

SAGUACHE ELK HERD MANAGEMENT PLAN ADJUSTMENT

DATA ANALYSIS UNIT E-26

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GMUs: 68 and 681

Last HMP Approval Year: 2023

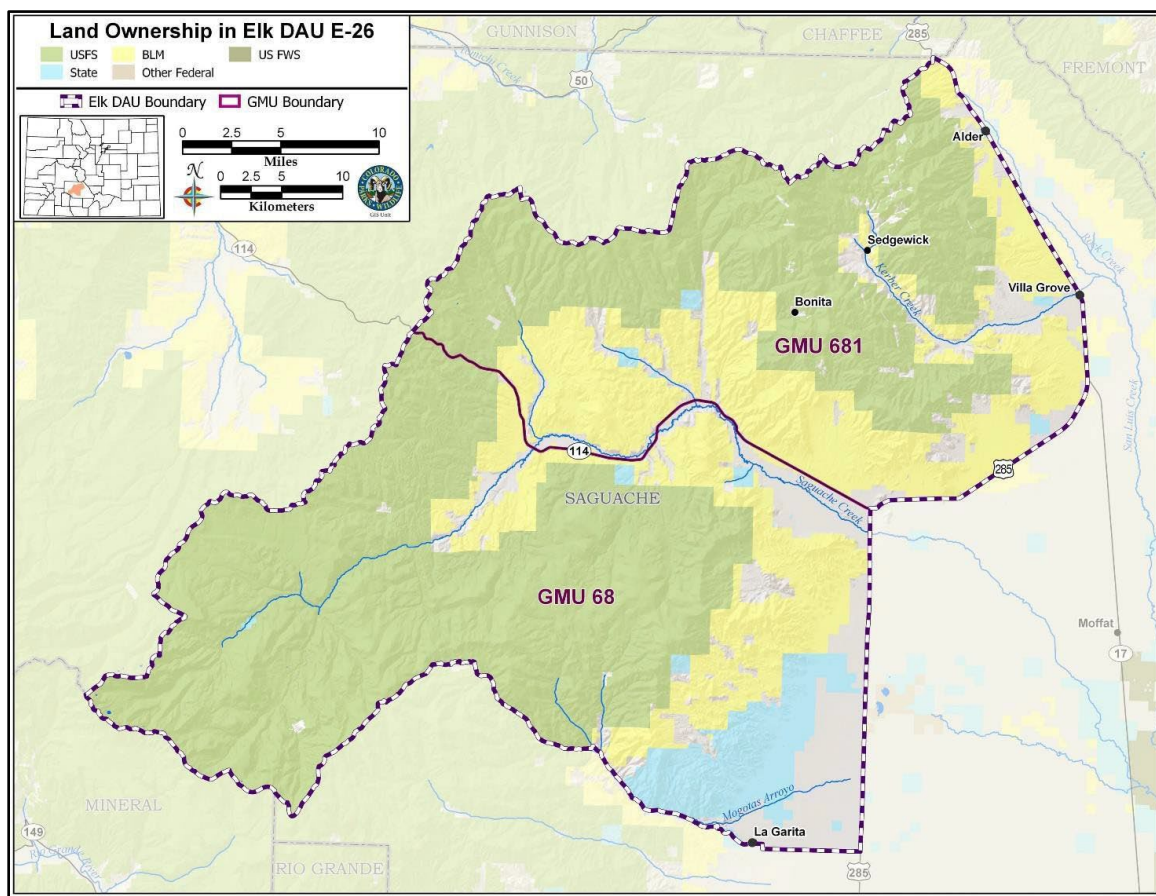
Post-hunt Population: Previous Objective: 4,000-4,800; 2024 Estimate: 5,500.

Preferred Alternative: Increase the current population objective to 5,000-7,000 elk

Post-hunt Observed Sex Ratio (bulls:100 cows): Previous Objective: 18-22;

2021 observed: 14; 3-yr average modeled: 22

Preferred Alternative: Extend the current expected sex ratio objective of 18-22 bulls:100 cows



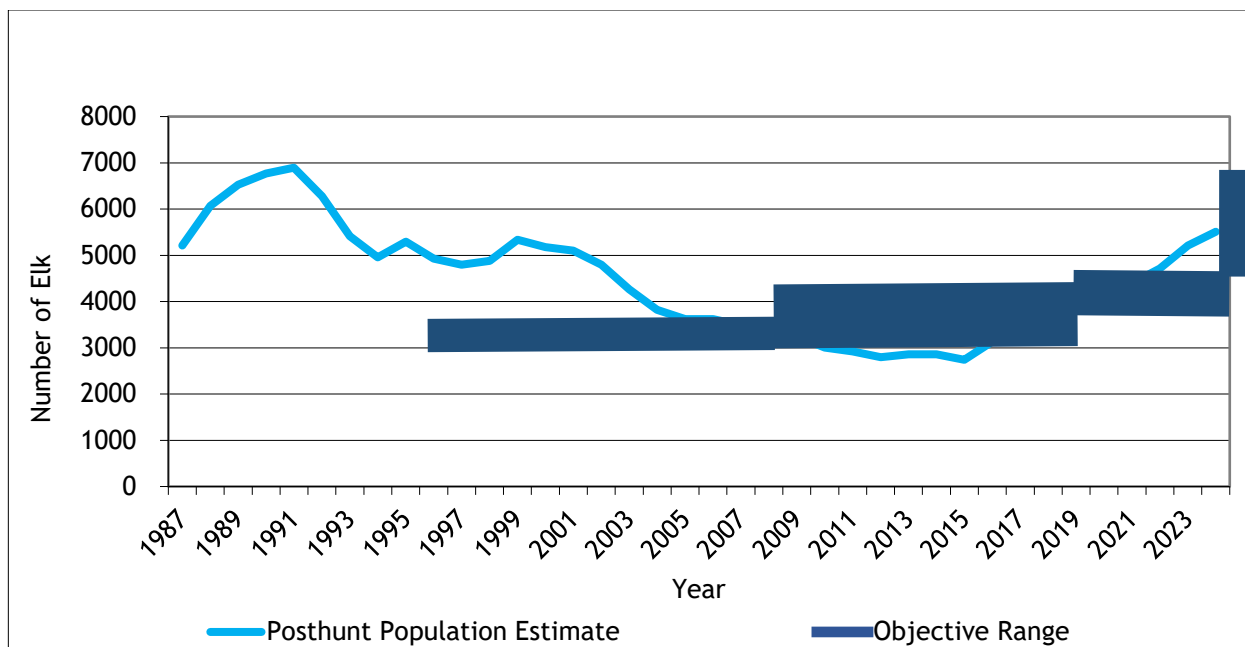


Figure E26-1. Elk DAU E-26 modeled post-hunt population and objective range, 1987-2024.

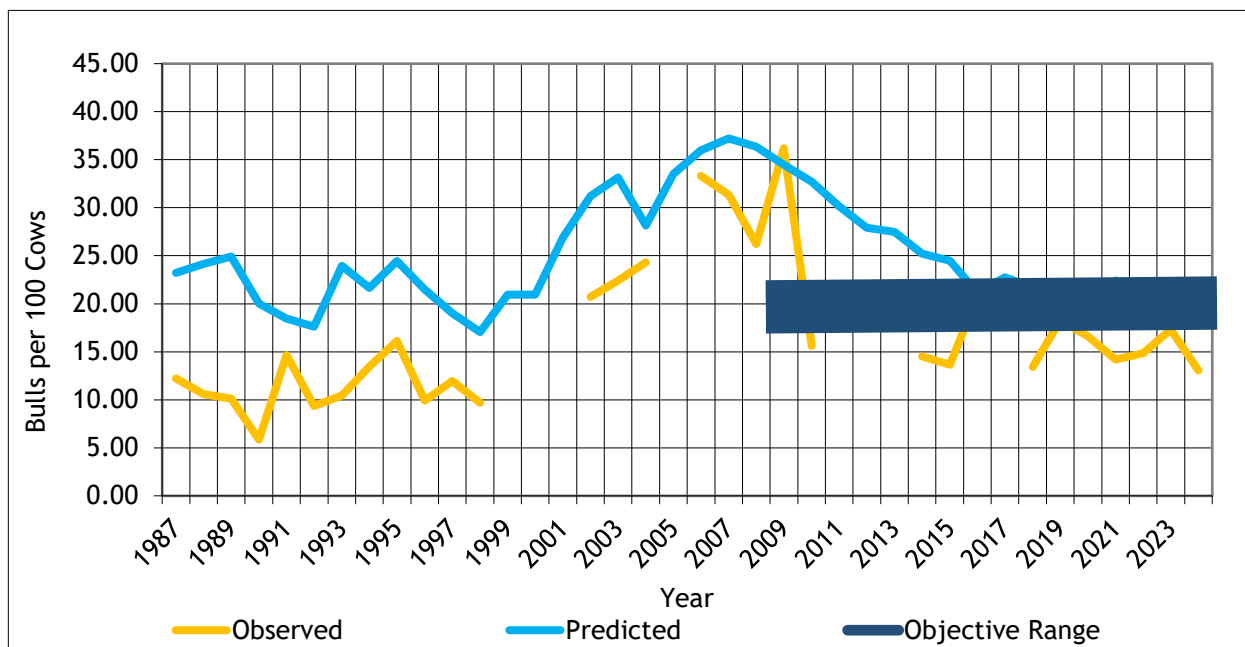


Figure E26-2. Elk DAU E-26 observed and modeled post-hunt sex ratio (bulls:100 cows), 1987-2024.

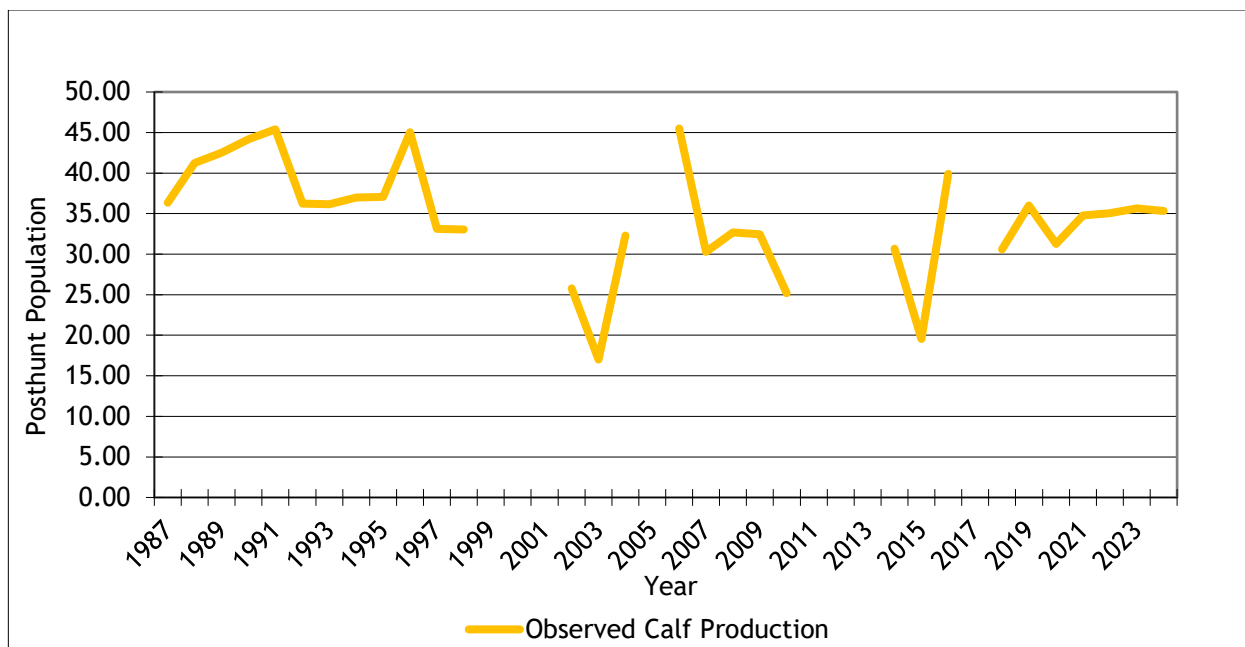


Figure E26-3. Elk DAU E-26 calf production (observed post-hunt calves:100 cows, 1987-2024).

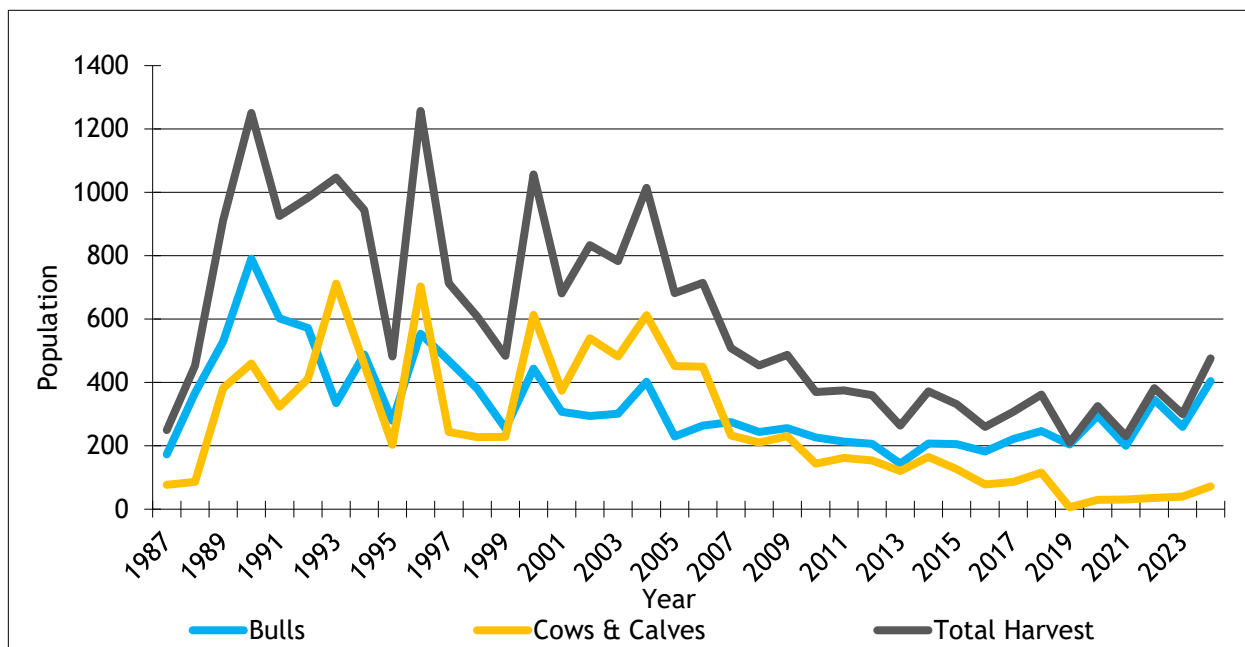


Figure E26-4. Elk harvest estimates in E-26, 1987-2024.

Background Information

E-26, the Saguache Elk Population, is located in the northwestern portion of the San Luis Valley in Colorado. The DAU comprises Game Management Units (GMUs) 68 and 681, approximately 1,047 square miles, and primarily encompasses Saguache County. Elk winter range within the DAU includes roughly 601 square miles, whereas the summer range encompasses about 768 square miles. Public land constitutes about eighty-eight percent of the DAU, while the private sector owns almost twelve percent.

E-26 has a highland or mountain climate, with cool summers and cold winters. The higher elevation areas of the San Juan Mountains receive approximately 30-50 inches of precipitation annually, mainly as winter snow. The foothills receive 10-16 inches, while the valley floor, considered a semi-arid high-elevation desert, gets 6-8 inches annually. However, summer rain can significantly impact the growth of forage resources in the area.

The E-26 population was increasing during the late 1980s. CPW believes the population peaked in the early 1990s, during which the herd reached its socio-political carrying capacity after receiving increasing reports of depredation on private land. Despite the increasing complaints at that time, CPW had fewer tools to address private land issues. Wildlife managers began limited efforts to control the growing population by increasing the number of antlerless elk licenses. Increased harvest aimed at cows began in 1989 and continued through 2006 to reduce the population. CPW reduced the cow licenses in 2007, decreasing antlerless harvest as hunters located progressively fewer elk, and game damage complaints became minimal. In 2008, CPW set the preferred population objective at 3,500- 4,500 elk. At the time, the public preference was to curb the downward trend, basing their decisions on information CPW provided from the elk population model estimates. Despite the reduced harvest rate, the population continued to decline. This downward trend brought the elk herd to its lowest level in 2015. In 2019, CPW re-evaluated the population objectives, and there was overwhelming consensus from the public to increase the objective range slightly. The intent was to improve the herd and raise the population to a sustainable and viable level. Based on the population estimate at the time, the public's 2019 preferred population objective was 4,000 to 4,800 animals. The objective range continued in the 2023 HMP as CPW believed the herd was slowly improving into the approved range. However, the boundaries for the range provided little flexibility for annual management.

Since 1987, observed sex ratios have averaged 18 bulls per 100 cows. In 2008, CPW set the public preferred sex ratio objective at 18-22 bulls per 100 cows. In 2019, CPW re-evaluated the objectives, and being an over-the-counter (OTC) unit, the expected sex ratio was to remain status quo at 18-22 bulls per 100 cows. The expected sex ratio objective should continue allowing hunter opportunities in an OTC unit. The previous 5- and 3-year observed averages for bull ratios averaged around 15 bulls per 100 cows.

CPW has managed GMUs 68 and 681 as over-the-counter bull-hunting units since 1987. Both units had relatively large numbers of antlerless licenses during the regular and private land-only seasons in the 1990s. The agency also provided either-sex licenses in the first rifle season from 2003 to 2007. Harvest success in E-26 appears to be significantly influenced by weather and changes to elk distributional movements. Prior to the onset of the objectives updated in 2019 and again in 2024, bull harvest had averaged approximately 214 animals. Since then, the average bull harvest has increased slightly to 301 animals. In 2019, in response to a strong public request, cow licenses for all seasons were reduced significantly so that the population could recover from the downward trend since 1990. At the time, CPW informed the public

that they would decrease cow licenses until the population increased within the preferred objective range. After that, CPW would conservatively implement additional cow licenses depending on the herd's growth and social- political tolerance pressures. Antlerless harvest from 2008 through 2018 averaged approximately 145 animals; however, since the reduction in 2019, antlerless harvest has averaged 36 animals and is on an upward trend with improved hunter-harvest success.

Following the reduction in cow licenses in 2019, local CPW personnel have recognized that the herd appears to be increasing and is above the objectives set at that time and prolonged in 2023. Nonetheless, private land depredation concerns remain minimal, hunter satisfaction in locating animals is improving, given the rising harvest success with limited licenses, and land management agencies have not reported compromised habitat forage conditions. Consequently, to allow for greater flexibility in management, CPW would like to increase and broaden the population objective range encompassing the herd's estimated current level and permitting room for expansion to a level that is less likely to degrade the habitat or compromise interspecific competition with other ungulates (mule deer and pronghorn). The increase would enable the herd to grow more sustainably while CPW continues limiting cow licenses relative to the herd performance.

Management Concerns

The primary issue the respondents brought up in the 2019 re-evaluation of the objectives was the desire to have more elk on the landscape. From an environmental perspective, the main limiting factors for E-26 are the winter range conditions, forage and water availability, and human social tolerance on agricultural lands. According to the Rio Grande National Forest, forage availability in the summer range is not likely limiting, having received new information from their eco-logical condition assessment. Water availability and forage affect the amount of quality habitat available for elk year-round. Increased recreational activity in E-26 may also reduce usable 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 abundantly more forage and water resources than public land. In the past, elk movement onto private land caused numerous game damage issues. Today, CPW has additional tools to address depredation issues through redistribution efforts using dispersal licenses offered to affected landowners. An increasing herd within a wider objective range allows CPW flexibility to be more cautiously reactive to the provision of annual hunting licenses to manage the herd within the approved objective range.

Management Alternatives

In Data Analysis Unit E-26, CPW considered four alternatives in 2025 for the post-hunt population size and maintaining the expected post-hunt observed sex ratio for an OTC unit:

Table E26-1. Proposed and approved population objective ranges for the 2026 E-26 HMP.

Post-hunt Population Objective Alternatives:	
4,000 to 4,800	(1) Status Quo
5,000 to 6,100	(2) Approximately 10% population increase above and below population estimate
5,000 to 6,500	(3) Approximately 10% below and 15% above population estimate
5,000 to 7,000	(4) Approximately 10% below and 20% above population estimate

The expected post-hunt observed sex ratio for E-26, based on its current status as an OTC unit, remains at 18-22 bulls per 100 cows. The expected ratio would be the objective that CPW will continue managing toward during the lifetime of this HMP. If the licensing strategy changes to an entirely limited system via the CPW five-year Big Game Season Structure or other Colorado Wildlife Commission processes, CPW may need to re-assess the sex ratio objective range.

Public Involvement

In 2019, CPW held a public meeting in Saguache, attended by 60 local constituents, at which time the previous objectives were set and continued in the 2023 HMP re-evaluation. CPW sent letters and the draft plan to local county commissions and land management agencies for comment. CPW also sent the draft plan to the local HPP committee for review. Local biologists also posted the HMP on the CPW website for 30 days, allowing additional stakeholders to provide comments and preferences on the alternatives in the plan. Moreover, local biologists considered professional input from other Colorado Parks and Wildlife personnel, and the agency examined and considered biological herd capabilities and social-political tolerance.

Preferred Management Objectives:

Post-hunt Population

The responses received during all public involvement processes in 2025, including feedback from partner agencies, suggest that the majority supported allowing the elk population to increase in GMUs 68 and 681. The preferred alternative was a population objective of 5,000 to 7,000 elk, which allowed for approximately 10% below the current level to about 20% above the population estimate. The preferred objective from 2026 continues to allow for the current OTC bull-hunting opportunities and continue increasing cow licenses conservatively as the population expands relative to the objectives.

Post-hunt Sex Ratio

CPW has managed the E-26 herd as an OTC unit since 1987. In 2023, the expected sex ratio was 18-22 bulls per 100 cows. With any season structure changes, CPW may expect a change in the "expected bull ratio." The current objective range would remain the same for the HMP as those established in 2019 and 2023, allowing for ample hunting opportunity in archery, second and third rifle seasons, and limiting the first and fourth rifle seasons

Strategies for Achieving the Preferred Objectives:

Post-hunt Population - To increase and maintain the population within the objective range, CPW will continue limiting and conservatively adjusting antlerless licenses depending on the overall herd performance. Controlling the cow licenses should help prevent the population from rising too far above the upper end of the objective range. Game damage licenses will still be offered, if necessary, to reduce agricultural depredation issues if they arise.

Post-hunt Sex Ratio - Any expected changes in the E-26 sex ratios would entail changing the license season structure throughout the unit and potentially restricting all licenses. Nonetheless, CPW proposes that the same expected sex ratio will remain in place starting in 2026 as the preferred alternative. E-26 is an OTC unit providing abundant bull-hunting opportunities, which could cause hunter overcrowding in the field. The OTC licenses are only available to Colorado residents, whereas non-resident licenses will be limited in number from 2025. CPW will attempt to work with hunters to encourage distribution, continuing to prevent potential overcrowding issues.

CPW Commission Approved Objectives:

Post-hunt Population

5,000 - 7,000 elk

Post-hunt bull ratio

18 - 22 bulls:100 cows (expected ratio based on OTC bull license allocation)