

ELKHORN MOUNTAINS PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE PROJECTS

AUGUST 2001



1992 - **The Elkhorn MOU** among the Helena NF, Deerlodge NF, Bureau of Land Management, and Montana Dept. Fish, Wildlife and Parks was signed establishing the Elkhorn Mountains as a "cooperative management area" with emphasis on managing the Elkhorns as an ecological unit across administrative boundaries. The MOU was updated in 1996 and again in 2000.

1993 - **The Elkhorn Landscape Analysis** was completed for BLM and FS lands establishing the history, natural processes, existing conditions, and desired conditions for the overall mountain range. Line officers and managers from all the agencies "signed off" on the desired conditions. Subsequently, more in-depth watershed assessments were completed for each of 3 implementation areas; Crow Creek in 1993, North Elkhorns in 1995, and South Elkhorns in 1996. All projects in the Elkhorn Mountains are based on these overall desired conditions. The basic philosophy is that healthy soil, water, and vegetation, along with controls on human disturbances, is the basis for excellent fish and wildlife habitat.

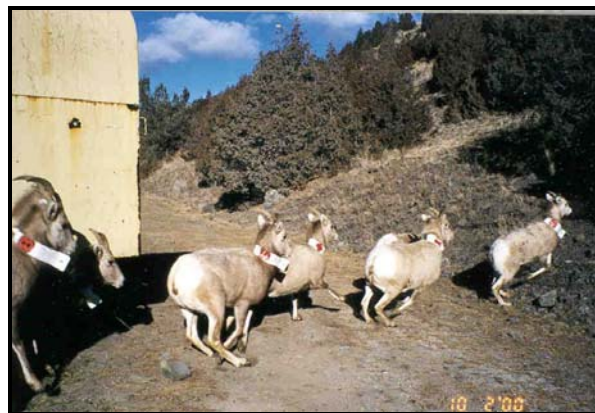
1993 - **Elkhorn Interpretive Strategy**. This documents the themes and opportunities to interpret for public education and enjoyment some of the unique features in the Elkhorn Mountains. The Elkhorn Brochure and Elkhorn Video were the first "products" of this strategy.

1994 - **Crow Creek Project Decision**. This project was the first "landscape" look at vegetation and grazing. The analysis considered 6 alternative treatments for restoring grasslands and open grown old growth forests and 3 grazing alternatives. The decision included revision of 4 allotment management plans (one allotment was closed) and prescribed burning on about 4,000 acres of grassland/shrubland habitat types and about 2,500 acres of underburning in Douglas fir forests. To date, most of the grassland burning has been accomplished, along with about 1,500 acres of forest underburning. Monitoring of the allotments suggests that better livestock distribution and stocking reductions have improved range conditions in both the uplands and riparian areas.

1995 - Elkhorn Travel Plan Decision and Road Reclamation. This project resulted in a comprehensive analysis of travel management that included all federally managed lands in the Elkhorn Mountains. The analysis considered 4 alternatives that ranged from no changes to a significant reduction in motorized access. The decision included mountain-range wide area closures with motorized access restricted to a system of designated routes. A balance of motorized and non-motorized recreational opportunities was the main decision criteria. A unique feature of the travel plan is the establishment of "retrieval routes". The eight routes open for the retrieval of big game from 11 am to 3 pm during the big game hunting season were popular last year; these routes are "self-policed". Implementation of the travel plan has included an on-going program to install barriers and to reclaim roads that were closed administratively on a yearlong basis.

1995 - Vosburg Mine Reclamation. This project resulted in the reclamation of the Vosburg mine site which included two relatively large, uncontained piles of fine-grained mine tailings situated within about 100 feet of the East Fork of Badger Creek, and 6 waste rock dumps. Revegetation was successful and fences were removed in 1999.

1996 - Bighorn Sheep Reintroduction. Following an environmental analysis, which was a cooperative effort by the BLM, FWP and FS, 25 sheep were released in Crow Creek in March 1996. An additional 30 sheep were released in January 1997. Sheep have stayed in the Elkhorns and dispersed mainly on the east flank of the mountain range. Although several sheep have died, there have also been several lambs born. The decision to burn 790 acres of potential bighorn sheep winter range, on both public and private lands, was made in 1996. These units were burned in the fall of 1998. An additional 20 ewes were released in Indian Creek in 2000 and additional 150 acres of prescribed burning was identified in 2000. One of 4 of these units was burned in 2001 with the remainder scheduled for 2002.



1996 - Elkhorn Forest Plan Amendment. Based on the monitoring information provided by the Elkhorn landscape analysis, changes and updates of the Forest Plans (Helena and Deerlodge) were proposed and analyzed in an EA. The amendment incorporated the original Wildlife Management Unit criteria, and ecosystem management principles into specific goals, objectives, standards and guidelines, which were unique to the Elkhorn Mountains. The amendment consisted of Elkhorn-wide direction organized by terrestrial, aquatic, and social environments; there were also unique goals, objectives, standards, and guidelines specific to two management areas. The management areas were delineated along "social lines" - motorized and nonmotorized areas. The decision was litigated and the District Court (Missoula) ruled in April 1999 that the amendment was significant under both NFMA and NEPA and that the Forest Service must complete an EIS for this amendment. The Forest Service has no plans to revisit the amendment prior to the revision of the Forest Plans, which is expected to begin in the next few years.

1996 - North Elkhorns Vegetation Treatment Decision. The original project analyzed 4 alternative ways of managing the forests in the urban interface of the northwest Elkhorns that included state land, the Helena National Forest and Bureau of Land Management lands. This project was the first to implement the specific vegetation desired conditions in the Elkhorn Forest Plan amendment, and the first to truly integrate timber harvest as a tool to achieve the desired conditions for other resources. The decision included prescribed burning in grasslands, road reclamation, road reconstruction, and commercial thinning and underburning on about 1600 acres of mixed ponderosa pine and Douglas fir forests. The Forest Service timber harvest portion of the project was litigated in conjunction with the Elkhorn Amendment and the court ruling in April 1999 was that the North Elkhorns could proceed only after an EIS was completed for the amendment. A further settlement in the 9th circuit court conceded that any project, including the North Elkhorns could proceed, which was consistent with the 86/87 Forest Plans. BLM and State Lands have implemented their portions of the decision. The Helena National Forest released a DEIS in the spring of 2001 and a decision is expected in the fall of 2001.



1997 - Indian Creek- Park Mines Reclamation. BLM, FS, and the State of Montana completed an interagency cooperative cleanup of the headwaters of the North Fork of Indian Creek. This was a comprehensive cleanup of the watershed including private and public lands.

1997 - Elkhorn Townsite Master Plan. A proposal was funded through the Farm Bill to hire a planner that would help citizens and agency personnel come to some agreements on management of the complex of private and public lands around the historic town of Elkhorn. A final action plan was completed in 1997 and the agencies have continued to work with private landowners to submit grant proposals and develop signing for the area.

1997 - Muskrat Creek Cutthroat Restoration Project. Funded through "Bring Back the Natives" in part, this project included brook trout removal and installation of a barrier to bolster a dwindling population of westslope cutthroat trout on this BLM/Forest Service stream. Monitoring in 1998 showed a positive response, although continued electroshocking, through 2001, show continued presence of brook trout.

1998 - Land Adjustment Strategy. A letter was mailed to all inholders and adjacent landowners asking them of interest in land exchanges and conservation easements. The agencies identified a "desired" boundary for the Elkhorns in 1996, which identifies lands to acquire and lands to dispose of. Response was minimal and controversial. Several landowners perceived that the agencies were trying to "take" private lands in the Elkhorns. In 2000, the Townsend Ranger District identified about 600 acres of lands with willing sellers on key elk winter range. They contacted a variety of groups, organizations, and political entities to get support and funding for this strategy. The first purchase was made in 2001 to secure a portion of the Kleinschmidt Mine inholding.

1998 - North Elkhorns Livestock Grazing Analysis and Vegetation Treatments. The decision was made in April to revise allotment management plans on 7 allotments, and to close one allotment (Tizer), which provides key elk summer range. The Decision included some experimental burning in willow habitats in Tizer Basin. The burning is scheduled for implementation in fall, 2001.

1998 - Hahn Conservation Easement. A key piece of private land, which links BLM land and Forest System lands, was put under a conservation easement through the Habitat Montana Program (FWP). The easement included development of a comprehensive livestock management strategy across BLM, private, and Forest Lands on this important elk winter range.

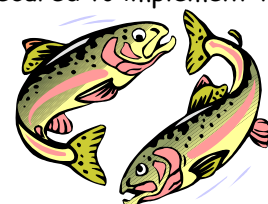
1998 - Elkhorn Fire Plan. The Elkhorn Wildland Fire Guidebook was completed and approved in May, 1998. This guidebook outlines a comprehensive, BLM/FS strategy for fire management in the Elkhorns and includes risk assessments and guidelines for "wildland fire for resource benefits" in the higher elevations of the Elkhorn Mountains. One fire was within prescription in Sept. 98 and was taken to the Stage II analysis level. The plan was updated in 2000.



1998 - Elkhorn Recreation Map. A topographic comprehensive travel plan and recreation map of the entire Elkhorns was completed and was printed in May 1999. The map was funded by all the agencies. An update is scheduled for 2002.

1998 - South Elkhorns Range and Vegetation Project. The original BLM, Deerlodge, and Helena National Forests Environmental Analysis was completed in July, 98 and included analysis of 5 alternatives for managing vegetation in the South Elkhorns and 4 alternatives for managing livestock grazing on allotments. A Decision Notice was issued in January 1999. The Forests were appealed, but were upheld, but subsequent to the loss of the Elkhorn Forest Plan Amendment, the Forest Service withdrew their decision. The BLM began implementation in March 1999, and as of spring 2001 has implemented most of the prescribed burning and the revised allotment plans. The Helena National Forest will reissue a decision on the Dahlman Allotment and prescribed burning in 2001; the Beaverhead-Deerlodge NF will begin an analysis of the Elkhorn Allotment and prescribed burning in 2002.

1999 - Elkhorn Westslope Cutthroat Trout Restoration Project. Montana Dept. Fish, Wildlife & Parks, in coordination with the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management released a programmatic EA in April 1999, which analyzed 3 alternatives for the restoration of this candidate species in the Elkhorn Mountains. MDFWP made a decision in July 1999 to implement the most aggressive restoration alternative, which would restore cutthroat trout from their current 7 miles of occupied habitat to over 70 miles by the end of 10 years. A biologist was hired in a cooperative effort between the Helena National Forest and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks. Bring Back the Natives (FS) and Future Fisheries (FWP) funding was secured to implement the program.



2000- **Guidelines for non-consumptive Outfitting activities in the Elkhorn Mountains.** The agencies developed and released, with public input, a set of guidelines that will govern permitting and management of outfitting that does not involve hunting and fishing. These guidelines protect fish, wildlife, and existing high use recreational areas. In 2001, Alternative Youth Adventures, which is a contractor for the Montana Department of Corrections, applied for a permit to operate on 3 sites during the winter of 2001. The analysis is complete and the USFWS concurred with a finding that the project was "Not Likely to Adversely Affect" lynx.

2000- **Staubach Creek Westslope Cutthroat Trout Project.** MDFWP and the Townsend RD released an EA to construct a barrier and remove brook trout in Staubach Creek to stabilize a pure WCT population, which has declined dramatically. The use of antimycin, a fish toxicant was also analyzed. The Decision was made to go forward with the project. Although the use of antimycin has been on hold pending a court decision on the Cherry Creek project, the barrier and removal of brook trout via electrofishing, was completed in 2000 and continued removal took place in 2001.

2000- **Integrated Weed Management Strategy.** Goals, objectives, strategies and tactics for the elimination and control of weeds across the entire Elkhorn Mountain Range was completed. The agencies are in the process of trying to raise \$100,000 and feature the Elkhorn Mountains as a pilot project for enhancing wildlife habitat through weed eradication. Several grants were secured in 2001 including \$20,000 from Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation for back-country weed eradication; \$10,000 from the Mule Deer Foundation for weed treatments on mule deer winter range; and \$15,000 from the Northern Region Partnership funds. A 3-person interagency weed crew was hired and several contracts let to accomplish the work in 2001.

2000 - **Slim Sam Aspen Restoration.** This project represents the first aspen restoration in the Elkhorn Mountains. It appears that regeneration of aspen is limited by browsing due to livestock and ungulates and that fencing may be necessary to perpetuate these small, but important aspen stands, in perpetuity. Inventory and baseline monitoring was completed in 2000; conifers were removed from several stands in 2001. Prescribed burning treatments are planned for 2001-2002.



2000 - **Boulder Hill Fire.** This wildfire burned several thousand acres within the BLM's wilderness study area in Muskrat Creek (also private lands and a small amount on the Deerlodge Forest). Rehabilitation efforts in 2000 focused on erosion control (contour felling and seeding). Additional work is on-going to replace signs, fences, and barriers; treat weeds; and protect aspen.

2000 - **Deer and Elk Management.** New regulations designed to reduce harvest of buck deer in the Elkhorn Mountains went into effect in 2000. Additional cow elk tags were issued to address game damage occurring on private land. Hunters enjoyed additional access on private lands in the Elkhorns with the addition of 2 new Block Management Areas (now a total of 15).

Past, present, and future recreation enhancements and interpretive trails. The BLM completed enhancements along Crow Creek to include an outhouse, fencing, firepits, and picnic tables. In 2001, road and trail signing updates were completed across the mountain range. Eagle Guard station is available for public rental from December 2 through May 15 and during the summer months is the home to summer interpretive programs. The Strawberry Lookout cabin will become a rental cabin in 2002. Over the past 10 years, all or portions of most of the system trails in the Elkhorn Mountains have been reconstructed. These improvements have included the Casey Meadows Trail, the Crazy Creek Trail, the Longfellow-Clear Creek Trail, the Muskrat Trail, the McClellan Trail, the Iron Mine Trail, the Tepee Creek Trail, and the Beaver Creek Trail. Planned improvements are also scheduled for the Tizer Basin Trails (#110, #129, #130).



CURRENT CHALLENGES

Elk Management - Range management problems that were complicated by a 3rd year of severe drought conditions opened up a renewed debate on the allocation of forage between livestock and elk in the Elkhorn Mountains, and the impact of elk on adjacent private lands. The debate focused on the appropriate levels of elk permits at Fish and Game Commission hearings. The Commission directed the agencies to meet with affected groups and individuals to resolve the issue and also to revisit the Elk Plan objectives for the Elkhorn Elk Management Unit.



Access to Private Inholdings - Requests for yearlong access across public lands to private inholdings have increased in the past few years. The agencies must provide "reasonable access", which can lead to conflicts with other resource values such as winter range and non-motorized recreation opportunities.



LOOKING AHEAD - 2001 and beyond:

Several projects will be on going for some time. These include the Elkhorn Cutthroat Trout Strategy, the Integrated Weed Program, the Land Adjustment Strategy, and the Elkhorn Fire Plan.

Additional mine reclamation projects are in the works that include the East Pacific Mine (Weasel Creek) and removal of tailings in the Middle Fork of Warm Springs Creek.

An experimental prescribed burn will be analyzed in 2002, which treats forest burned in the 1988 Warm Springs Fire in Pole Creek. The objective of the burn will be to open up some pockets in the dense lodgepole canopy and burned boles to facilitate movements and foraging opportunities for both livestock and wildlife.

Two projects competed successfully for funding by the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation. One project consists of prescribed burning in Kimber Gulch and Weasel Creek to enhance forage on elk winter range. The other project consists of replacing existing fences in the Kimber Gulch area with "elk friendly" fences that would be "let down" during the winter months. Both projects should be completed in 2002.

There should be several projects in and around the Elkhorn Townsite in the near future, including new fencing and interpretation of the cemetery, improvements to the Picnic Area, an integrated fuel reduction plan between the Forest Service and private landowners, and reclamation of administratively closed roads.

There may be changes in the management of the Limestone Hills complex, as the National Guard seeks to withdraw the area they have used for training. The limestone hills gravel mine has applied for an expansion and the state of Montana is the lead agency completing the analysis.