NEWS RELEASE
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ELK POPULATIONS SHOULD FLOURISH IN AFTERMATH OF FIRES

The third in a special series by Deborah Ritchie-Oberbillig

As the tally of acreage burned in Montana and Idaho exceeds one million acres, elk hunters may wonder what to expect as they prepare to return to favorite hunting grounds.

"We want to let people know that elk will ultimately benefit, and we ask all recreationists to help restoration efforts by staying out of areas that are being rehabilitated and off recently constructed fire lines," said Cindy Swanson, director of Watershed, Wildlife, Fish and Rare Plants for the Forest Service's Northern Region.

"The miles of bulldozer lines from the firefighting efforts are not new access roads for off-road vehicles or horse users," Swanson stressed. "The Forest Service is rehabilitating those lines to prevent erosion. We need the public's help throughout the upcoming fire season to ensure the regeneration of the firelines and burned areas."

John Firebaugh, wildlife biologist for Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks in Missoula, has some post-fire messages for hunters as well. Basically, the news for elk so far appears excellent, starting with the direct effects from fires in the Bitterroot Valley. "Most elk escape the fires easily," Firebaugh said. "We've had a few reports of some that died, but it's rare. These animals have evolved with fire and seem to be able to sense danger and move away."

A combination of drought and the fires, however, appears to be luring elk down from the mountains earlier to lower elevations and into verdant agricultural areas, where they aren't always welcome guests.

"We are hoping for a good harvest this fall to achieve balance between elk numbers and available forage," he said.

After two mild winters and light harvests, populations in the Bitterroot Valley area are high. Firebaugh predicts that dry conditions will concentrate elk in places with succulent grasses and forbs, such as the heads of drainages.

Elk also could be more visible during hunting season in the intensively burned areas where fire torched the needles and branches, leaving black standing trunks. "They are traditional about where they go for hiding cover during hunting season," Firebaugh said. It might take them a little while to get educated and look for good security. "There's plenty of security within the fire area," he pointed out. TV images

of walls of fire, mile-high smoke plumes, and torching trees captured the awesome power of fire, but what the public often failed to see was fire creeping along the ground and playing hopscotch, leaving a pattern of green and black in its wake.

Firebaugh has not yet been given permission to fly over the Bitterroot fires, but he likes what he has seen from driving miles of roads through winter range in the East Fork Bitterroot and Skalkaho. He looks forward to watching the burned winter range transform into a lush, nutrient-rich haven. “The fire burned in fingers and missed areas altogether,” he said. “The more I saw, the more encouraged I felt.”

He's also keeping his fingers crossed that the fall rains will continue while the weather is warm enough to allow for a greening up of the burned areas before winter sets in.

Up to 2,000 elk congregate in the Sula Basin each winter, trekking there from the Pintler Mountains, the Big Hole, Upper Rock Creek and the Bitterroot country. If the winter range burned extensively in combination with a hard winter, Firebaugh said the short-term forecast for elk could be grim. That's why he is delighted to see a mosaic fire pattern so far that ought to give the herds enough choices this winter, both for food and cover.

Mike Hillis, wildlife biologist for the Lolo National forest, also has taken an up-close look at the fires that burned in elk country west of Missoula in the Ninemile area and near Superior. “All the fires that burned into elk winter range will significantly benefit the animals,” he said. “But I do have some concern about knapweed spread.”

Weeds are already present within the winter range, and could multiply with conditions they like best: disturbance and more sunlight. Hillis said they will monitor weed spread closely and be ready to act to protect the native vegetation and discourage weeds.

As far as what to anticipate in elk and mule deer winter range after fire, Hillis can rattle off impressive statistics gained firsthand from monitoring prescribed burns on Strawberry Ridge in the Rattlesnake National Recreation Area, close to Missoula. “We saw a 2,000 percent increase in shrub and forage production the year after a prescribed burn in 1998,” he said. Before the fires, shrubs like snowberry, chokecherry and ceanothus yielded 45-60 pounds per acre. After the fire, that production level jumped to 1,300 pounds per acre.

Hillis said that the secret to success is a hot fire that kills some of the trees. A hot fire does the best job rejuvenating these favored foods of elk and mule deer. Besides fire opening up the overstory and letting in sunlight, flames and heat provoke an amazing response in shrubs.

For instance, the seeds of ceanothus are “serotinous,” meaning that they germinate only after being exposed to heat from fire. Fires must burn hot and long enough for those seeds to sprout.

Serviceberry evolved with fire another way. Some plants we see today are more than a century old. Each time a fire sweeps through, the top burns off, the roots survive and quickly, within a few weeks even, the shrub re-sprouts. Elk feast on the young leaders-- or shoots-- after a fire. Rufous-sided towhees congregate in the young shrubs, along with other songbirds. In contrast, serviceberry that has not burned grows into a woody, tree-like shrub without leaders. A return to its roots through fire is just what this plant-- and big game-- needs, according to Hillis.

A Montana evening news program covering the 2000 fires zeroed in on two mule deer ambling through a blackened forest, commenting on the “bewildered wildlife.” In fact, deer and elk are far from bewildered. Their species has long lived-- and thrived-- in the presence of fire.

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(Note: Northern Region news releases are available on the internet at http://www.fs.fed.us/r1)