

Colorado Parks and Wildlife
Habitat Partnership Program
Lower Colorado River



DISTRIBUTION MANAGEMENT PLAN



Approved - Colorado Parks and Wildlife Commission: May 4, 2018
This plan is valid for 10 years from approval date.

2018-2028

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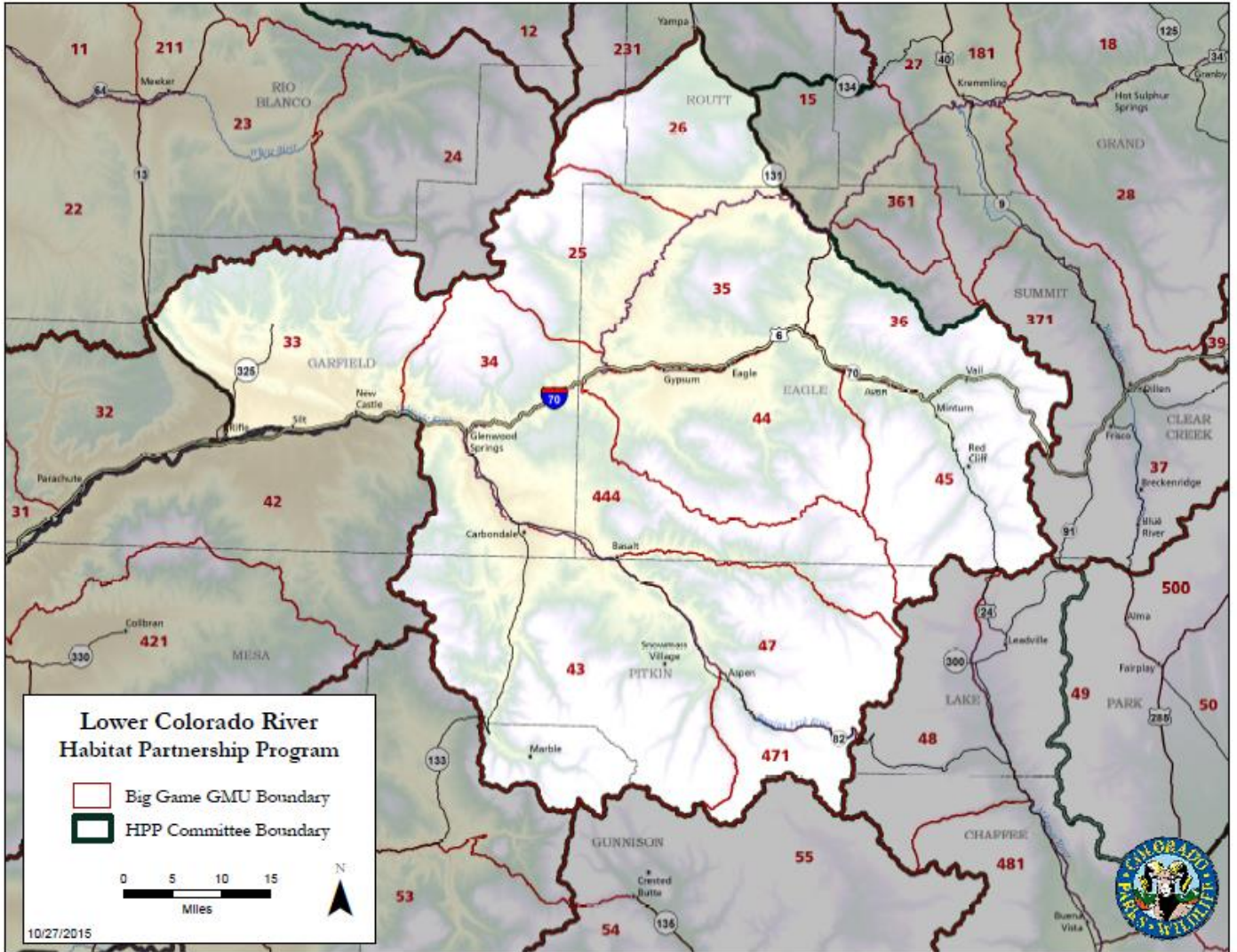
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On January 15, 1993, the Lower Colorado River Habitat Partnership Committee (LCRHPP) was appointed by the CWC to resolve conflicts between the White River elk herd and livestock producers in game management units 25, 26 and 34. The LCRHPP Committee expanded in 2003 and now encompasses Game Management Units (GMU) 25, 26, 33, 34 35, 36, 43, 44, 45, 47, 444 and 471.

Of the approximate 4,000 square miles in the program area, 23% is private owned lands, 17% is BLM, 58% is USFS and less than 1% is State of Colorado. Winter range for elk is split almost equally between public and private lands with 517 square miles located on private property and 532 on public property.

While conflicts between big game and livestock still exist, and the committee remains focused on them, the LCRHPP committee believes they have been reduced. Given the human growth in this area, their efforts have turned to improving remaining habitat in their area, which will help achieve and maintain herd objectives and hunting opportunities.

LOWER COLORADO RIVER HPP AREA



COMMITTEE MEMBERS

The LCRHPP committee currently has the following committee members: three members representing local livestock growers, one member representing sportspersons, one member representing the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), one member representing the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), and one member representing Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW).

MEMBERS

1. Rick Bumgardner, sportsman representative (chairman) Started HPP Term: Sept. 2000
2. Darren Chacon, CPW representative (co-chairman) Started HPP Term: Jan. 2007
3. Jim Nieslanik, livestock grower representative Started HPP Term: Mar. 2004
4. Pat Luark, livestock grower representative Started HPP Term: Dec. 2002
5. Scot Doderer, livestock grower representative Started HPP Term: Jul. 2006
6. Hilary Boyd, BLM representative Started HPP Term: Nov. 2014
7. Phil Nyland, USFS representative Started HPP Term: Mar. 2007

INTRODUCTION

On January 15, 1993, the Lower Colorado River Habitat Partnership Committee (LCRHPP) was appointed by the CWC to help resolve conflicts between the White River elk herd and livestock producers. The appointment of the Lower Colorado River HPP Committee was made in conjunction with the appointment of the Upper Yampa River and Meeker HPP Committees. These three committees encompassed the entire White River Elk Herd.

In 2003, the LCRHPP area was expanded to help reduce or eliminate wildlife - livestock conflicts and assist the agricultural interests within the Eagle, Gore Creek, Frying Pan, Roaring Fork and Crystal River Valleys as well as all the northern drainages of the Colorado River from McCoy west to Rifle. Despite the fact that agricultural operations in this area are becoming fewer and fewer, this larger area allows the committee to work with the remaining ranches in the area in an effort to preserve and improve both important wildlife habitat and livestock range. Conflicts between big game and livestock still exist, although the LCRHPP committee believes they have been reduced.

Resolving conflicts between livestock and wildlife will remain the committee's main objective. However, due to reduced impacts in the LCR area and the pressures on the remaining habitat, committee emphasis in recent years is now looking toward preserving and improving habitat (i.e. pinyon & juniper removal, various water projects, noxious weed control, wildlife friendly fencing, prescribed burns and conservation easements).

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... 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.

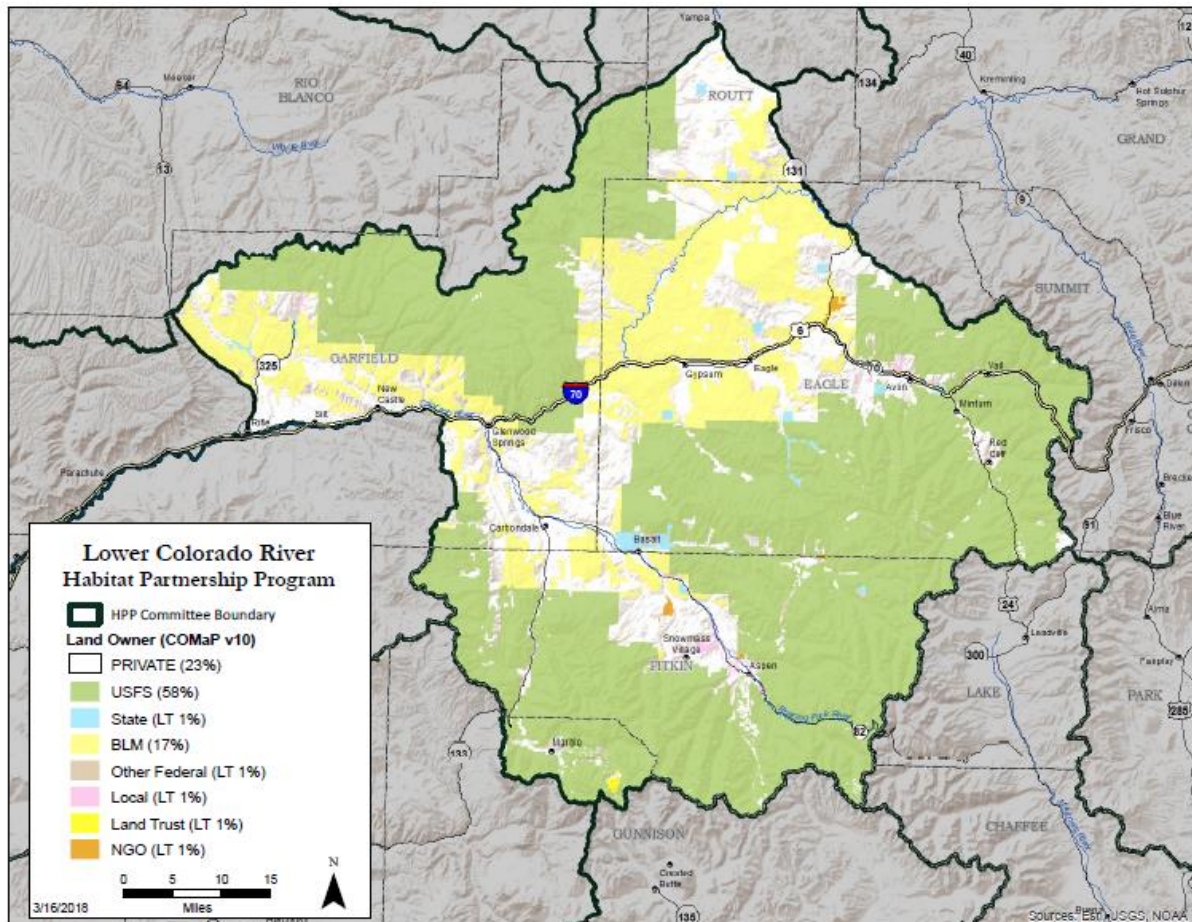
(e) The committee shall be authorized to procure from land owners, land managers, or other providers, materials or services necessary for carrying out activities identified in the distribution management plans pursuant to subparagraph (IV) of paragraph (d) of this subsection (8); except that all such 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 GOALS & OBJECTIVES

- The committee will continue to help reduce conflicts between big game and livestock.
- The committee will help to maintain, protect and/or create new big game/livestock habitat.
- The committee will continue to assist CPW manage for a healthy deer and elk population and achieve herd management objectives.
- Maintain and improve communication between CPW, private landowners, sportspeople, land management agencies and the general public.
- Review Herd Management Plans and make recommendations on proposed objectives, taking into account private land issues, habitat availability, and public desires.

AREA DESCRIPTION

This area ranges in elevation from 5,345 feet in Rifle, Colorado to 14,265 feet on top of Castle Peak, in the Maroon Bells Wilderness. Of the approximate 4,000 square miles in the program area, 23% is private owned lands, 17% is BLM, 58% is USFS and less than 1% is State of Colorado. Winter range for elk is split almost equally between public and private lands with 517 square miles located on private property and 532 on public property.



HABITAT DESCRIPTION

A variety of vegetative habitats occur in the program area. The area to the north and west of the Colorado River, from Yampa to Rifle, remains primarily grass, alfalfa, and/or shrub land pastures, which are used for agricultural interests.

The vegetation within the LCRHPP boundaries can be categorized into five main groups: cropland, riparian, shrub lands, woodlands, and alpine.

Cropland is found in the valleys, primarily at lower elevations. These are mostly hay grounds of timothy, orchard grass, wheatgrasses, and alfalfa.

Riparian vegetation is found along the major creeks and rivers. These communities support the greatest abundance and diversity of plant and animal species. Cover types range from spruce-fir to blue

Elevation and aspect largely determine the vegetation in this unit. The mountain peaks above approximately 12,500 feet contain mostly bare rock or alpine communities. Spruce-fir occurs mostly between the elevations of 8,000 and 12,500 ft. Aspen and aspen-conifer mixes dominate the slopes from 7,000 to 8,500 feet. Mountain shrubs show up on lower slopes near 7,000 feet. In the western two-thirds of the unit, pinyon-juniper covers the foothills, and sagebrush parks appear on the more level sites as elevation drops. Aspen, an early successional species, is found mostly on sites that have been burned or disturbed within the past 150 years. Riparian vegetation parallels creeks and rivers. Elk prefer areas with a diversity of vegetation types in close proximity to each other. These areas occur because of disturbance and changes in slope, aspect and microclimates. The best habitat areas generally have a ratio of 40% cover to 60% open foraging habitat.

Shrub lands consist of sagebrush, mountain shrubs, and grassland communities.

- Sagebrush is the most common land cover at the lower elevations. Rabbit brush, western and slender wheatgrass, and native broadleaf plants commonly grow with the sagebrush.
- Mountain shrubs include serviceberry, snowberry, mountain mahogany, chokecherry, bitterbrush and a small amount of Gamble's oak. The shrub lands' grasses and forbs provide forage for elk in the spring months.
- Grasslands occur on the more level sites in forested areas (large bunchgrasses such as Thurber's fescue, wild rye, needle grass, and brome) and in the alpine areas (Idaho and Thurber's fescue, Sandberg bluegrass, blue bunch wheat grass mixed with forbs).

Woodlands fall into five major groups: pinyon-juniper, aspen and aspen-conifer mix, Douglas fir, lodgepole pine, and spruce-fir.

- Pinyon-juniper woodlands occur in the lower elevation foothills. They provide good thermal and hiding cover but poor forage.
- Aspen and mixed aspen-conifer woodlands occupy the middle elevations. The understory consists of emerging conifers (where aspen is not the climax specie), grasses and forbs, and some shrubs. This community provides some of the most important calving habitat, summer cover and forage for elk.

- Douglas fir shares the middle elevation zone mostly on the moister sites usually on north facing aspects, but is less represented than the aspen woodlands. It is a long-lived specie valued for wildlife habitat diversity, scenic value, and big game cover.
- Lodge pole pine grows in even aged stands and below the spruce-fir. In mature stands, the dense over story limits the growth of understory forage, but provides good cover.
- Spruce-fir (Engelmann spruce and subalpine fir) dominates the higher elevations up to tree line. This habitat provides excellent summer cover for elk.

Alpine sites occur on mountain peaks. Grasses, sedges, and numerous forbs are present. Short willows grow in moister areas. These sites provide important elk summer range.

BIG GAME POPULATION SUMMARY

Each individual herd (deer, elk and moose) is grouped into a Data Analysis Unit (DAU). The DAU boundaries are drawn so that they approximate an individual herd unit where most of the animals are born, live, and die with as little egress or ingress from other herds as possible. The unit contains the entire habitat necessary for wildlife to breed, rear young, migrate, and forage.

Below are the proposed management objectives for all the DAUs within the scope of the LCRHPP. The LCRHPP committee will assist CPW meeting herd management objectives associated with the committee's area through the establishment of private land access, recommending special hunts (i.e. youth, disabled, veterans, etc.) and continued preservation and improvement of habitat. Lastly, the committee will provide input for Herd Management Plans (HMPs).

In the past, Pronghorn would move into and out of unit 26 from the Toponas area but a resident herd never became established. However, recently more pronghorn are being found for in this area and are becoming established in Unit 26. To address this, a limited number of pronghorn licenses are available for unit 26. In the event more pronghorn migrate into the area, the number of licenses will increase.

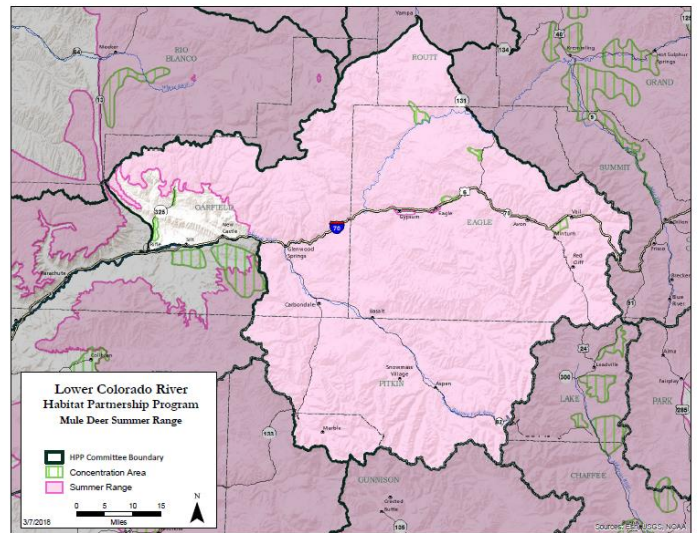
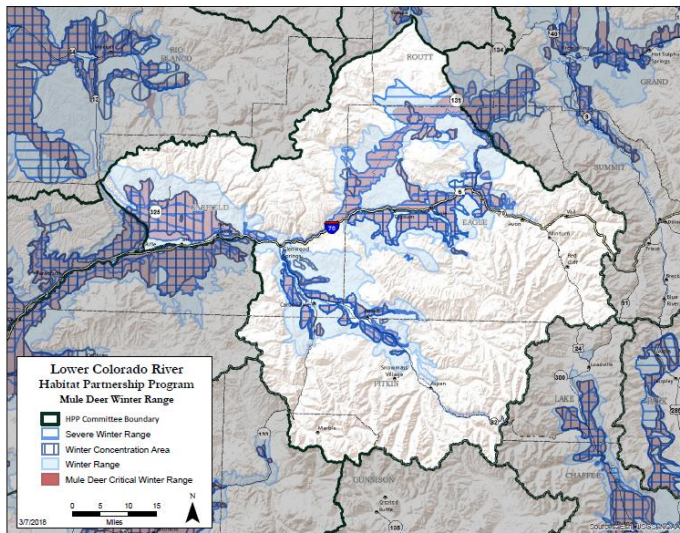
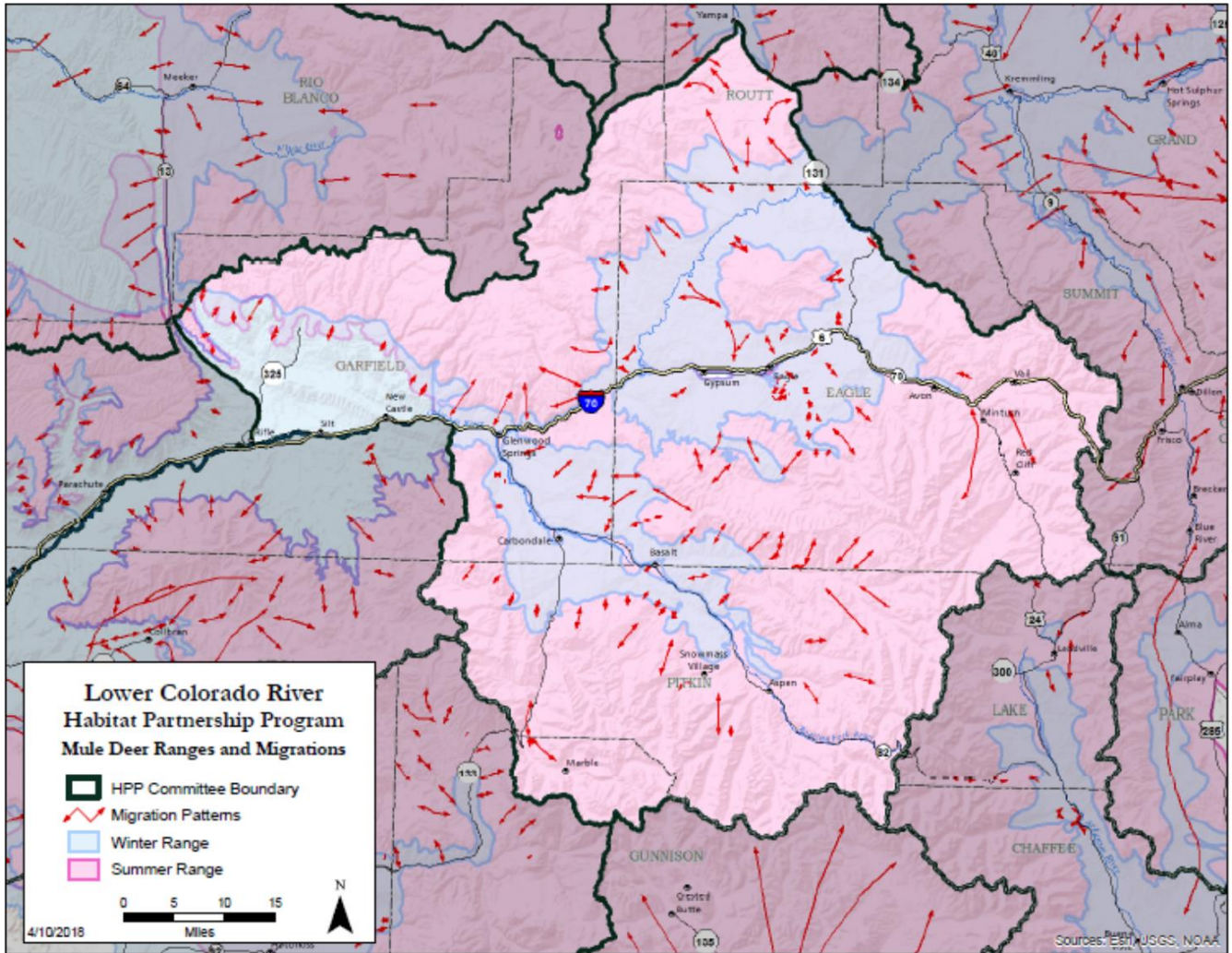
Table 1. Data Analysis Unit Summary for Lower Colorado River HPP Area

Management Herd (*DAU plan in the renewal process)	1990s Population Avg.	2000s Population Avg.	2010 - 2017 Population Avg.	Current Pop.Mngt. Objective
Deer - State Bridge(D8)	15,159	16,862	14,666	13,500-16,500
<i>Game Management Units: 15, 35, 36, 45 & 361</i>				
Deer - Maroon Bells(D13)	8,992	8,924	6,200	7,500-8,500
<i>Game Management Units: 43, 47 & 471</i>				
Deer - Brush Creek(D14)*	2,920 (post hunt 95-99 avg.)	3,019	2,280	7,000
<i>Game Management Unit: 44</i>				
Deer - Rifle Creek(D42)	6818	7155	7897	7700-9400
<i>Game Management Unit: 33</i>				
Deer - Sweetwater Creek(D43)	6,312	6,459	6,189	5,000-6,000
<i>Game Management Units: 25, 26 & 34</i>				
Deer - Basalt(D53)*	4,217 (post hunt 96-99 avg.)	5,570	4,672	5,300
<i>Game Management Unit: 444</i>				
Elk - White River(E6)	52,700	51,741	40,978	32,000-39,000
<i>Game Management Units: 11, 12, 13, 23, 24, 25, 26, 33, 34, 131, 211 & 231</i>				
Elk - Piney River(E12)	5,584	5,367	3,511	3,000-4,600
<i>Game Management Units: 35 & 36</i>				
Elk - Avalanche Creek(E15)	7,526	6,016	4,323	3,800-5,400
<i>Game Management Units: 43 & 471</i>				
Elk - Frying Pan(E16)	10,161	8,699	5,070	5,500-8,500
<i>Game Management Units: 44, 444, 45 & 47</i>				
Moose - Grand Mesa & Crystal River Valley(M5)	0	0	467	300-400
<i>Game Management Units: 41, 42, 43, 411, 421, 52, and 521</i>				

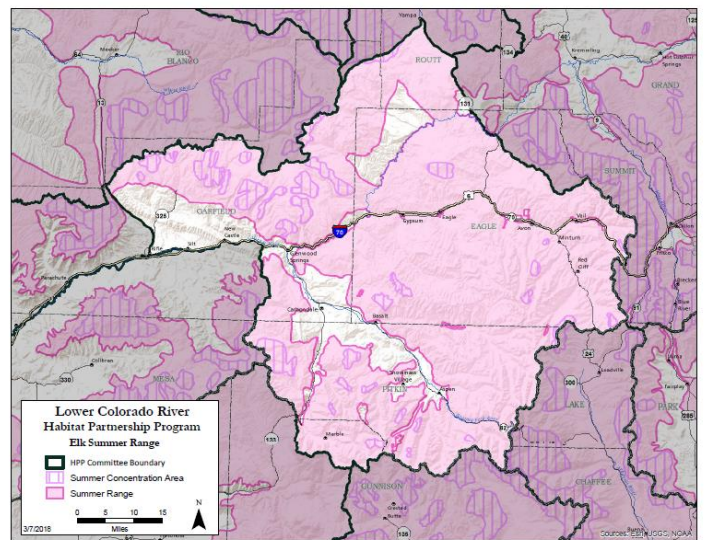
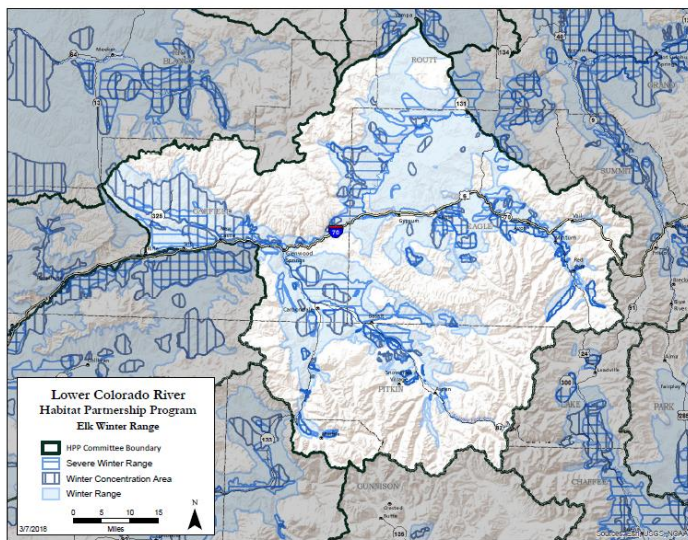
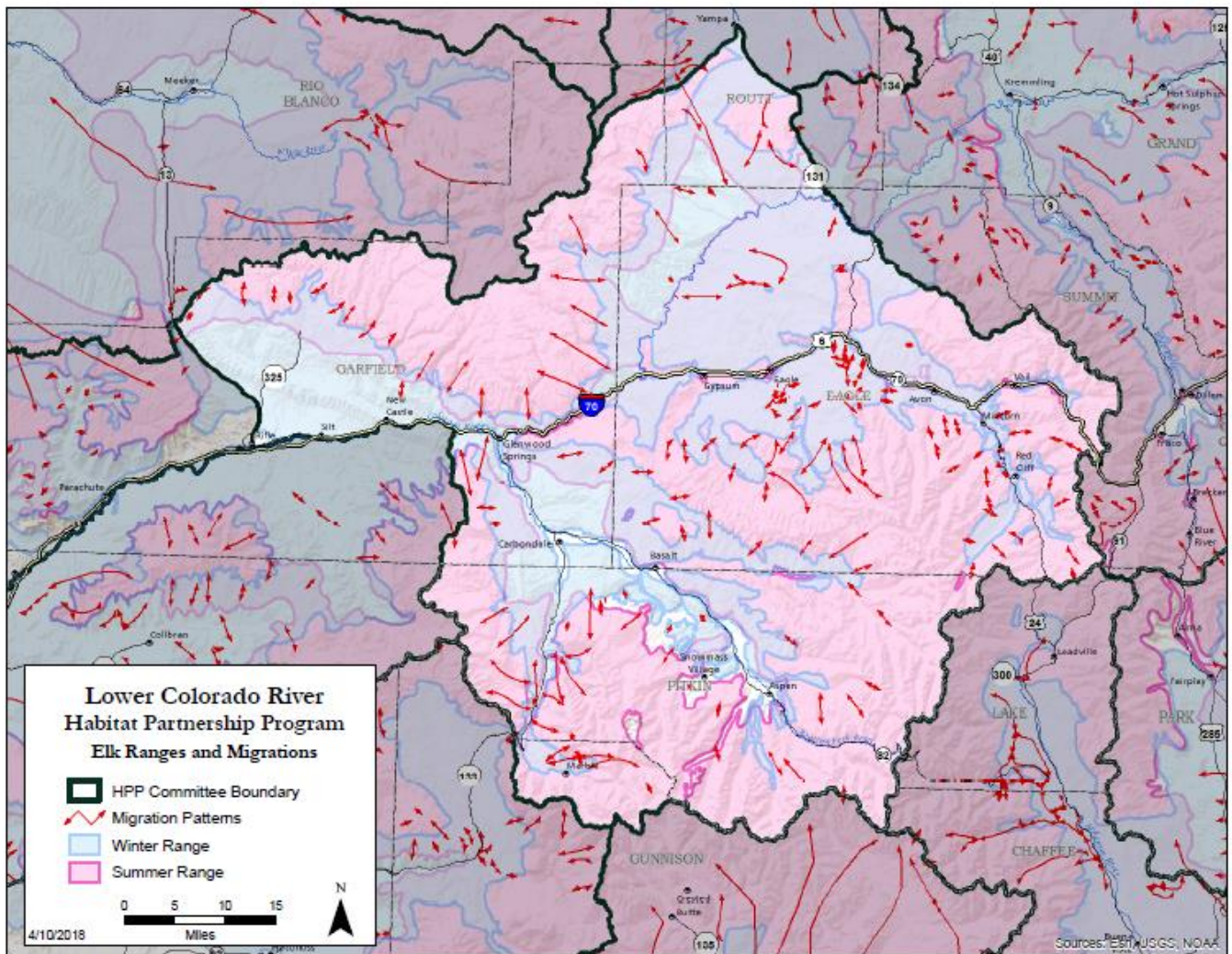
Population #s for all decades are based on the post hunt 2017 models.

BIG GAME RANGES & MIGRATIONS

DEER

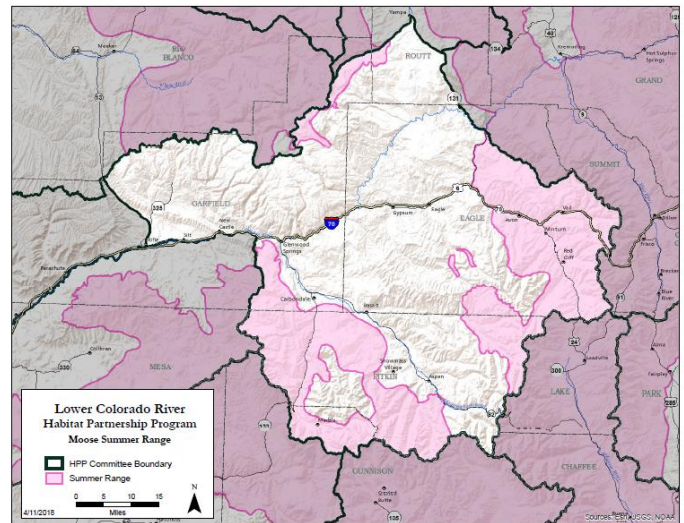
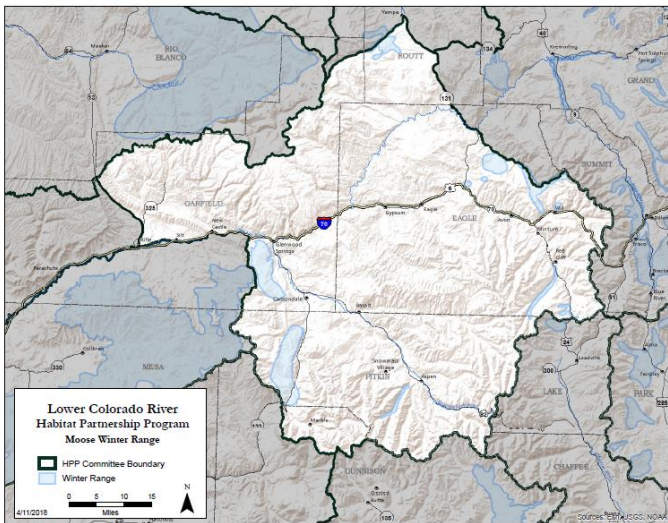
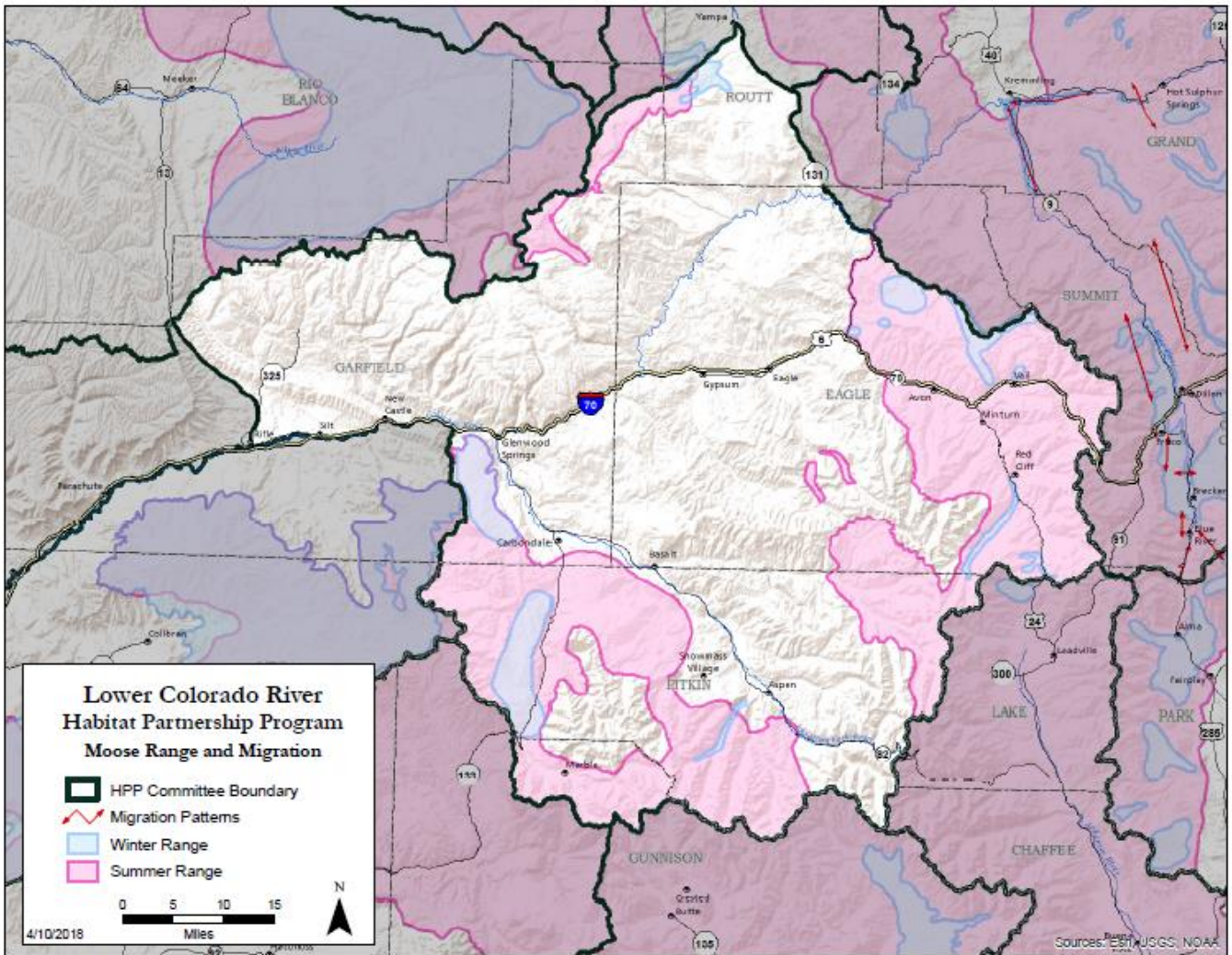


ELK



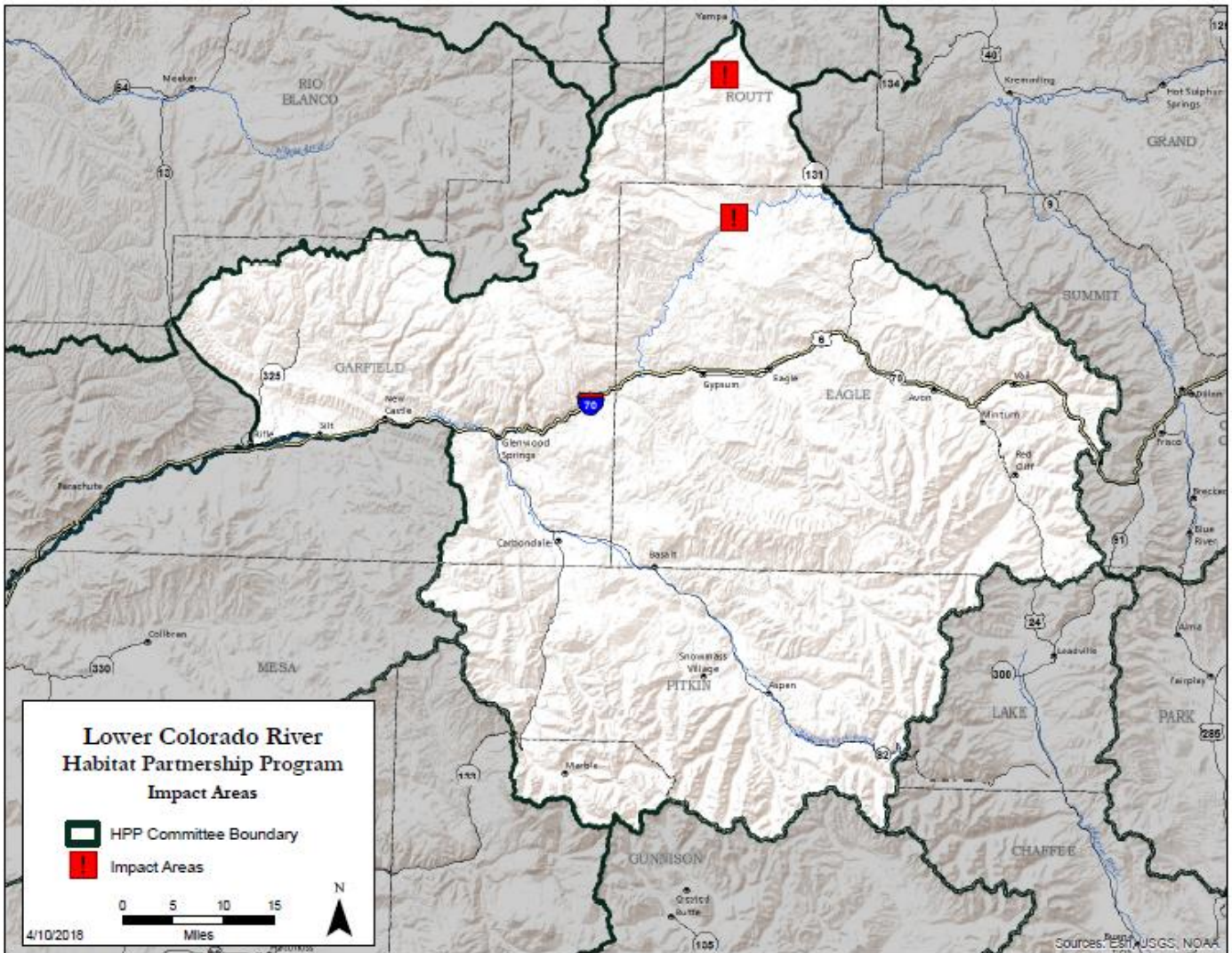
Due to a declining calf to cow ratio in recent years, license numbers have been reduced in DAU's E12 (Piney River), E15 (Avalanche Creek) and E16 (Fryingpan).

MOOSE



The M5 population was introduced starting in 2005, so it's currently growing exponentially. Currently moose licenses are available in units 36, 43, 44 and 45. In the future it is highly likely that moose hunting will be available in all the units within the LCRHPP area.

IMPACT AREAS



While these areas are currently targeted for conflict resolution work, conflicts exist throughout the LCR 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 undertaken on public lands, private lands or a combination of both as needed wherever the local committee believes the project has the best chance to effectively reduce, minimize or eliminate a big game/livestock conflict or help CPW achieve game management objectives.

PROJECT PRIORITIES

Priorities for project funding will be:

- Habitat protection, improvement or creation will receive the highest level of funding. Emphasis shall be placed on projects concerning habitat development, improvement or creation on public lands. The purpose of this emphasis is to attract or disperse wildlife previously using private forage, reducing the conflicts between livestock and wildlife.
- Improvement or creation of habitat on private lands would receive the next emphasis. This could be used as a tool to mitigate the impacts to private property.
- Mitigation for wildlife damage and research to determine animal movements and best management practices remain as important factors.
- Research and monitoring will continue to take place on all the projects. Elk and mule deer movement studies using radio collars have been proposed in conflict areas.

OPERATING GUIDELINES

A chairman elected by the voting members shall head the committee and a co-chairman will also be elected.

Voting members missing two consecutive meetings without notice may be asked to step down by the committee.

All projects which are approved must be through a total consensus of the voting members.

Generally, the committee will not fund projects which have been completed and/or started prior to committee approval.

A quorum is defined as 1 more than half of the total number of committee members. A quorum is needed to approve a project and 1 of the 3 livestock growers must be available for voting.

Project areas where hunting is allowed will be given priority.

Members will abstain from voting in any instance where a conflict of interest may be interpreted.

Members may proxy their vote on proposals in writing or verbally to another voting committee member. Proxy votes should be provided to a committee member with the instructions on how the absent person would vote if they were at the meeting.

Public participation will be encouraged at all times.

The Committee will follow Parks and Wildlife Commission regulations and HPP guidelines

The committee will monitor and evaluate projects for success and/or failure.

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.

Monitoring projects are critical for the long term sustainability of the HPP program. To provide documentation, determine treatment effectiveness, and be able to 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 HPP local committee and administrative assistant.

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 draws 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. Fences will be wildlife-friendly to HPP specifications. Maintenance of fences will be the responsibility of the landowner.
3. **GAME DAMAGE PROJECTS:** Providing stackyards for landowners otherwise ineligible for them and using hunt coordinators and forage purchases address pending damage problems that CPW may be financially liable for.
4. **INFORMATION/EDUCATION PROJECTS:** 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. 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 to protect a property's conservation values, particularly agricultural productivity, wildlife habitat, and hunting access.

BUDGET GUIDELINES

The base-operating budget for the State HPP program is based on 5% of total annual revenues for big game license sales in the HPP areas. The HPP State Council allocates funding to the individual HPP committees. The Lower Colorado River HPP budget was developed to best meet the goals and objectives outlined earlier in the plan, while maintaining the flexibility to deal with emergencies and take advantage of opportunities.

The statewide HPP financial system allows local HPP committees to carry specific project dollars over from year to year if the project is ongoing or the funds have been committed. This allows us to better address long-term management and larger, more complicated projects as well as giving us the flexibility to more efficiently prioritize our projects.

Additional funds are also available through the HPP State Council for special projects or unforeseen opportunities outside of the capacity of the local committees. These dollars supplement our existing budget and allow us to take on special projects from time to time.

LOWER COLORADO RIVER HPP BUDGET:

The Lower Colorado River HPP Committee has developed a budget allocation in line with our vision, which 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. Our budget for the five-year period has been broken down as follows:

BASE BUDGET ALLOCATION:

Habitat Manipulation	55%
Fencing & Game Damage	20%
Information & Education	5%
Administration & NEPA Related Activities	5%
Conservation Easements	10%
Research	5%

TOTAL ALLOCATION: 100%

It is important to acknowledge that the budget allocation is based on past projects, future projects that are likely to be proposed as well as committee emphasis in funding certain project types. While these are desired and/or likely allocations, the committee retains the ability to shift funds as needed between categories as projects and opportunities arise or as situations dictate.

While conflicts between big game and livestock producers still exist, the Lower Colorado River HPP committee believes conflicts have been reduced. We anticipate that our emphasis will remain on habitat manipulation projects over the next ten years while administration and monitoring remain constant. One change we foresee over the next ten years is an eventual decline in the need for fencing projects, especially elk-proof stackyards. As we continue to improve rangeland conditions and address big game conflicts, we should be able to adjust our budget to include funding of more conservation easements as an additional tool to protect big game habitat.

CURRENT & FORESEEABLE ISSUES

DEVELOPMENT

The vast majority of the area is seeing dramatic development. Many of the river bottoms and side drainages are now housing developments and golf courses replacing former agricultural fields. The Crystal River Valley, Derby Creek, and Piney Valley area still has some working ranches but development is occurring. Limited development is currently occurring in the Yampa and Toponas areas; however, these areas have been identified as potential growth centers.

RECREATION

Since the last management plan was written, there has been a surge in year-round recreation, motorized and non-motorized, on public lands. As a result, big game animals are being stressed and displaced which can increase the potential for movement onto neighboring private lands. This increases the potential for big game/wildlife impacts in areas which were not problematic in the past.

GREATER SAGE-GROUSE

In 2015, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) found that protections of the greater sage grouse under the Endangered Species Act were not warranted. One of the main factors in this determination was the ongoing conservation efforts and partnerships to conserve sagebrush habitats throughout the western United States. With this finding, the USFWS is scheduled to conduct a status review regarding the potential listing of the greater sage grouse in 2020.

Greater sage-grouse priority habitat within the LCRHPP area includes Burns, State Bridge and Piney Valley. The committee will ensure that projects proposed within these areas do not negatively impact sage-grouse. Although good for big game and livestock, any projects that could have a negative impact to sage-grouse will not be approved.