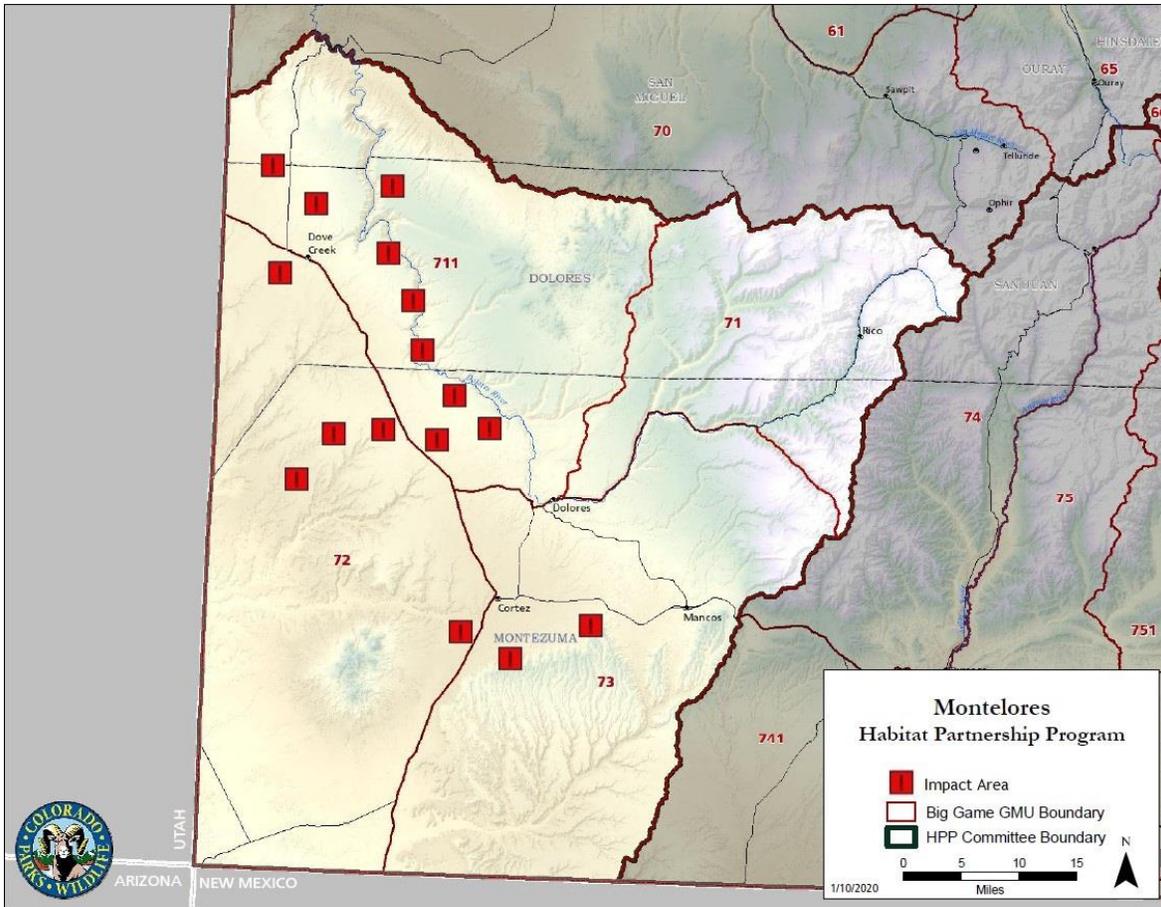
The Montelores committee has identified "impact areas" within the committee boundaries. These areas were delineated based on resource competition between various interests. While overall numbers of deer and elk are generally near or within desired population objectives, problems with distribution during various times of the year can result in private or public land conflicts.

Specific impact areas on this map include those with conflicts caused by wintering mule deer and elk on stacked hay, pasture or hay fields and fences. Large numbers of wintering animals, particularly elk, leave visible corridors on the landscape. As illustrated in the elk range maps, a high percentage of the winter use areas for this species are private lands along the Dolores River canyon rim. Winter range along the Dolores River canyon rim within the Montelores area is generally characterized as mountain shrub habitats interspersed with irrigated and dryland agriculture. Most of the agricultural fields are in alfalfa hay production.

The impact area map also includes agricultural fields north and west of Cortez below 7,000-feet; and crop lands west of the Dolores River canyon rim and north of Dove Creek. Big game damage can occur during the growing season to alfalfa, corn, beans, safflower, and sunflower crops. These crop lands consist of small fields interspersed with mountain shrub. While some damage has always occurred on these small fields, deer and elk have found the oil crops, e.g., sunflower, especially palatable.

Finally, refuge areas can also be considered impact areas. High concentrations of deer and elk in protected areas can result in damages to nearby agricultural operations; however these animals cannot effectively be managed by CPW or HPP operations when hunting access is limited or prohibited. Refuge impact areas include Mesa Verde National Park and the Escarpment, and the Mountain Ute tribal lands.

IMPACT AREAS MAP



Resolving conflicts in these zones is a priority for the Montelores committee. Projects within the targeted zones where the most severe conflicts occur will be given higher priority in funding decisions. However, while these areas are currently targeted for conflict resolution work, conflicts exist throughout the Montelores committee area. It is likely that patterns of land ownership and land use will continue to change, resulting in new conflicts and challenges in the future. These may affect which areas the committee considers to be higher priority impact areas.

GAME MANAGEMENT OBJECTIVES

In addition to resolving wildlife conflicts, HPP is also statutorily directed to “assist the division in meeting game management objectives....” This assistance will be directed towards a) maintaining/increasing the population in a given area primarily by habitat manipulation projects; b) maintaining/decreasing the population in a given area primarily by pursuing hunting opportunities; and c) participating in research activities aimed at habitat, population, disease, and/or movement factors that influence big game populations.

PROJECT TYPES & PRIORITIES

PROJECT TYPES (TO INCLUDE, BUT NOT LIMITED TO):

Habitat Manipulation:

- Prescribed burning
- Water developments
- Weed control, including herbicide vouchers
- Fertilization
- Seeding
- Hand thinning
- Mechanical (chaining, roller chopping, hydro axing, etc.)

Fencing Projects:

- Fence vouchers for fence repair materials
- Construction of new fences (usually > ¼ mile in length)
- Landowner reimbursement for purchased fencing materials
- Prototype or experimental fence designs
- Wildlife crossings or retrofitting fences to be more wildlife-friendly

Game Damage Projects:

- Stackyards- materials and/or labor
- Distribution hunts
- Hunt coordinators for distribution hunts, youth hunts, etc.
- Forage purchases
- Baiting

Information/Education Projects:

- Seminars
- Workshops
- Brochures
- Electronic media: websites, etc.
- Comment letters
- Travel management: signage, temporary fencing, etc.

Research/Monitoring Projects:

- Habitat
- Population
- Inventory
- Movement

Conservation Easements (transaction costs only)

Archaeological Clearances (and other NEPA required clearances)

HPP projects may be implemented on public lands, private lands, or a combination of both wherever the committee believes the project has the best chance to effectively reduce or eliminate big game conflicts, or to assist CPW in meeting big game management objectives.

OPERATING GUIDELINES

In an effort to be consistent and fair to all applicants, the committee has established operating guidelines that detail priorities, eligibility requirements, project rules and limits, and other policies. The committee retains the authority to review and update these guidelines as necessary to meet the changing needs of the area; however, these standard rules should apply to most HPP projects and will be enforced by the committee with few exceptions. Projects that mitigate big game conflicts with agriculture will have higher priority than those that achieve big game management objectives. Project applications should adequately address the following questions:

1. Has the applicant/landowner acted in good faith and cooperation with CPW? To maximize program effectiveness, applicants or landowners with a history of misconduct related to the HPP program shall be ineligible for program participation.
2. Is the landowner willing to participate financially or in-kind to complete the project? Is there a partnership opportunity to leverage other stakeholder funds or in-kind support?
3. Does the proposed project address a recurring conflict that involves a significant number of big game animals?
4. How well will the proposed project meet the landowner or agency objective(s) while benefiting wildlife? Does the project have other public benefits beyond direct landowner and wildlife benefits?
5. Will the proposed project enhance habitat conditions or improve distribution of big game animals involved in conflicts?
6. Does the project have educational value because it is innovative or new to the area?
7. Is the proposed project technically sound and within the scope of HPP?
8. Does the landowner applicant allow low-fee or no-fee public hunting such as “private land only” licenses, big game distribution hunts, or general access hunting?
9. Do fencing projects repair or replace existing fences? (With rare exceptions, entirely new fences are not likely to be funded).

PROJECT MONITORING & EVALUATION

Comprehensive project monitoring is critical for the long-term sustainability of HPP. To provide documentation, determine treatment effectiveness, and convey results, monitoring will be done on all projects. Specific monitoring methodology shall be matched to the treatment. Monitoring data will be submitted to the local HPP committee and administrative assistant. At a minimum, applicant must agree to allow the Committee and the local Wildlife Manager or biologist access to the project site(s) to evaluate and monitor success of treatment(s) supported through this cooperative funding. Before-and-after photos and other measurable data will be required as part of the application evaluation phase, as well as follow-up inspection and monitoring.

MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Management strategies were developed to achieve the committee's objectives. Strategies primarily involve resolving big game conflicts through habitat manipulation, fencing, and game damage projects; or achieving big game management objectives through information and education, research and monitoring, or conservation easements. Most HPP projects will fall into one of the following management strategy categories.

1. **HABITAT MANIPULATION:** Improving habitat on private and public lands attracts big game away from impact areas; improves big game distribution; holds big game for longer periods of time on public lands; or improves forage abundance, availability, or palatability such that it reduces competition between big game and livestock.
2. **FENCING PROJECTS:** Repair of existing fences and/or construction of new fences help alleviate ongoing big game damage, and offset the financial burden to landowners. Fence projects should result in the reduction of damage claims, overall habitat improvement, and improved distribution of big game. Fences will be wildlife-friendly to HPP specifications. Maintenance will be responsibility of the landowner.
3. **GAME DAMAGE PROJECTS:** Providing stackyards for landowners otherwise ineligible for them and using hunt coordinators and forage purchases to address pending damage problems that CPW may be financially liable for.
4. **INFORMATION AND EDUCATION:** Producing and distributing informative materials helps public land agencies and private land managers educate the public and provides information about the programs, agencies, conflicts and user responsibilities. Travel management may include signage or education on closures or activities that will benefit big game.
5. **RESEARCH & MONITORING:** Projects will include, but not be limited to, those focusing on habitat condition, populations, inventory and movement patterns; or those that assist CPW in meeting management objectives. While these types of projects may be funded, the committee's primary focus will be on conflict resolution between big game and livestock.
6. **CONSERVATION EASEMENTS:** Conservation easements help protect a property's conservation values, particularly agricultural productivity, wildlife habitat, and hunting access. Improving access to public and private lands improves harvest of big game animals in impact areas, and helps disperse problem animals.

BUDGET GUIDELINES

The operating budget for HPP is based on 5% of the total annual revenues from big game license sales in HPP areas. The HPP State Council allocates annual funding to the local HPP committees. Additional funds are also available through the HPP State Council for special projects or unforeseen opportunities that are beyond the capacity of the local committee. These funds supplement the existing budget and allow committees to occasionally participate in larger-scale special projects.

The Montelores HPP Committee has developed a target budget allocation that allows for short-term strategies to deal with immediate fence and forage conflicts caused by big game, but concentrates on adaptive, long-term management strategies leading to the establishment of healthy and sustainable rangelands. It is important to acknowledge that the budget is intended to be flexible. While these are desired allocations based upon the priority level for different types of projects, the committee retains the ability to shift funds as needed between categories to effectively resolve big game conflicts.

Habitat Manipulation	55%
Game Damage.....	5%
Fencing.....	20%
Research/Monitoring.....	10%
Conservation Easements	5%
Other (-Includes information/education, etc).....	5%
<u>TOTAL ALLOCATION</u>	100%

CURRENT & FORESEEABLE ISSUES

The committee anticipates that multiple factors will influence big game populations and distribution in the future, which will drive conflicts with agriculture and may change management objectives. These may include, but are not limited to, the following:

RECREATION

Many forms of outdoor recreation take place on public lands in important big game habitats. Local governments and land management agencies have been promoting recreation as a key economic driver in the area, which has expanded the scope and timing of recreation activities. Recreation on winter ranges is particularly concerning, and has severe negative impacts on big game at the population level. As recreational access on public lands continues to expand and the number of users increases, wildlife conflicts will be exacerbated in existing areas and begin to occur in new areas.

DEVELOPMENT

Portions of the Montelores HPP area are experiencing housing and road development as the human population continues to expand. Much of this development is occurring in big game winter range and replaces former agricultural fields, as well as impacting river bottoms and other big game habitat resources. Subdivisions, including those with larger or dispersed individual parcels, result in significant habitat fragmentation and loss. Continuing these patterns of human development will change big game movement, distribution, and potential conflict throughout the committee area.

ENERGY & NATURAL RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT

Historically, there has been very little oil and gas development in this HPP area but the possibility of future development remains. Solar and wind technologies may be viable in this area, which could result in new conflicts as these operations are implemented.

HABITAT CHANGE

The habitat in the committee area is experiencing changes due to beetle infestations, aging and decadent vegetation, vegetative stress due to weather events, and poor overall winter range and sage park conditions. These factors may continue to worsen and affect big game distribution on public and private lands.

AGRICULTURAL CHANGES

The committee area is experiencing a small shift in agricultural practices to include conversion of pastures and traditional crops to more novel livestock and products, including hemp. While the committee may not participate in conflicts directly related to hemp production, the loss of acres previously involved in forage production could shift or concentrate conflicts in other areas.

GUNNISON SAGE GROUSE

This HPP area currently has populations of Gunnison Sage Grouse that require additional levels of monitoring and project compliance to minimize potential impacts. The committee recognizes the importance of Gunnison Sage Grouse and will ensure that HPP projects are not detrimental to them.

DISEASE

Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) has not yet been detected within the Montelores HPP area. However, given the prevalence of the disease within Colorado and its evident spread towards the southwest, it is highly probable that CWD will become endemic in this area in the future. CWD and other big game diseases may affect CPW management objectives for deer and elk.