

Minnesota Elk: Exploring the Potential for Future Growth

What is DNR doing?

The Department of Natural Resources (DNR) is beginning conversation with tribal leaders, local landowners, agricultural producers, legislators, local government officials, and state agencies to identify elk management concerns in addition to interest in maintaining and strengthening the resilience of the elk population.

Additionally, DNR is set to conduct an in-depth elk life-history and health research project from 2025-2026, supported by the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund. This project will inform elk management by providing essential data on reproductive rates, survival, mortality factors, movements, and genetics.

Why?

There is collective interest in increasing opportunities for activities such as elk viewing and hunting. Additionally, leaders from several tribal governments, the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, and Izaak Walton League have expressed the desire to increase the elk population in Minnesota for cultural, ecological, social, and economic reasons.

DNR's Concerns

DNR is concerned about how managing elk under current state law—maintaining small herd sizes—may be detrimentally impacting the health and behavior of the herds. This includes concerns about susceptibility to catastrophic events, limited genetic variation, as well as herd structure and behavioral changes due to heavy hunting pressure necessary to keep populations at or below established goals.

Statutory and Programmatic Updates Required

To support the state's long-term vision to enhance the size and range extent of Minnesota's elk population, DNR and stakeholders need to demonstrate that there is support for expanding the elk herd. In addition, removing the statutory tie between elk herd population levels in northwestern Minnesota and agricultural damage payments (statute 97B.516, subpart b and the latter portion of subpart c) is an important next step. As currently written, the elk populations in northwest Minnesota can increase only if agricultural damage payments have not increased for at least two years.

Additionally, the Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA) and DNR are working together to recommend updates to programs that assist agricultural producers in responding to elk damage concerns (e.g. MDA compensation program and DNR or other technical and materials assistance).



Current Status of Minnesota Elk

Elk in Minnesota have been categorized as a special concern species since 1984 due to susceptibility to catastrophic events and other vulnerabilities associated with low population levels and limited range.

According to the current statute, elk are managed to maintain the same population level as prior to 2016. Specific goals for each herd are as follows:

- Grygla: 30-38 elk
- Kittson Central: 50-60 elk
- Caribou-Vitae: 150-200 elk

DNR's Support of Tribal Interests

The Red Lake Nation asserted off-reservation 1863 treaty rights and hunted elk in 2022 and 2023. DNR understands that the Tribe plans to conduct annual hunts, and the DNR is in conversation with Red Lake Nation to determine how to support more elk hunting.

With support and direction from the Minnesota Legislature, DNR is a partner with the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa on the Band's proposal to restore elk to the Fond du Lac Reservation and surrounding area in northeast Minnesota. The 2023 Minnesota Legislature provided \$2.3 million in funding to the Fond du Lac Band and DNR to "... expand Minnesota's wild elk population and range. Consideration must be given to moving elk from existing herds in northwest Minnesota to the area of the Fond du Lac State Forest and the Fond du Lac Reservation ..."

DNR is working on elk management broadly, and supporting the Fond du Lac Band's restoration proposal, in a variety of ways:

- Providing staff support: DNR hired an elk biologist, funded by the 2023 legislative appropriation.
- Assessing CWD risk: DNR has been assessing elk health since 2004 and no CWD has been detected in Minnesota's wild elk. Additionally, during the 2023 firearms deer season, deer harvested by hunters in the five deer permit areas in and around the northwest Minnesota elk range were tested for CWD. Thankfully, no CWD was detected.
- Exploring expansion: DNR is initiating discussions with tribal leaders, local landowners, agricultural producers, legislators, and local government officials to explore the possibility of expanding the northwest elk population to meet the increased interest in elk.

Stay Tuned

For more information and updates on elk management, sign up for the Elk Notes email newsletter and check out the DNR's elk management webpage: www.dnr.state.mn.us/elk.

