



Two years before statehood, 1910, elk were extirpated from New Mexico. The first territorial game warden began to reestablish elk populations in 1911 with the help of private land owners. In the 112 years since, the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish has restored the elk numbers in New Mexico from literally zero to a very conservative estimate of 70,000 plus animals. That is a success by any standard and EPlus has been a part of that.

New Mexico's EPlus program is a contemporary wildlife and habitat management tool that recognizes the need to have private land owners and managers participate in modern conservation. It definitely has some problems, but for the Department of Game and Fish to discard years of public/private partnership and go back to the practice of managing just the public land for New Mexico's wildlife and habitats would be quite discouraging for many who are concerned with conservation in this state.

EPlus has also provided access to public lands which would be inaccessible without the participation of landowners. In a time when *public access* is at the center of so many conversations in the angling, hunting, outdoor, and wildlife conservation world it seems a shame to backpedal on a policy that helps to promote that very access. Some would argue that it is a system to sell wildlife to landowners but Eplus distributes elk tags, which is an opportunity not an elk, whether it is won in the state draw or aquired from a landowner. There is an economic value to those tags and that value incentivizes the landowner to manage private land to sustain a public resource.-This is beneficial to more than just elk, all wildlife will prosper in a well maintained habitat. Ecosystems, and their inhabitants, are like water or wind, and have no regard for fences, public land, private land, state, or federal, it makes no difference to an elk, an eagle, or a pocket-gopher, it is imperative that all land holders participate in the process. EPlus gives the private landowner a vested interest in managing their property to benefit wildlife. The conservation of wildlife in the Western United States is a constant struggle and an ongoing experiment, there is habitat fragmentation and loss at alarming rates, so to discontinue a program that encourages the management and preservation of any habitat seems counterproductive.

It is the mission of the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish to conserve, regulate, propogate and protect the wildlife and fish within the state of New Mexico. The maxim declared on video publications is "conserving New Mexico's wildlife for future generations". Changes to wildlife management policies and practices often take years to produce results, if those changes are fruitless or even damaging it could take decades to rectify. Litigation, legislation, and social pressure, while sometimes useful or necessary, are poor substitutes for well considered ecological practices. Legislators and the Commission should allow the Department to do it's job and the Department of

Game and Fish should do that job. NMDGF should Endeavor to correct the issues with the EPlus program using current science and sound ecological management practices and dedicate the resources that such a valuable program warrants. It would be a loss to all New Mexicans to abandon such an inovative device for contemporary conservation.

Applicants to EPlus should be meeting specific requisite conditions based on the best available science to participate in the program and NMDGF should be verifying that those conditions are met before allocating any tags to the applicant. The current "Participation Guidelines" are an inadequate means of distributing a public asset. Initiate minimum acreage requirements based on annual carrying capacity per Animal Unit, landowners who's acreage cannot support a designated number of Animal Units year round should not be eligible for tags, especially "unit wide" tags. Require each candidate to submit a long term habitat management plan and offer NMDGF resources such as data and personnel to help develop these plans. Either eliminate the "unit wide" tag or put more stringent restrictions on the allocation of those tags. If landowners recieve tags that are valid for an entire unit then those qualifying private acres should absolutely be accessible to public hunters. Raise minimum acreage for a "unit wide" tag, it has a higher value to the hunter and therefore to the landowner, accordingly that landowner should be making a greater contribution which means sustaining more elk and elk habitat on those acres. If NMGDF issues "unit wide" tags they should be following up to make sure program recipiants are doing their part.

EPlus is far from perfect, but it is a foundation to build on. The intent of the program, which is to involve private landowners in habitat management for the benefit of the public, is commendable. New Mexico is a rural state with a little over 50% of the land in private ownership, before EPlus is abandoned, one should ask how effectively NMDGF can manage all of the elk in the state on only half of the land they occupy. It is imperative that the New Mexico Game and Fish Commission direct the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish and the concerned department heads to gather the relevent science and data, solicit opinions and recommendations from the affected parties, and develop guidance and recommendations for the Commission to determine a lasting disposition for Eplus. There is an opportunity here to bring NMDGF, private landowners, and sportsmen together in a very worthwhile pursuit, so long as those stakeholders commit to listen to each other and do the work required to resolve the issues. The first thing a person should ask themselves when considering an issue like this is "what is the best path forward to preserve wildlife and wildlife habitat in the state of New Mexico today and in the future", this applies to lawmakers, landowners, administrators, and citizens, and the answer is never lawsuits or legislative management.