

Elk Translocation  
Talking Points – Feb. 2016  
Spokesperson: Kevin Wallenfang, 608-261-7589  
Local Spokesperson: Scott Roepke, 715-284-1403  
Health Spokesperson: Tami Ryan, 608-266-3143

## **Wisconsin Elk Translocation: A Partnership Effort Between the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife, and Others**

### Why?

- Opportunity to restore a native species to Wisconsin for current and future generations.
- Based on public feedback and a 2012 survey, elk translocation is strongly supported in Wisconsin, with 85% of respondents in favor of these efforts.
- Provide recreational opportunities through viewing and hunting for Wisconsin citizens and tourists from other states, with an expected economic boost for local economies from increased recreation and tourism.
- Introducing additional elk will provide genetic diversity to the existing herd and aid herd growth.

### Post-Trapping, Year 1: February 2015

- Capture efforts in Kentucky ended Feb. 9, 2015. The last elk entered the holding pen on Feb. 7th, 2015 initiating the start of the 30-day health testing requirements and the full 120-day quarantine period.
- Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources staff spent roughly five weeks working cooperatively with Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources and other key partners to capture elk in eastern Kentucky.
- 28 elk were held in a holding pen and received 24-hour care leading up to their transport back to Wisconsin – two elk were lost during health testing in Kentucky.
- 26 captured elk arrived in Wisconsin March 26, 2015 - safety was top priority, and no injuries occurred to elk or staff.
- The overall 2015 capture effort was well organized and WI/KY staff worked well together. KY staff worked hard and went beyond the call of duty to capture elk for Wisconsin. Wisconsin held to every detail of what we promised, and further solidified a great relationship that will serve us well in future years.

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### Post-Trapping, Year 2: February 2016

- The second year of trapping Kentucky elk as part of Wisconsin's reintroduction effort is now complete for the 2016 trapping season, with 40 elk awaiting transport to their new home in Jackson County. 15 adult cows, 7 yearling cows, 4 yearling bulls, 14 calves
- The elk are being held in a 7-acre health testing and quarantine pen in Kentucky receiving daily care and monitoring. They will undergo a stringent quarantine and health testing period of at least 120 days, including an acclimation period in Wisconsin, before being released into the area in and around the Black River State Forest of Jackson County.
- Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and other partner staff members spent about five weeks capturing the elk in eastern Kentucky working cooperatively with Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources staff.
- An earlier start, better access to lands occupied by elk, and good conditions resulted in a higher capture success than the 2015 effort when 26 elk were transported to Wisconsin.

### Current Situation – Jackson County Herd

- **23 elk were released in Jackson County in August 2015. As of mid-February 2016, 15 animals remain alive.**
- Of the eight mortalities since August 2015 release:
  - Six mortalities caused by wolves (one in August 2015: five in January 2016).
  - Two mortalities were caused by vehicle collisions (September and November 2015) and were discovered through the use of tracking equipment. Neither accident was reported by the drivers involved.
- As outlined in the Jackson County Management Plan, vehicle collisions and predation were identified as likely causes of loss to the elk herd.
- Elk/wolf interactions between August and January had been minimal, as documented through the use of satellite tracking technology used on both elk and Black River area wolf packs -2015-16 winter track observations suggest this pack has at least 6 wolves, two of which are radio-collared.

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- Through experience with the Clam Lake herd and research regarding wolf/ungulate interaction around the county, mortality is often related to winter weather conditions and elk vulnerability. The majority of wolf-caused mortality occurred during a period of sub-zero temperatures when the need for nutrition may make wolves more persistent in their pursuit of food.
- No elk were killed during the 2015 deer hunting seasons, much to the credit of Wisconsin hunters and pre-season outreach efforts and efforts by local staff to visit hunting camps and post information at public hunting grounds to inform hunters of their presence.
- Local staff and partners have worked to inform the public of the presence of elk through regular local press updates, caution signs along roads, and billboards asking drivers to be watchful for the presence of elk in Jackson County.

## Moving Forward

- Our agreement with KY provides for a multi-year effort, giving us flexibility and added opportunity to reach our ultimate project goal of transporting 150 healthy wild elk to Wisconsin – and the success seen in trapping in the second year is very encouraging as the project moves forward.
- So far, the combined efforts could not have gone better logistically - both KY and WI staff have learned much and we have carefully recorded and documented our work in an effort to improve future capture efforts. By all accounts from KY staff, our number one priority of being perceived as professional, courteous, and hardworking has been achieved.
- This is a multi-year effort, with an overall goal of bringing up to 150 elk from Kentucky.
- We appreciate the continued local support and patience as we move closer to release in the first year of our efforts in Jackson County.

## History

- Elk are native to Wisconsin, but were extirpated during the 1800s.
- Early reintroduction efforts in the 1930s failed; the last Wisconsin elk was killed in 1948.
- A feasibility study on elk reintroduction was commissioned in 1989, and in 1993 University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point evaluated the possibility of reintroducing elk to Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest.

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- In 1995, 25 elk from Michigan were released in the Clam Lake area in northern Wisconsin as part of a feasibility study to determine survivability and adaptability to the area. While this was not considered a true reintroduction effort, the herd has grown consistently in the last 20 years.

## Today

- Wisconsin is home to two elk herds
- Funding for Wisconsin's elk translocation efforts is a result of partnerships with stakeholder groups, and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources has committed to using only funds received from partner groups.
- The current translocation effort is expected to cost about roughly \$750,000. This number represents an increase from original estimates due to late-developing requirements to build more significant infrastructure in the quarantine facility, as well as a longer than expected holding period during the first year of translocation.
- To date the project has received over \$500,000 in contributions from the Ho-Chunk Nation, Jackson County Wildlife Fund, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, and various county governments and other partners.
- Wisconsin's northern elk herd generates over \$200,000 of revenue per year in the Clam Lake area (according to the Cable Chamber of Commerce).
- The opportunity to provide for a further increase in economic revenue for communities near these elk herds (and statewide) is significant - larger elk herds in other states generate over \$1 million to local economies from wildlife viewing alone.
- Hunting season establishment is expected to draw additional funds for elk management and generate revenue for local economies in Wisconsin.

## Agreement with KY

- The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife have developed an agreement that both parties will follow during the trapping and quarantine process.
- The agreement provides Wisconsin with up to 150 elk over a 3-5 year trapping period, including the trapping and transport of a maximum of 50 elk per year.

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- Wisconsin and Kentucky will work cooperatively in this effort, and Wisconsin DNR staff will assist with trapping efforts in Kentucky.
- In exchange, Wisconsin will assist Kentucky financially in the development of habitat projects in Kentucky that will benefit elk and other wildlife, with a special emphasis on ruffed grouse.

## Scope of the New Translocation Plan

- Goal: increase herd size to 1400 elk in the Clam Lake area and 390 elk in Jackson County.
- The elk management plan was amended in 2012 and underwent a public review process before final approval.
- Beginning January 2015, wild elk were trapped in Kentucky and transported to Wisconsin with the health of the elk as top priority.
- Kentucky has an abundant, healthy elk herd of more than 10,000 animals
- While not a concern at this time, the new elk will provide additional genetic diversity to the Wisconsin herd that will be beneficial in the long-term health of the herd.
- Elk will be released on public lands in Jackson County and the Clam Lake region.
- The DNR and partners will distribute elk more evenly across areas of appropriate habitat. This process is known as “assisted dispersal,” and is intended to speed up elk distribution and herd growth in the most suitable habitat
- Research and monitoring of both Wisconsin herds will continue to inform translocation and reintroduction efforts.

## Moving Forward – Translocation Timeline and Details

- It is the Department’s hope to translocate a target goal of 150 elk to Wisconsin over an expected period of three to five years. If realized, these elk will be divided between the current Clam Lake elk herd and a new Jackson County elk herd.
- The department will work in partnership with the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife. Full-time staff and rotating crews are involved from Wisconsin

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- Each year, captured elk will be transported to a holding pen in Kentucky where they will be tested for diseases and quarantined before transport to Wisconsin.
- Elk will receive health assessments before and after arriving in Wisconsin.
- Upon arrival in Wisconsin, elk will be held in quarantine to help acclimate them to their new home range and complete their quarantine period and health testing.
- Each year, where elk will be released will be determined each fall prior to the start of the trapping effort.

## Addressing Common Concerns

### **Predation**

- Although wolves and bear do kill elk, the DNR and partners are working to improve elk habitat to encourage them to spread out across the elk ranges. This will help reduce the concentration of elk in areas where they are most susceptible to predation.
- To minimize the likelihood of additional wolf predation events, local staff:
  - recaptured and radio-collared a lone bull calf and reconnected it with a larger group of elk;
  - can undertake placement of car-killed deer carcasses near the high activities centers of the Wildcat wolf pack to see if we can reduce their encounters with elk activity areas during the remainder of this winter. Note: Diversionary feeding has been tried in Alaska and Canada without much success; and
  - can trap and relocate elk away from the interstate and January wolf depredation locations.
- Such losses are not something new to Wisconsin's experience. The Clam Lake elk herd, reintroduced in 1995, has experienced both wolf and vehicle losses which are two of the top three causes of death over the past 20 years (bear predation being the third).
- Elk losses during a reintroduction effort are to be expected. Kentucky and Missouri saw losses of up to 50 percent during their first year of reintroduction efforts.
- Despite losses in Clam Lake, the population has continued to grow during most years. The only years of negative herd growth have occurred during severe winters.

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- Research conducted in Wisconsin shows that deer and elk are significantly more at risk during winters of deep snow and extreme cold. The later condition was occurring when the recent Jackson County predation events occurred.

## Disease

- Wild elk from Kentucky will be tested for tuberculosis and brucellosis prior to being brought into Wisconsin per USDA interstate movement requirements which are in place to reduce risk of disease introduction
- The DNR is working closely with the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection on health testing protocol to reduce the risks to the cattle industry in state
- Kentucky's elk and deer have been tested statewide and are free of CWD, bovine tuberculosis and brucellosis.
- Elk will be tested for tuberculosis prior to release in Wisconsin.

### Low Risk:

- USDA rule requires captive cervids captured from a wild population for interstate movement and release to be accompanied by a certificate stating that the source population has been determined to be low risk for CWD, based on a CWD surveillance program in wild cervid populations that is approved by the State Government of the receiving State and by APHIS.
- We have this agreement between the KY and WI ag departments due to the following:
  - The state of Kentucky has been conducting CWD disease detection surveillance of their wild deer and elk populations since 2002
  - Kentucky has tested over 23,000 animals.
  - The source wild population has been documented to be low risk for CWD based upon a CWD surveillance program in wild cervid populations approved by Wisconsin and USDA APHIS
  - Because they have "low risk status", the US Department of Agriculture APHIS and the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection has authorized the interstate transport of KY elk to Wisconsin.

### Disease Testing:

- There are strict federal disease testing requirements, and state legislation, to which WDNR is complying with, including but not limited:
  - Brucellosis, Tuberculosis, Blue tongue virus, Epizootic Hemorrhagic Disease and Bovine Viral Diarrhea Virus testing
  - CWD testing

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- Through GPS radio telemetry and other means, we will monitor all imported elk during the first 5 years after their release and conduct disease testing/necropsies whenever mortalities are detected
- All animals are affixed with two forms of USDA animal identification one of which is official, required for interstate movement to comply with CWD standards

### **Quarantine:**

- Animals are held in quarantine before release
- Disease testing is to begin in Kentucky on the group to be transported to Wisconsin 30 days after the last wild trapped animal is added to the quarantine pen. No other animals will be added after testing begins.
- We are following all requirements that the captive cervid industry is required to follow
  - Double fenced enclosure with 8 ft. fence (ours are 10), surrounded by a second exterior fence more than 16 feet from the interior fence
  - A solid fabric barrier is also in place on all pen walls
  - All animals will be affixed with a USDA approved unique identification device and a second ID to comply with CWD rules.
- Elk will be transported to Wisconsin only after the entire group tests negative for TB and BR and a pre-movement health exam does not find signs of any infectious disease or illness.
- Total Quarantine period of 120 days
  - TB testing will be repeated once animals arrive in Wisconsin.
  - Animals showing positive results to tests must be euthanized, necropsied and tissues submitted to NVSL for testing.
  - The quarantine will be extended until all tests are negative.
  - If any animal tests positive on the confirmatory test, this group of animals is considered exposed and all shall be depopulated.
  - Once all animals test negative, the quarantine will be lifted and they will be released
- If cultures come back positive for Brucellosis or Tuberculosis, the entire group of elk will be disqualified for translocation.
- For viral diseases, any individuals with positive reactors will not be translocated.
- Positive reactors to Brucellosis and/or Tuberculosis will be culled and cultured. Culling will not be done for positive reactors to viral diseases.

### **Competition with white-tailed deer for food:**

- Although elk and deer share similar habitat preferences, research has shown that having elk on the landscape does not produce negative competition with deer.



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### **Elk/Vehicle Accidents**

- Elk/vehicle accidents have occurred in Wisconsin, and this experience has helped wildlife managers and local communities adapt to this issue. Various measures can and have been taken to reduce this risk moving forward.

### **Crop Damage**

- Wisconsin's Wildlife Damage Abatement and Claims Program also covers damage caused by elk.
- Elk can be hazed or removed if damage to cranberry beds, agricultural crops or timber becomes a problem.
- Currently, public land encompasses most of the elk range so crop damage is not a major concern.

### **Reduced Access to Roads and Natural Areas**

- DNR has made a commitment not to close any roads or recreational areas due to the presence of elk.

### **Cost**

- Elk program expenses currently run about \$200,000 per year. While this is expected to increase somewhat with the establishment of a second herd, increasing elk numbers also means new opportunities to help fund the program.
- Hunting license applications, permit sales and grants from partners are expected to contribute to the elk program budget once a hunting season starts.
- Increased tourism and viewing opportunities are also expected to have wide-ranging economic benefits to local communities within the elk range.