

Data Submitted (UTC 11): 3/15/2019 6:00:00 AM

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Comments: RE:GV01- Kelso Mesa roadless area

The Canary in the Coal Mine-

Elk cow/calf recruitment rates are our "canary in the coal mine" for the health of our national forests. We are trying to understand thru various studies what is going on to cause the decline in elk cow/calf recruitment rates across the western US. One study " Cause specific mortality of rocky mountain elk calves in west central Montana" saw ratio of calves in Montana decline from 41/100 cows to 20/100 from 1988 to 2001. They found 3 causes for death of the calves. The number one cause was predation. Colorado Parks and Rec people are trying to address this now by lowering the cost of bear licenses for out-of-staters and making licenses "b" and "c" licenses. #2 cause of mortality was malnutrition. Our changing climate has a huge effect especially during drought years on the quality of the range for elk. We should also be more pro-active to reduce dead wood (fuel load) in our forests thru controlled burns to improve the vegetation quality. #3 was disease. In the end the authors concluded " we believe cause-specific mortality studies often underestimate neonatal loss due to malnutrition because it is difficult to assess, is generally not assessed when predator sign is present[hellip]" They also stated "poor nutrition predisposed young to predation". Another study " Factors influencing elk recruitment across ecotypes in the western US" found habitat was a key factor in calf recruitment. Colorado Parks and Wildlife also have an ongoing study: "recruitment and habitat use" that will help us draw further conclusion in the future. That last study I would like to point to is "Effects of human activity on space use and movement patterns of female elk" The study looked at "industrial areas" defined as areas and roads around gas well pads vs elk in transition areas vs elk with little to no interference from human activity. The study found " elk in industrial areas attempted to minimize contact with sources of human activity." This human activity can stress the animals and concentrate them on certain habitats which overtime can alter vegetation communities. "such change can influence persistence of animal populations by affecting patterns of occupancy, distribution, dispersal or colonization. Elk occupying industrial areas reduced their space use, moved farther between successive locations, and showed increased complexity of movement (particularly during calving season) relative to elk using non-industrial areas." I read this as human activity is stressing the elk and reducing their survival. The article went on to say " Elk in industrial areas use smaller areas more intensively[hellip]to avoid coming in contact[hellip] where human activity occurs. Elk in industrial areas move during rut and calving seasons because they are more sensitive to human activity during reproduction. Elk exposed to high levels of human activity may be forced to alter their behavioral strategies to avoid contact with humans or anthropogenic features: factors that have been found to influence probability of mortality." In conclusion the article states what one goal should be " concentrating activities within areas less preferred by elk provides an additional management strategy ". Forest Service, Parks and Recreation, and all users groups need to collaborate and pay attention to the canary in the coal mine.

Based on the studies I have read I would prefer the Kelso Mesa roadless area remain as a roadless area. A wilderness designation would not allow us to keep trails open with chain saws and would affect the outfitting business that currently operates a horse drawn wagon to distribute hunting camps. This historic use also takes away from this area ever being considered a wilderness area. Prior to even the wagon use, vehicles were allowed in the area and these trails take away from it being a pristine area. Also, with the global warming that is occurring, more fires, even larger than last years Bull Creek fire will occur. We need to maintain certain roads for these firefighting efforts and to allow use of chain saws to create barriers to prevent fire spread to the private property inholdings. Reading the study "Prescribed fires in wilderness-case study" by Laurie Yung, it's apparent that once an area is designated wilderness using the tool of prescribed burns becomes complicated for the forest

manager. To me, that's another good reason to keep the area as a roadless area. We need more prescribed burns to manage the fuel load. The environment and climate is rapidly changing and we need to let the forest managers manage it quickly without the bureaucracy of wilderness designation. If anything, I think the Kelso Mesa roadless area should be expanded by continuing the effort to block off all the little dead end spur roads to expand the roadless area . Yes, do maintain the main access routes down each mesa for recreation and forest management but limit any spurs that further disrupt the elk. Concentrate the loop trails for mountain bikers and 4-wheeler enthusiasts in areas less preferred by elk. Our common goal is sustainability and the elk are our canary. Let's make the correct decisions so future generations can thank us.

Tom Streich