



IMPORTANCE OF PRIVATE LANDS AND LANDOWNER INCENTIVE PROGRAMS FOR BIG GAME MIGRATION

Fact Sheet #2

Overview

While wildlife are a public resource, private landowners provide important habitat for big game and other wildlife. Some big game species can spend a large portion of their lives on private land. Many migratory elk and mule deer herds live on high elevation public land in the summer, but move to low elevation winter ranges which are frequently dominated by private land. Because of their wide-ranging movements, habitat for big game is not managed by one landowner or agency alone. It requires stewardship across jurisdictions and landscapes. The continued existence of long-distance migrations and wide-ranging species is a testament to the current and past management of these lands.

Lands managed for the mutual benefit of wildlife and livestock provide critical habitat and space to move across the landscape. These working lands help offset increased fragmentation and pressures from the expanding human footprint throughout North America. Providing financial and technical resources for landowners whose lands overlap with migration corridors is a high priority for wildlife and habitat managers.

Challenges

Landowners can incur expenses associated with wildlife use including damaged crops and fences, reduced livestock forage, potential for disease transmission, and adjustments to business operations to account for wildlife use. Pressures to develop and subdivide are a significant challenge for conservation of privately-owned lands. When important wildlife habitats such as migration corridors are documented on private lands or leases, landowners have expressed concern over the potential for increased regulations and restrictions on their land, mineral developments and public land grazing leases.

Opportunities

When migration corridors are located on or near private land, economic incentives might be available for landowners to implement conservation actions that simultaneously benefit traditional agriculture operations and wildlife. This may include funding for fence modifications, conservation easements, habitat improvements, invasive species treatments, disease transmission reduction programs, and livestock depredation reduction efforts. Direct benefits often extend beyond property boundaries because wide-ranging wildlife populations are enhanced. Improved populations can also support agricultural communities because landowners may receive secondary income through outfitting, hunting, and other wildlife related tourism.



Conservation easements are instrumental in preventing fragmentation and maintaining important and connected seasonal habitats. While conservation easements are entirely voluntary and in place only at the request of a landowner, they can provide tax credits and funding to prevent subdividing or development. In many cases, conservation easements are important planning tools and a mechanism for maintaining large intact properties for generations. In these circumstances, they benefit both landowners and wildlife.



Habitat and forage improvement projects can benefit both livestock grazing and wildlife. These projects also provide landowners with tools to manage the landscape, enabling agricultural operations to be more adaptive. Invasive annual grass control, vegetation improvements including shrubland or aspen habitat enhancements and planning for grazing management are all projects that have been completed on private lands to improve habitat in migration corridors.

Other projects can include wildlife friendly fence modifications that support livestock management and enhance the ability of wildlife to move between seasonal habitats. Good fence placement and design benefit both wildlife and livestock by allowing productive grazing management. Landowners within migration corridors often receive assistance for fence modification projects which can include installing new fencing, rehabilitating old fencing to be more compatible with wildlife, adding seasonal lay-down sections, inserting extra gates to improve wildlife passage, and removing unused or derelict fences.

Incentive programs

There are a wide variety of programs to provide financial and technical assistance to landowners that want to enhance habitat for migratory big game species. Department of Interior Secretarial Order 3362 has been a cornerstone for grant programs specific to deer, elk, and pronghorn migration corridors and winter ranges prioritized by western states in their State Action Plans. Grants addressing these topics are administered by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and United States Fish and Wildlife Service Partners for Fish and Wildlife programs. Natural Resources Conservation Service provides significant funding and technical assistance to private landowners through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Agricultural Conservation Easement Program and Regional Conservation Partnership Program programs outlined in the Farm Bill. State wildlife management agencies, federal land management agencies, county weed and pest control, and county conservation districts also provide significant funding, incentives, and assistance to landowners to implement proactive management practices on private land and associated public land leases.



Summary

Private lands provide important habitat for migrating wildlife and have been a priority for financial incentive programs associated with migration corridors. Projects that benefit wildlife and livestock operations within migration corridors often involve long-term, multi-year planning and multiple landowners. Incentive programs prioritize projects that address challenges faced by private landowners to protect connectivity habitats. Aldo Leopold, the father of modern wildlife ecology, may have said it best. In 1934, he wrote that “the thing to be encouraged is the use of private land in such a way as to combine the public and the private interest to the greatest degree possible.” That means finding ways of “rewarding the private landowner who conserves the public interest.”