

Conservation Commission seeks more information, citizen comments on elk restoration

Commissioners say citizen interest, improved habitat and better animal health testing warrant revisiting the issue tabled 10 years ago.

CAPE GIRARDEAU – The Missouri Conservation Commission has directed Missouri Conservation Department (MDC) staff to reinitiate plan development that would enable the agency to restore elk around Peck Ranch Conservation Area (CA) while addressing concerns raised nearly a decade ago.

At the July 16 Commission meeting in Cape Girardeau, MDC Resource Scientist Lonnie Hansen presented a report on an elk-restoration feasibility study conducted in 2000. That effort was suspended due to the emerging issue of chronic wasting disease and concerns about adequate habitat.

The Conservation Commission requested the presentation in response to inquiries from the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, continued citizen inquiries and media coverage on possible elk restoration. Following the presentation, the Commission directed Department staff to reinitiate plan development, based on current information and knowledge, incorporating the following:

- A well-defined elk restoration zone around Peck Ranch CA focusing on an area in Carter, Shannon and Reynolds Counties,
- Established herd management guidelines, including a release protocol, population objectives and hunting as the primary management tool,
- Effective health protocols, including disease testing and a contingency plan to ensure the health of domestic livestock and wildlife, and
- Provisions for dealing with elk that leave the restoration zone.

The area around Peck Ranch CA was selected because it has suitable elk habitat, a high percentage of public land, low density of public roads and a limited amount of row crop and livestock production.

MDC Director Bob Ziehmer said several things have changed since the Conservation Commission first considered the idea of elk restoration.

“The Department has continued to stay engaged on the restoration topic since 2000. There have been significant improvements in habitat for elk on public land around Peck Ranch in the past 10 years,” Ziehmer said. “Efforts to restore natural communities on a landscape scale have paid off in ways that would benefit elk – a species native to our state. We also have a better understanding along with testing options for chronic wasting disease than we did 10 years ago. Other states have developed and successfully implemented protocols to address animal health concerns.”

Commission Chairman Chip McGeehan said that Arkansas, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Virginia and Wisconsin all have successfully restored limited elk populations. He said these restoration programs have provided significant economic benefits through ecotourism and hunting, without adverse affects on agriculture or wildlife.

“The elk is one of Missouri’s historic native species,” said McGeehan. “Bringing this species back to the Show-Me State is very much in line with our longstanding commitment to landscape-scale conservation. We will engage citizens by providing information and working to gather their thoughts about elk restoration.”

The Department will hold public meetings in the area around Peck Ranch to gather citizen input. Details of public meetings on possible elk restoration will be announced later. The Conservation Department will accept public comments at any of its offices statewide and at <http://mdc.mo.gov/contact-us>.

Staff will prepare and submit a report with findings to the Conservation Commission regarding the elk restoration program at the October 2010 Commission meeting.

-Jim Low-