

AN ELK MANAGEMENT PLAN FOR SOUTHWESTERN VIRGINIA

With the release of over 70 elk in Buchanan County and immigration from neighboring states, elk populations have been growing in southwestern Virginia. Now that elk are in Virginia, the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (VDGIF) is developing an Elk Management Plan for Southwestern Virginia to effectively manage this new elk population and to strike a balance between varied public opinions. No further relocation or expansion of the elk herd beyond southwestern Virginia will be considered during the planning process. The plan's focus will be areas of southwestern Virginia where elk are currently present or might move during the plan's 10-year period. The elk management plan will provide VDGIF with guidance on how to address the complex management challenges and issues related to desirable population levels, locations, recreation (including hunting), human-elk conflicts, economic impacts, and habitat conservation.

To successfully manage elk in southwestern Virginia over the next decade, VDGIF is incorporating diverse stakeholder values and biological guidance from wildlife professionals to develop planning goals, objectives, and strategies. The first phase of plan development uses focus group meetings and surveys to provide opportunities for public input, identify prominent issues, and gain better understanding of Virginians' views toward elk. After this initial phase, attention shifts to developing the comprehensive elk management plan based on stakeholder values, survey results, and other scientific data.

To facilitate the process to develop the plan, VDGIF has partnered with the Virginia Tech Department of Fish and Wildlife Conservation. The Department of Fish and Wildlife Conservation has a long history of providing VDGIF with expertise in conservation planning and public involvement.

Phase I: Identifying stakeholders' values and issues. To ensure the elk management plan reflects the values of Virginia citizens, focus group meetings and public surveys are used to begin identifying values and issues of importance to stakeholders.

- **Focus Groups.** Participants are selected from known interest groups (e.g. hunters, agricultural producers, non-consumptive interests), suggestions from VDGIF staff, and open solicitation. Meetings are held across southwestern Virginia in the spring of 2016 with representatives of specific interest groups. Participants respond to questions designed to identify important issues and concerns with elk management.
- **Public Surveys.** Individuals (approximately 3600) mostly from southwestern Virginia will participate in a telephone survey designed to identify important issues and concerns with elk management.

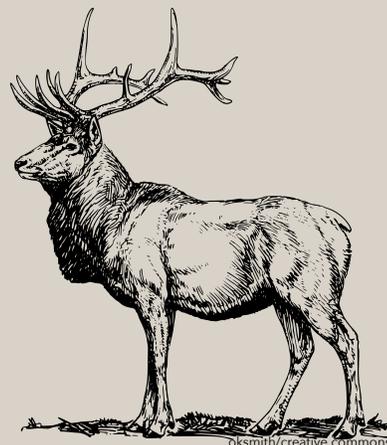
- **Outreach and Education.** As needed throughout the process, seminars are held in southwestern Virginia to inform people about elk, elk in Virginia, and the process of developing an elk management plan.

Phase II: Comprehensive Management Plan

Development. Incorporating both public values and biological realities, a plan is drafted to guide elk management in southwestern Virginia. Goal areas include topics related to populations, habitat conservation, recreation, and human-elk problems. General steps in the planning process include:

- **Stakeholder Advisory Committee Meetings.** A Stakeholder Advisory Committee (SAC), composed of diverse representatives from key stakeholder groups (including public and private landowners, sporting interests, non-consumptive interests, and agricultural producers), meets in a series of facilitated meetings to draft a plan that includes proposed goals, objectives, and strategy options for elk management in southwestern Virginia over the next 10 years.
- **Building a Sound Biological Base.** A technical committee, composed of VDGIF staff with expertise in elk management, provides scientific information and technical feedback to the SAC. Relying upon the latest available research and management information, the technical committee provides the scientific foundation for SAC discussions, objective development, and strategic approaches to elk management.
- **Public Review & VDGIF Board Endorsement.** All Virginia citizens have the opportunity to review the draft plan (expected summer 2017 on the VDGIF website) and provide comments for consideration by the SAC. A final plan is drafted and presented to the VDGIF Board of Directors (expected fall 2017) for consideration and, ultimately, implementation.

With public values as its foundation, the Elk Management Plan for Southwestern Virginia will establish the framework (i.e., goals and objectives) for addressing future elk management issues in southwestern Virginia.



Do you have questions or suggestions regarding this project? Please contact David Kalb, VDGIF Elk Project Leader, at david.kalb@dgif.virginia.gov; or Zach Hurst, Virginia Tech Public Planning and Participation Specialist, at zmhurst@vt.edu.