Cody Elk Working Group  
March 5, 2012  6:00pm - 9:00pm  
(Approved 3-17-12)

Group members in attendance: Curt Bales, Jim Klebba, Chip Clouse, Tim Fagan, Barney Henrich, Theresa Lineberger, Lee Livingston, Doug McWhirter, Steve Brock, Dan Morris, Justin Sanders, and Jim Yockey.  
Absent: None  
Facilitator: Dennie Hammer  
Notetaker: Dan Smith

Welcome
- Hammer started the meeting at 6:00pm and went over the agenda.  
- Additional agenda items:  
  - Respond to public comments from last meeting.  
  - Legislative update on wolf bill by Alan Osterland, WGFD Cody Regional Wildlife Supervisor.

Ice-Breaker
- The group was asked to respond individually to the question, “One word to describe the wind.”

Response to Public Comment from February 27, 2012 Meeting
- Is it possible to have a youth only any elk season?  
  - McWhirter responded that he was unsure. He was not sure it was possible for one specific type of license to be restricted to youth only.  
  - Livingston commented that he believed Randy Blackburn’s comment referred to allowing youth to take any elk in a season that was restricted to 6 points or better.

Approval of Meeting Minutes from February 27, 2012
- Corrections needed:  
  - Page 5, under the heading Hunt Area 60, 2nd bullet. Change bullet to read “hunt area 60 and southern YNP combined…” Does not include northern YNP.  
  - Page 6, 1st major bullet, 1st sub-bullet. The calf ratios in the Clarks Fork Herd Unit were approximately 35:100 cows. There is no data for the Cody Herd Unit.  
  - Page 6, 1st major bullet, 2nd sub-bullet. Currently the calf ratio in hunt area 61 is 34:100 cows. Summer calf ratios in hunt area 60 are 27:100 cows. McWhirter discussed the idea that when front country elk are reduced to count objectives, the elk migrating to the Thorofare would have calf production approximately 23% (not the 8% in the notes) less than in the late 1980’s, early 1990’s. This would result in lower bull numbers than before.
• Page 5, under the heading Hunt Area 60, last sub-bullet. Change bullet to read, “Jackson will have a general season with spikes excluded in 2012.”

• Page 5, under the heading Cody Elk Survey and Harvest Data Presentation, 3rd bullet, 1st sub-bullet. Change sub-bullet to read, “McWhirter advised that no matter where the elk from the Thorofare calve, the calf numbers are low.” Based on data from the Clarks Fork Herd unit, calving location does not make a difference, but there could be a different situation in the Thorofare.”

• Page 4, 1st bullet. Add an additional sub-bullet: The total number of non-resident general licenses state-wide was 4,511 in 2009 and 4,326 in 2010. There are currently 42 general areas to hunt state-wide.

• Page 2, under the Goal: Redefine the Cody Herd Unity, 2nd bullet, 2nd sub-bullet. Change sub-bullet to read, “Significant hunting opportunity has been lost…”.

• Page 4, second to last bullet, 2nd sub-bullet. Change sub-bullet to read, “Even with no outfitters in the Thorofare, the number of resident hunters may not change, and neither may the success.”

• With the above changes, the group approved the minutes.

Legislative Update on Wolf Bill

• Alan Osterland gave an update on the wolf bill going through the state legislature.
  o The bill passed both the House and the Senate, and has been sent to the Governor for his signature.
  o The Department has put together a plan based on meetings held between the Governor and the USFWS. The plan went to the Legislature where it passed.
  o The Department will draft regulations and take them to the public for comment.
    ▪ The regulations will be based on the plan.
    ▪ A public meeting will be held on March 28, 7:00pm, at the Cody Holiday Inn to discuss the draft regulations.
  o After public comment, the draft regulations go the WGFD Commission for approval.

Hunt Area 60 Discussion (continued from last meeting)

• Sustainability of Harvest
  o What is sustainability?
    ▪ What can be maintained over the long term.
    ▪ Not changing regulations and seasons every year.
  o When did regulations in hunt area 60 last change?
    ▪ Changed in 1990 by changing the closing date from Oct. 31 to Oct. 21.
    ▪ Carter Mountain and the North Fork herd units were combined in 1996 to form the Cody Elk Herd Unit.
    ▪ Hunt area 61 changed to limited quota in 1989.
  o Are we looking at 20 years for sustainability?
- The Game and Fish can’t look that far ahead. Can maybe go 5 to 10 years.
  - If things don’t change populations wise, is the current hunting sustainable?
    - Does the biological potential exist?
    - Does quality persist?
  - Is harvesting 180 quality bulls/year sustainable?
    - Quality is another factor.
    - Bales stated if quality diminishes, then it is not sustainable. We need to maintain what we have today.
  - Fagan commented that the group is almost looking at a “standard” of what the herd ought to be, and trying to maintain that standard.
    - 1994 to 2002 may have set a standard – “The Heyday”
    - Is sustainability that standard?
      - Can we even get there again?
        - We should try.
        - At what cost?
  - Yellowstone National Park – With wolves, the elk numbers are not what they used to be. Not as many elk come from the park. Elk numbers can’t be what they were unless regulations become super restrictive.
  - Klebba commented that the elk numbers may not return to what they were in the 1990’s, but need to be somewhere between where they were then, and where they are now.
  - In hunt area 60, the bull ratio is 11:100 before hunting begins. The bull ratio in Yellowstone National Park is 24:100. Having to depend on the migration from the park for hunting may indicate that it’s not sustainable.
  - Lineberger stated she’s not seeing it. Hunt area 60 is not out of bulls during the 3rd and 4th hunts. In her camp:
    - The biggest bull of the year could come from any of the hunts.
    - Hunters harvest 6-point bulls during every hunt.
    - Not every hunter is successful, but they all see elk.
  - Klebba commented that some outfitters do a better job than others at self-regulating.
    - Some areas are definitely overhunted.
  - Bales asked – Do we all think that bull hunting pressure needs to be reduced in hunt area 60?
  - Clouse asked how many elk are going to the Thorofare?
    - From hunt area 61 – 70%
    - From Dubois – a significant amount
    - From Jackson – unknown
  - Clouse stated the group is trying to manage the elk, not the hunters.
    - Hammer advised that part of managing elk is managing the hunters.
  - Based upon summer pre-season classifications, there was bull escapement from the Thorofare (includes the southern end of Yellowstone National Park).
- Only harvested 184 bulls.
- Lineberger reiterated that bull survey numbers are the least reliable data according to McWhirter.

  - Clouse asked about collecting data from hunters.
    - Lineberger advised the WGFD used to collect teeth from harvested elk.
    - Clouse stated we should recommend collecting teeth to get data.
      - McWhirter acknowledged that it would be nice to have age data.
      - Livingston added that the Cody check station should be reopened.

  - The group agreed to make a recommendation to collect teeth from harvested elk, and reopen the Cody check station to collect data.

  - Brock brought up a report discussed at a previous meeting stating that 4 predators/1,000 elk affects sustainability.
    - Lineberger stated the densities have been higher than 4 predators/1,000 elk for a long time, but not seeing the doom and gloom predicted.
    - Brock commented that he didn’t see how the current predator densities don’t affect elk.
    - Lineberger added the Jackson WGFD biologist (Brimeyer) observed 40 mountain lions while surveying elk this year.
    - McWhirter advised predator densities can have varying effects from one location to another. It would be nice to know if calf production is different in different areas.

  - Lineberger stated hunter numbers in the Thorofare have been declining since 2004.
    - Bull harvest is declining. Success is increasing.
    - Prior to 2004, Lineberger would have agreed that harvest needed to be reduced. Not now.
      - As big as hunt area 60 is, a bull harvest of 180 elk doesn’t seem that high.
      - There needs to be a harvest in hunt area 60.

  - Fagan stated he had hoped the situation would get better.
    - Can’t argue the hunt success at 60%.
    - Bull numbers continue to decline. Bull ratios of 11:100 is a concern.
    - The group needs to take action.

  - McWhirter advised he started seeing low cow:calf ratios in 2005-2006, and cut back on cow harvest in the Southfork and Greybull River (hunt areas 56, 59 and 61).
    - Calf ratios in the teens.
    - In 2007, hunters harvested only 73 antlerless elk in hunt area 61.
    - Hunt area 60 is being propped up by a large migration from the Greybull. When those numbers in the Greybull are whittled down, there will be less elk in the Thorofare.

  - Livingston stated the numbers are not indicative of the need for a drastic change in hunt area 60.
• McWhirter noted that from 1983-1987 approximately 120 bulls on average came through the check station. At that time approximately 2,000 elk migrated to the Thorofare.
• With the current situation of approximately 3,000 elk migrating to the Thorofare, 150-180 plus bulls are being harvested.
• Reducing the number of elk migrating to the Thorofare would mean reducing the harvest back to approximately 125 bulls.
• Not drastic, but a reduction.
  o Sanders advised he was trying to look at the long term and had 2 concerns:
    • Hunt area 60 is the heart of the herd.
      - The elk from there migrate to different places.
      - Something may need to change to address concerns in other hunt areas.
    • Hunt area 61 has a high number of elk.
      - If brucellosis came in to the herd, the state may come in and remove a lot of elk which would affect hunt area 60.
      - Bales pointed out that brucellosis is already there. The state won’t wipe out the elk, but may drastically reduce the numbers.
      - Morris informed that brucellosis prevalence was lower in 2011—going from 17-19% in 2010 to 10-12% in 2012.
  o Bales stated he is concerned about reducing elk harvest in hunt area 60 when there are high numbers of bulls in hunt area 61 that are not being harvested.
    • Should reduce harvest in hunt area 60.
    • Should change the opening dates to the 20th or 25th to match other hunt areas.
  o Henrich stated that numbers may look okay now, but don’t see how they can be that way in 2-5 years.
    • Agreed dates should be changed.
  o Yockey added that predators are pushing elk in to more open areas. The state needs more control of predator numbers. Elk will continue to move back and forth through the Thorofare.
  o Clouse stated the numbers are “all whacked out”.
    • Sportsman for Fish and Wildlife (SFW) would be happy with an archery or primitive weapon season in September.
      - Not sure it would reduce bull harvest.
      - Not sure if bull harvest numbers need to come down or not.
    • SFW also agreed with a 6-point restriction.
    • Clouse stated it is very hard to manage elk.
  • Hammer posed the question, “Do we need to reduce bull harvest in Hunt Area 60? If so, how?”
    o Brock – YES – Go to limited quota.
    o Clouse – YES – Go to an archery season.
o Klebba – YES – Move archery season to September 20 and add a 5-point restriction to all seasons.
o Livingston – NO
o McWhirter – YES – Have a later opening date for rifle season on the front end. Replace early seasons with archery seasons to maintain hunter days.
o Sanders – YES – Go to an archery season in September.
o Henrich – YES – Have a later rifle season opening and add more type 9 (archery) licenses.
o Bales – YES – Go to an archery season until September 20 or 25.
o Lineberger – NO – Residents will suffer with an archery season.
o Fagan – YES – Go to an archery season until September 20.
o Morris – YES – Go to an archery season until September 20.
o Yockey – YES – Go to an archery season until September 20.

Break 7:45 – 8:00

Hunt Area 60 Discussion (continued)
• Hammer pointed out there were 10 Yes’s and 2 No’s. Why should the “NO’s” join the “YES’s?”
o Bales asked what effect the suggested changes would have on the outfitting business.
  ▪ Livingston responded that although he was not a Thorofare outfitter, he had talked to a few. Some would continue to book hunters in an archery season, others were not in the archery hunter market, and the change would reduce business.
  ▪ Lineberger responded that it would reduce business, and in some cases put outfitters out of business.
    • The Thorofare is a long way to pack in and to put in a camp. With a reduced rifle season, would it be worth it?
    • Outfitting is a business and there is an expectation to make a profit from the work.
o Lineberger asked what the structure of the hunting seasons would be? General? Type 9?
  ▪ Fagan responded that it would likely be the same as it is now from September 1-9, General with an archery stamp or a type 9 license.
o Bales commented that it looked like it wouldn’t reduce the number of hunters, but could reduce the harvest.
• Hammer asked the group - How much would changing to archery seasons reduce the harvest?
o McWhirter answered that it is unknown. Archery will have some reduction of the harvest.
  ▪ May only save bulls until the later rifle hunt.
  ▪ Would have to monitor and adjust.
o Brock supplied some harvest data from 2009
  ▪ Rifle harvest 29% for general license season in hunt areas 55, 56, 59, 60, 51.
- Archery harvest 28% average for Type 9 licenses hunt areas 55, 56, 59, 60, 51 and 54.
  - Brock supplied some wounding loss data from 2002:
    - In Oregon, 29% of animals wounded by archers were not recovered, compared to 7% by rifle hunters.
    - In Montana, 51% wounding loss in archery.
    - In Utah, 15% wounding loss by archers.
    - Livingston commented the wounding loss by archers has dramatically decreased because of the improved technology of the equipment.
      - In his camps, the harvest for archers is not as successful as rifle hunters.
        - Approximately 40% success for archers and 80% for rifle hunters.
  - McWhirter advised the archery success in hunt area 60 for the past 10 years averaged about 17%.
- Hammer asked the group – How long could this change persist?
  - Lineberger asked that when hunters have lost something in the past, has the Department ever given it back?
    - McWhirter responded that it depends. Expectations change, and other factors change. Statewide, some seasons have gone back but this has not happened in the Absaroka Mountains.
    - Brock commented that limited quota hunt areas give the Department flexibility to change numbers of licenses, both increase and decrease.
    - Lineberger stated that once it goes to limited quota, it never goes back to General license hunting.
- Hammer asked the group – What is the time frame for what you are recommending?
  - Bales – As things change, every 2-3 years, the Department has to be flexible to change.
  - Sanders – It’s a 3-5 year process.
  - Livingston – If you could get things to change in 3-5 years, I would be surprised.
    - Agrees with Lineberger that what gets lost doesn’t come back.
    - Seasons set would not be revisited.
  - Klebba – 3-5 years.
  - Clouse – Once things change to limited quota, it never goes back.
  - Brock – 5-10 years is what I would like, but suspect 3-5 years.
  - Yockey – 5-7 years to give it a chance.
  - Morris – 5 years.
  - Fagan – Don’t know in years, but more long term.
    - Seasons have become more restrictive because of need, or perceived need.
    - Changes happen about every 10 years.
  - Henrich – Should be a recommendation that is revisited every 3-5 years.
• Bales – The Department looks at the herds annually and makes changes as needed. Lineberger – Would like to see the August pre-season flight surveys continue and be a part of annual conversations.
  - The surveys are a vital piece of the puzzle.
  - A group like this should happen every 3-5 years to really take a hard look at what is happening.

• Bales commented what do you say to the “NO” votes.
  o Trying not to affect the number of hunters – and affect their livelihood – but reduce the bull harvest.
  o Sanders commented that there is a large contingent of up and coming archery hunters.
    - Perhaps it is a new market for outfitters to pursue.
  o Livingston stated he was not sure the numbers indicate a need for a reduction in bull harvest.
    - Making changes to hunt area 60 reduces opportunity on a general license for resident hunters. If we are reducing opportunity in one area, we should increase opportunity for general licenses in another area.
      • Hammer asked if opportunity increased in another area for general licenses, would a reduction in hunt area 60 be acceptable?
        o Livingston responded, yes. We should try to maintain balance.
  o Henrich advised he was asked by his group to pursue more Type 9 licenses/opportunity.
    - Suggested archery seasons to help the outfitting business.
    - Archery interest is increasing.
    - Type 9 license are becoming more popular.
    - Outfitters have the opportunity to market to archery hunters.
    - Are all type 9 licenses being sold now?
      • No.

• Lineberger stated she did not say no because she is an outfitter. Why should the “YES’s” join to “NO’s”?
  o Changes in hunt area 60 will not put her out of business, or cause her to lose her camp.
  o The elk numbers do not convince her there is a need to reduce bull harvest.
  o People from Dubois are asking her to push for a cow season in the Thorofare. They believe there are plenty of elk.
  o Outfitters in the area are not exceeding their Forest Service use permits.
  o The number of bulls harvested is going down, and success is going up.
  o Since 1992-93, hunters are harvesting in excess of 100 bulls/year.
  o Tom Ryder (WGFD, Wildlife Assistant Division Chief) advised the premise of trying to save bulls in one area to hope to be able to hunt them later in another area “carries no water.”
  o House Bill 10 in the legislature is looking to remove the restriction on the number of elk a hunter can harvest.
Jim Magagna (Wyoming Stockgrowers) is concerned with comingling of Yellowstone National Park elk and resident elk because of brucellosis.
  - He is against limiting harvest opportunities for any sportsman that would result in an increase in front country elk numbers.

It appears the Department wants to make a change just to make a change.
  - Hammer asked if that was true. Is the Department making a change just to make a change?
    - Fagan responded absolutely not. He was hoping the bull number trends would start increasing instead of decreasing on their own.
  - Hammer asked the group – Have trends improved enough that nothing needs to be done?
    - Henrich responded that he doesn’t see how things are going to be good in 3-5 years.
    - Fagan stated trends haven’t gone up in the past, so there is no expectation that it will in the next 3-5 years.
    - McWhirter added that we could sustain what we have now if nothing else changed.
      - Things are going to change because front country elk numbers are going to be reduced in the near future – the next 3-5 years.
      - Things will get worse in hunt area 60.
    - Livingston commented that if we start to see predicted changes, then we should react. Needs more convincing that changes need to happen now.
    - Brock stated the elk are 2,900 elk over objective which means there needs to be a reduction of 47%. That will have a big impact on what migrates to the Thorofare.
    - Lineberger stated bull harvest has been high in the Thorofare for many years; prior to the large increase in the Greybull River.
      - Lineberger does not see the downward trend that Fagan discussed.
      - McWhirter commented that the area will be going back to 1980’s numbers with 25% less recruitment in the herd.

The discussion was stopped to allow for the public comment portion of the meeting.

**Public Comment**
- Jay Reynolds
  - Has two camps and been outfitting since 2002.
  - His “bread and butter” hunts are the first three rifle hunts.
  - If rifle hunts are removed, it will reduce 1/3 of his business making it no longer viable to go in to the Thorofare.
  - Suggested reducing the bull harvest by using point restrictions. It’s the easiest way.
  - His hunters rarely take a bull with less than 6 points.
  - Why destroy livelihoods?
  - In some years, he only does four hunts instead of five. He makes his living on the first three hunts.
o He has never seen a resident hunter after the first rifle hunt. Removing the first hunt removes opportunity.

• Carl Sauerwein
  o If you take away the first hunt, you take away the resident hunters.
  o Supports a 6-point season.

• Mike Hirsch
  o Need to disperse use in the backcountry.
  o Need to have a blend of seasons.
    ▪ 30 day archery season in September.
    ▪ Increase type 9 licenses.
    ▪ Limited quota season the first 8 days of October.
    ▪ General season October 9-22 to take advantage of the migrating Yellowstone National Park elk.
  o Need to find common ground.
  o Does not want to take livelihood away from anybody. It’s not the right thing to do.

• Rick Adair
  o Hunt area 60 is where the elk for southern area 55 and northern area 56 come from.
  o Hunt area 60 impacts other areas.
  o The group needs to consider how hunt area 60 will impact hunt area 55 and other areas.

Next Meeting Saturday, March 17, 2012, 10:00am-4:00pm, Big Horn Federal.

Future Meetings (TENTATIVE) Monday, March 26, 2012, 6:00pm-9:00pm, Big Horn Federal.

Meeting Adjourned at 9:10pm