

Elk Plan Public Input

The Board of Game and Inland Fisheries at their Oct 2009 meeting requested that the Department initiate the development of an operational plan for elk restoration and management that considers the biological, sociological, economic and environmental issues associated with elk restoration in southwestern Virginia. This plan is intended to thoroughly assess these issues and provide potential restoration alternatives.

The Draft Operational Plan – Elk Management in Southwestern Virginia was presented to the Board of Game and Inland Fisheries at their June 8, 2010 meeting. The Board accepted the plan and requested that the Department proceed with gathering public input and comments on the elk restoration plan. A news release was sent out statewide detailing the elk plan and requesting public input: through the VDGIF website or by written comments. In addition, they requested that VDGIF schedule several public informational meetings in the southwestern counties identified for elk restoration efforts.

Below is a summary of the public comments received on the VDGIF website and in written form. A brief summary of the public meetings is also included at the end of this report.

Type Comment	Elk Restoration				Recreation		Economy		Damage		Effect on Ecology		Disease Issues	
	Yes	No	Active	Passive	Pro	Con	Pro	Con	Pro	Con	Pro	Con	Pro	Con
Website	286	92	149	19	80	7	80	23	10	52	6	14	2	32
Written	204	87	61	2	42	2	45	17	6	73	1	7	0	31
Total	490	179	210	21	122	9	125	40	16	125	7	21	2	63

As of August 1, 2010 a total of 924 comments (559 website, 365 written) were reviewed by VDGIF (see table above). Seven hundred and twenty-one (721) comments were in favor of some type of elk restoration while 179 comments were against. Several issues were brought up by the public while commenting: recreation impacts; economic impacts; damage impacts; disease issues; and effects on the environment. These issues were further broken down into whether the person commenting felt the impacts would be positive or negative. **Note:** many people only commented that they wanted or did not want elk, with no further comment. So the number of additional comments on these issues is much less than the total number of people responding.

Many persons commenting asked VDGIF to consider stocking elk in other parts of the state (for instance the Mt. Rodgers/White Top area or in adjacent counties (Lee, Russell, Tazwell, etc.). The Shenandoah Valley and Blue Ridge Mountains were also mentioned.

Of interest were many comments from people who lived in the SW (Wise, Dickenson, and Buchanan) noting that they were in favor of elk restoration. Several commented that the County Board of Supervisors didn't speak for the majority of the people in these counties.

Summary of Website/Written Comment Issues

Recreation Impacts (122 positive: 9 negative):

Positive comments related primarily to increased hunting opportunity, but also included wildlife watching to a lesser extent.

Negative comments related to little public access to lands; hunt club problems; and a belief that the common hunter won't be able to access private coal company lands. Also, people commented there would be increased license fees to cover elk restoration and damage stamps.

Economy Impacts (125 positive: 40 negative):

Positive comments related primarily to increased tourism dollars, but also keeping money in VA instead of hunters spending it out west. A couple of comments stressed the benefit of bringing people to this area that might stay and add revenue to the county. A few comments stated that the compensation/damage fund would resolve the damage issue by paying for damage.

Negative comments related to spending large amounts of money to stock elk in a down economy – where is the money to come from. Some comments feared increased taxes. Also, economic loss from elk crop damage or vehicle collisions was a concern. A couple of comments were concerned with economic loss from disease in cattle.

Elk Damage Impacts (16 positive: 125 negative):

Positive comments related to there being little farming in the area, so impacts would be minor, and a belief there would be fewer problems from elk than from deer.

Negative comments related primarily to damage to fences, crops, gardens, flowers, orchards, and vineyards. Also, some concern with vehicle/elk collisions.

Effects on Ecology (7 positive: 21 negative):

Positive impacts dealt with returning elk to their native habitat.

Negative impacts were concerned with damage to the existing habitat by elk, and also the need to provide adequate habitat for the elk. One comment stated that these elk are not “eastern elk” only a subspecies which were never in Virginia. Another suggested the restoration of predators.

Disease Impacts (2 positive; 63 negative):

There were no positive comments regarding the possible introduction of disease from elk. Two comments stated that DGIF will insure the elk stocked are not diseased (appropriate precautions taken).

Negative impacts were the concern about introducing CWD, TB and other diseases into the livestock. Loss of disease-free status would be devastating to Virginia livestock industry.

Summary of Public Input Meetings

Bureau Wildlife staff conducted five public meetings on the draft elk management plan. These meetings were held between June 24 through July 6 at Lebanon in Russell County, Wise in Wise County, Clintwood in Dickenson County, Grundy in Buchanan County, and Jonesville in Lee County. The meetings were well-attended with 403 participants, including Senator Puckett, Delegate Phillips, and numerous county officials. Staff gave a short presentation on the Department's draft Operational Plan for Elk Management in Southwestern Virginia, followed by a question and answer session. Many of the questions concerned elk hunting, elk diseases, property damage by elk, and compensation for any damages incurred. State and local officials also expressed concerns about these topics. Meetings in Lebanon, Wise, and Jonesville had many participants from farm communities that expressed support for continuing current management of elk. The meeting in Grundy had many participants from the hunting community that expressed support for active restoration of elk. The meeting in Dickenson County, which had the highest attendance at 125 participants, was more evenly split between elk enthusiasts and elk opponents.