



SPECIAL REPORT

THE ELK PRIVATE LAND USE SYSTEM

EPLUS is vital for New Mexico's
economy and wildlife



PROTECT NEW MEXICO'S **ELK HABITAT**
SUPPORT NEW MEXICO'S **RURAL ECONOMIES**

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Executive Summary

Key Messages

- Elk in New Mexico rely on public, tribal, and private lands for food, cover, water, and migration corridors. However, they spend the majority of their time on private lands.
- By law, elk in New Mexico do not belong to landowners, hunters, or any individual; they “belong” to everyone in the state¹. The New Mexico Department of Game & Fish (NMDGF) manages elk for the state².
- Elk seek refuge³ on private lands to avoid disturbance and hunting pressure. When they occupy private lands, landowners incur costs and damages.
- Without hunting on private lands, elk excessively congregate on private land⁴, leading to ineffective herd management and damage to landowner resources.
- The EPLUS program was created in recognition of the important benefits that private lands make to the elk populations and hunting opportunities in New Mexico, and to incentivize landowners to allow hunting on private land. The program gives hunters and landowners a way to work together to effectively manage and hunt elk on private lands.

This report and accompanying website examine how EPLUS affects New Mexico’s rural economy and elk⁵. Citations are provided via endnotes throughout. See page 25 for the list of cited works.

The basics of elk habitat

Rocky Mountain elk in New Mexico roam across public, tribal, and private lands. Approximately 47% of New Mexico land is privately owned. These private lands play a vital role in providing forage, water, and shelter for elk, making the preservation of large tracts of private land essential for maintaining elk habitat. Elk spend the majority of their time on private land in New Mexico⁶.

However, elk can cause financial losses for landowners by consuming crops and pastures, damaging fences, and transmitting diseases⁷ to livestock. To manage elk herds and incentivize landowners to maintain elk habitat, the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish (NMDGF) regulates and authorizes legal elk hunting on private lands through their Elk Private Land Use System (EPLUS).

Elk hunting and habitat management

Elk hunting in New Mexico is highly sought after by residents and non-residents. For example, in 2022, 103,170 hunters applied for 24,381 available public land elk hunting licenses. The NMDGF applies a quota on these public land licenses, allocating 84% to New Mexico residents, 10% to residents and non-residents who contract with an outfitter, and 6% to non-residents. Limits based on elk biology and herd population are applied to private land elk hunting licenses in the primary (PMZ) and special (SPZ) management zones where elk are most plentiful in the state. Outside of these zones is the secondary management zone (SMZ) where private land elk hunting licenses are unlimited and sold over-the-counter (OTC).

Hunters who do not obtain a public land license can acquire private land elk hunting authorizations through EPLUS. EPLUS-registered landowners can sell, trade, gift, or barter their authorizations, which hunters use to obtain a valid private land elk hunting license from the NMDGF. This market provides landowners with incentives to maintain elk habitat and collaborate with NMDGF to allow hunting on their land.

Revenue generated from the sale of hunting licenses on private land is used to fund various elk conservation efforts, research projects, and initiatives to improve habitat on public land. It is important to note that the NMDGF is mainly a self-funded agency, and does not receive significant funds from the state's general tax revenue. The department relies heavily on revenue generated from license fees and Federal Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration (WSFR) funds to support its operations, which include wildlife management, conservation, law enforcement, and public outreach programs.

Economic benefits for rural communities

Private land elk hunters play a vital role in contributing to the economies of the rural and often underserved communities in New Mexico where elk are found. The market for private land elk licenses enables landowners to maximize the value of their EPLUS authorizations, thus encouraging the preservation of crucial elk habitat at no cost to taxpayers. EPLUS also provides financial stability to landowners who might have otherwise sold their land, leading to the loss of elk habitat. EPLUS plays a pivotal role in protecting elk habitat in New Mexico and supporting its traditional rural communities.

EPLUS-registered landowners are more likely to manage their land to benefit elk populations by preserving forage areas and providing refuge and cover for elk away from people and water sources. Climate change, stagnating rural economies, subdivisions, ranchettes, and urban sprawl continue to chip away at elk habitat in New Mexico. Substantial incentives are needed to preserve our remaining wildlife habitat and migration corridors.

Elk hunting tourism is a crucial source of revenue for rural communities in New Mexico, and its significance cannot be overstated. The spending patterns of non-resident hunters on lodging, food, gear, and guide services provide invaluable support to local businesses, while creating job opportunities in areas where economic prospects are limited. Additionally, elk hunting tourism plays a vital role in generating gross receipts and lodging tax revenues for local governments and communities, which are essential for their sustained growth and development.

Elk population management

The NMDGF utilizes EPLUS private-land elk hunting licenses as a means to manage elk populations efficiently. By incorporating private-land hunting into their comprehensive elk management approach, the department can sustain a balanced ecosystem accounting for the carrying capacities for elk on both public and private lands, distribute elk across the broader landscape, and reduce the negative impacts of elk on agricultural resources. Climate change and drought require more frequent elk carrying capacity assessments on both public and private lands. There is not one-size fits all approach to elk management across our diverse landscapes.

Learn more about EPLUS

This report and the accompanying website, EPLUSNM.org, where greater detail and data are presented, demonstrate the positive impact of EPLUS on preserving elk habitat, facilitating effective elk management, and boosting rural economies in New Mexico.



The data tell an important story about the value of EPLUS. But just as important are the human stories of impact from this program. We surveyed and interviewed hundreds of EPLUS allocation recipients and users. Select comments are included throughout this report in gray boxes like this one, with the location information of the respondent when it was provided.

Summary in Four Heatmaps

2019 Poverty Rate by Census Tract with GMU Overlay

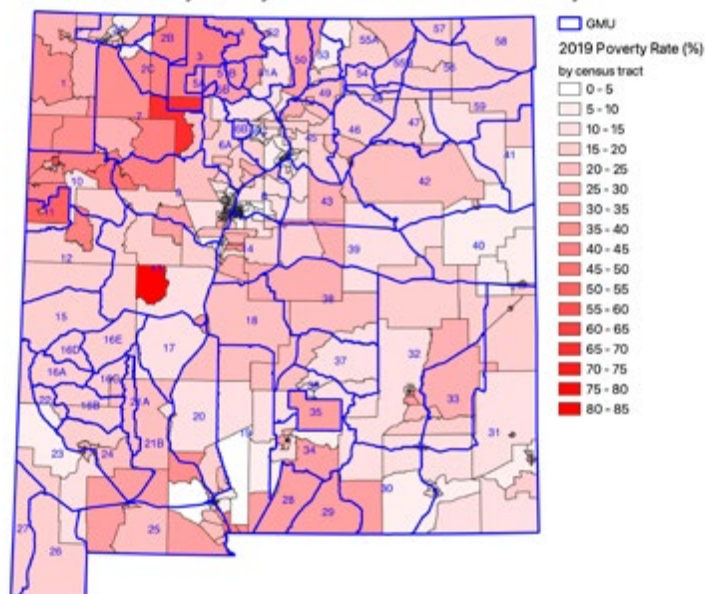


Figure 1

Poverty in New Mexico is rural.

Elk hunting is concentrated in some of New Mexico's poorest communities. Hunting revenue matters a lot to the economic survival of these communities.

Fraction of Primary Management Zone Game Management Units that are Private Land

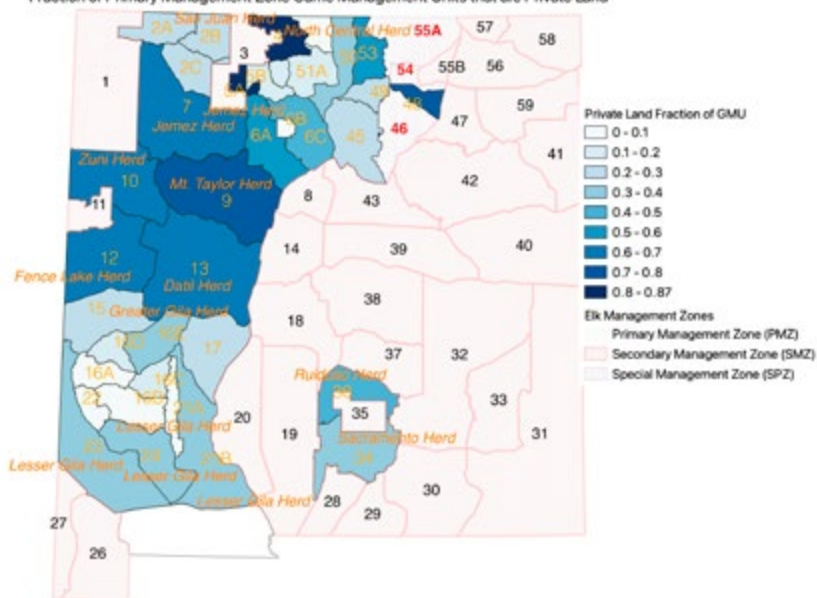
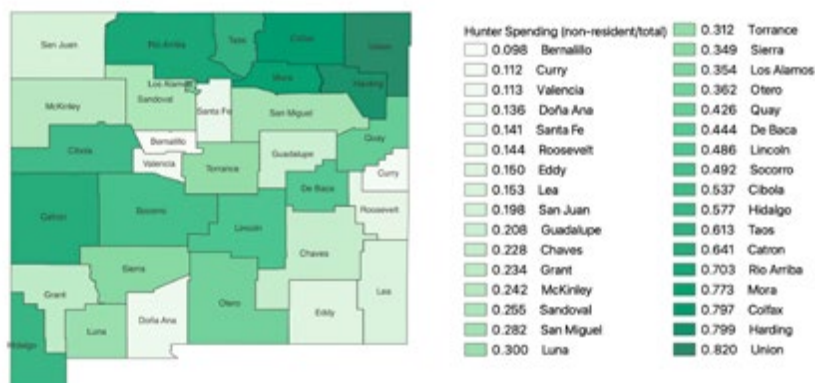


Figure 2

Elk herds spend much of their lives on private land.

This map shows the proportion of land in the Primary Management Zone that is privately owned. The state's largest elk herds are concentrated in GMU's with large amounts of private land.

Hunter Spending (Non-Resident) / Hunter Spending (Total)



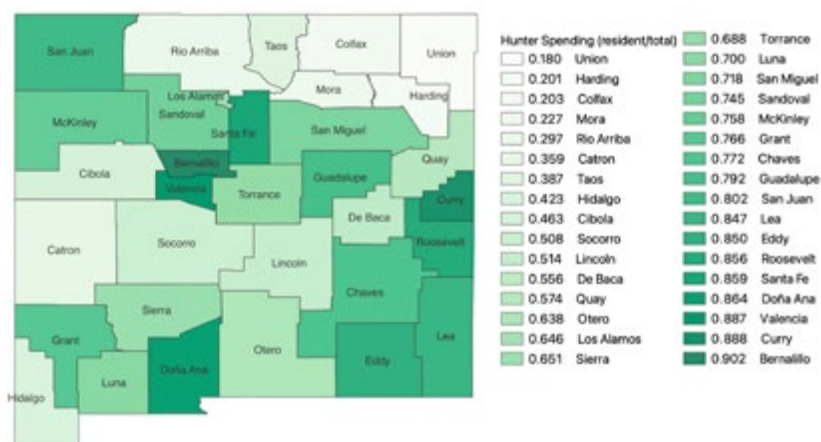
The Economic Contributions of Fishing, Hunting, and Trapping in New Mexico in 2013: A statewide and county-level analysis. July 31, 2014, Southwick Associates for NMDGF

Figure 3

Non-resident hunters spend more in rural communities.

The economic impact of resident vs. non-resident hunting is not equal.

Hunter Spending (Resident) / Hunter Spending (Total)



The Economic Contributions of Fishing, Hunting, and Trapping in New Mexico in 2013: A statewide and county-level analysis. July 31, 2014, Southwick Associates for NMDGF

Figure 4

Resident hunters spend less overall, and mostly close to home, in cities.

Rural communities and small businesses in New Mexico thus rely on non-resident hunters for vital revenue.

Private lands support New Mexico's elk

46.5% of New Mexico is privately-owned. The rest is tribal land (about 11%) and federal or state trust lands. But of course, elk are not uniformly distributed across New Mexico, and land management is a key factor in determining actual elk distribution.

Elk occupy and migrate through both public and private lands in New Mexico. When elk are present on private land, the landowner does not own or have population control over the elk. The New Mexico Department of Game and Fish (NMDGF) manages elk populations on behalf of the public, whether they are on public or private land.

Private lands in New Mexico directly benefit publicly managed elk and other wildlife. Fertile lands, which provide winter forage for elk, coincide with farms and ranches in the state. High-altitude ranches coincide with summer



Elk on private land with prime cover, forage, and water. GMU 4, Rio Arriba County, New Mexico.



Elk congregating on private land during hunting season, GMU 55B, Colfax County, New Mexico.

“Conservation will ultimately boil down to rewarding the private landowner who conserves the public interest.”

– Aldo Leopold⁹

elk habitats. Research from NMDGF and others has shown that many elk herds in New Mexico spend the majority of their time on private lands⁸.

Private landowners can be essential conservationists of wildlife habitat, provided that their incentives outweigh their costs. The costs of having elk on your land result in significant financial burdens, including lost forage and agricultural resources, property damage, and disease risk. These costs decrease landowners' ability to sustain wildlife habitat, particularly in rural and highly impoverished areas of New Mexico.

When the financial challenges become too great, landowners often cash out by selling their land, increasing the risk of sub-development and habitat fragmentation.



**Newborn elk on private land,
GMU 4, Rio Arriba County, New
Mexico.**



**Elk herd on private land in
August, GMU 46, San Miguel
County, New Mexico.**

“Every year from early spring to the late fall elk graze our fields, usually from dusk to dawn. Some years the loss from grazing is significant. In 2019 we suffered a loss of just under 300 bales to our annual hay harvest, cost to us of \$3000. When we receive a mature bull tag we are able to recover some of the cost by selling our tag to local outfitters. When we get a cow tag we can put meat in the freezer.”

– San Miguel County rancher



A rancher with his sheep in GMU 4, Rio Arriba County, New Mexico.

“EPLUS has allowed my husband and I to improve our property. We have been able to buy equipment, improve water systems which allows us to plant our pastures with feed. This enables us to provide habitat for elk and all wildlife.”

– Catron County rancher

Farm and ranch poverty is a problem in rural New Mexico

The rural areas where elk hunting takes place are among the most impoverished in the state (see figure 5 at right).

Private land elk hunting via EPLUS is crucial for these rural communities to survive. In many communities private land elk hunting is a major source of livelihoods — supporting outfitter/guides, lodging, restaurants, gas stations, and other businesses.

In rural areas of New Mexico, traditional farming and ranching operations have been passed down through many generations. New Mexico has a unique bond with the land, with many farms and ranches remaining in families that lived here before the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848), when New Mexico was still part of Mexico.

However, when traditional ranchers face financial hardships, selling the farm can be a tempting option to escape poverty. Agricultural land that is sold in New Mexico is oftentimes converted into extensive housing developments (i.e. ranchettes). The resulting fragmentation from construction, road and utility infrastructure and domestic trappings like pets, fences, lawns and noise and light pollution, lead to significant loss of wildlife habitat. According to the University of New Mexico's Bureau of Business and Economic Research (BBER), New Mexico has lost an average of 218,000 agricultural acres per year over the past two decades. From 1997-2017, the state lost 5.1 million agricultural acres. As we lose this land, we lose not only our agricultural economy and food security, but we also lose wildlife habitat and species.

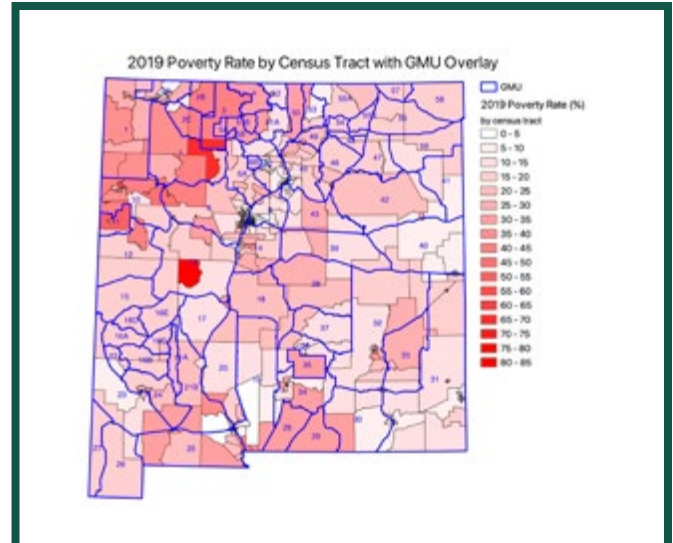


Figure 5.

Poverty by census tract.

Extreme poverty is concentrated in rural New Mexico.

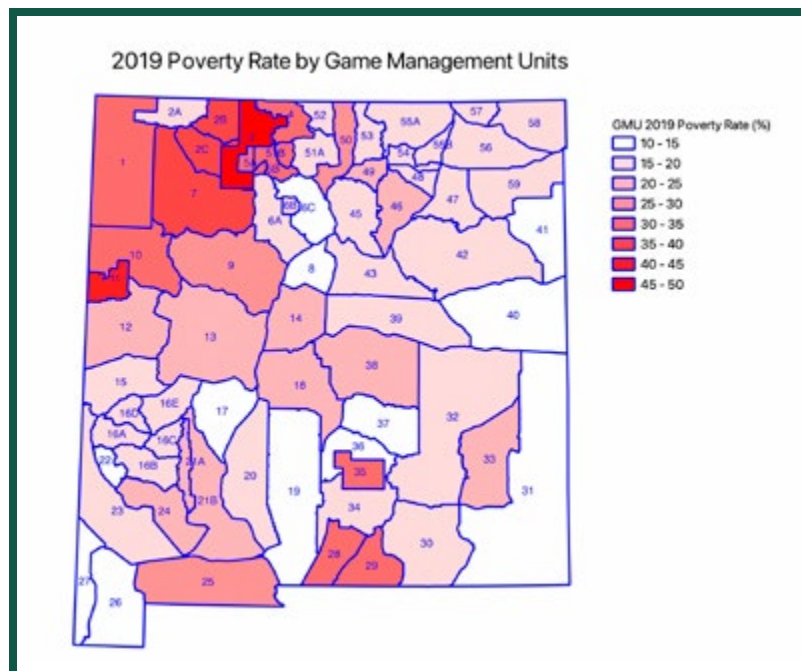


Figure 6.

Poverty rate by Game Management Unit

To evaluate the impact of EPLUS on rural poverty, we calculated the poverty rate for each Game Management Unit (GMU) in New Mexico.

Providing habitat to elk costs private landowners money

Elk grazing on agricultural crops can lead to substantial economic losses. On rangelands and pastures, elk compete with livestock for forage. Research¹⁰ shows that elk consume at a rate of 0.6 to 0.7 animal unit month (AUM) of pasture resources¹¹.

Elk crossing property lines often damage fences. Landowners can spend thousands of dollars per year repairing fences damaged by elk¹². Many ranches in New Mexico report elk damage to fencing and watering infrastructure. Fence repairs are often short-lived when elk return frequently¹³. This is especially problematic when elk rely on water resources on private-lands¹⁴.

Over time, these impacts can place a serious financial strain on agricultural producers, particularly those operating on thin profit margins. As a result, some landowners may feel compelled to sell their land and subdivide it for residential or commercial development as a way to recoup their losses and secure a more stable financial future.

But this solution often only exacerbates the underlying problem. When agricultural lands are subdivided and developed, it leads to a direct loss and fragmentation of elk habitat. As their range becomes increasingly constrained and disconnected, elk may concentrate even more heavily on the remaining agricultural lands, intensifying the damage they cause. This creates a feedback loop that threatens not only the viability of traditional land uses but also the long-term health of elk populations and the ecosystems they inhabit.

EPLUS helps to slow this feedback loop by providing landowners financial incentives to keep their agricultural lands intact in the face of these challenges.

In many states wildlife agencies work with landowners to offset the costs of elk and enhance private land habitat through transferable hunting permits. Landowners can use the permits or sell them in a free market.



Some landowners resort to installing elk proof “high-fences” to protect their agricultural resources. Although fencing out helps protect their land from negative impacts from elk, the amount of elk habitat is reduced. Ranchers that install elk proof fencing are not eligible for the EPLUS program.

A comprehensive study of the economic contributions of EPLUS to rural communities is currently being conducted by [Southwick Associates](#), and will be completed by the end of 2024.

“If I didn’t have permits to sell I would have to sell my cattle due to three years of drought. We need these permits!”

– Rio Arriba County rancher

In New Mexico the revenue generated through EPLUS offsets the costs landowners face, and in many cases is the primary reason landowners keep the habitat intact.

In some cases, transferable licenses still do not entirely cover the costs landowners incur from elk impacts.

Alternative models such as non-transferable landowner tags, public-access incentive programs, or outfitter permits lack the financial incentive that transferable landowner hunting permits provide to conserve or improve habitat. EPLUS authorizations offer the crucial element, a potential revenue stream, to achieve the goals of conserving and improving habitat while offsetting landowner costs.

In winter, outside of normal hunting season, large herds of elk forage in the lower mountain valleys (where farms and ranches are common). When hunting season arrives the elk have left to their higher altitude summer range.

For the small landowner, elk create a particular challenge. Their land is not large enough, or does not demonstrate enough elk presence over the year, to score high enough in the NMDGF habitat assessment — they end up being a “small-contributing ranch (SCR)” and are not guaranteed EPLUS authorizations each year.



Out of season elk feeding on small farms and vineyards became a significant problem in 2023 for landowners in Abiquiu, GMU 6C.



All the land visible in this photograph of GMU 4, northern Rio Arriba County is private land and prime elk habitat. Rural landowners rely on EPLUS to make ends meet, pay property taxes, and recoup damages from elk on their private lands.

These smaller landowners cannot recoup costs by selling tags because their land is too small for someone to pay much to hunt on it.

If elk are not on the landowner's parcel during hunting season, the EPLUS authorization has very little value in the market. In order to mitigate this challenge "unit-wide" authorizations were established.

For this reason, EPLUS authorizations can either be "unit-wide" (UW) or "ranch-only" (RO).

Managing carrying capacity across public and private land

Carrying capacity refers to the maximum population size of a species that an environment can sustain without degradation. The carrying capacity for elk depends on various factors such as habitat quality, precipitation, forage availability, competition with other species, predation, and human activities like hunting and land management practices.

During times of drought, elk numbers may need to be further reduced to conserve the habitat. Carrying capacity needs to take into consideration multiple uses of the land, including livestock production and other wildlife needs. When drought occurs, ranchers cut back numbers of livestock. Wildlife managers need to balance the health of the elk herds in conjunction with the carrying capacity of land.

The carrying capacity on private lands is influenced by land use practices, fencing, and the tolerance of landowners towards elk. Fencing elk off private land, hunting on private land, or not hunting on private land, all affect the carrying capacity for elk.

The number of EPLUS authorizations (and public land licenses) must be based on carrying capacity, not on the demands of hunters (public or private land). When elk habitat is lost, the carrying capacity of a GMU is reduced. When elk population densities increase too much, the carrying capacity of the landscape is also reduced.

Arguments against EPLUS are usually framed around the number of public land hunting licenses available, without any consideration of carrying capacity or the public/private land split used to balance elk hunting in proportion to where elk are present. The number of available licenses must be based on elk population growth and recent carrying capacity assessments.

"As an individual landowner in [GMU] 6A, the little I receive from the sale of my landowner tags has helped repair the constant fencing damage caused by all these elk."

– Sandoval County rancher

Distributing hunters based on elk distribution

The NMDGF allocates public land elk licenses and private land EPLUS authorizations based on wildlife biologists' recommendations at the game management unit (GMU) level. As you can see in Figure 2 on page 6, there is a high proportion of private land in game management units that are home to the largest elk herds in the state. The ratio of public land area to private land area for each GMU in the Primary Management Zone (PMZ) is used to allocate those licenses/allocations to the public draw and EPLUS ranches in the GMU. This is a reasonable approach since elk freely roam between public and private lands in most GMUs.

In the PMZ, many of the major elk herds of New Mexico are co-located with large concentrations of private land. Effective elk management requires regulated hunting on these private lands. NMDGF established EPLUS to partner with landowners to achieve their elk management goals while providing incentives for landowners to maintain elk habitat.

**A group of bachelor bull elk graze
on private land in New Mexico.**



EPLUS supports the rural economy

The economic benefits of EPLUS do not stop at the direct sale of transferable tags. In fact, that makes up only a small fraction of the overall impact of the program on New Mexico's rural economies. This is because hunters in New Mexico spend their money very differently depending on whether they are residents or non-residents.

Non-resident hunters accessing elk tags through the EPLUS program spend far more money overall in New Mexico while hunting than residents. This is because they pay for travel expenses like gas, food and lodging and outfitter and guide services. As a result, their hunting activities contribute significantly more to gross receipts and lodging tax revenues. Non-resident license fees are also significantly higher than resident fees, meaning each non-resident hunter contributes significantly more per elk to wildlife habitat conservation and the other work of NMDGF.

Furthermore, as figure 8 shows, non-resident spending is much more likely to occur in the rural, elk-supporting communities of the state than in the wealthier urban centers. Non-resident hunting tourists typically stay at least one night in the rural communities where they hunt. They pay for guiding and outfitting services, buy new equipment at local sporting goods stores and eat at local restaurants. Those who drive in from neighboring states must fuel vehicles at local gas stations.

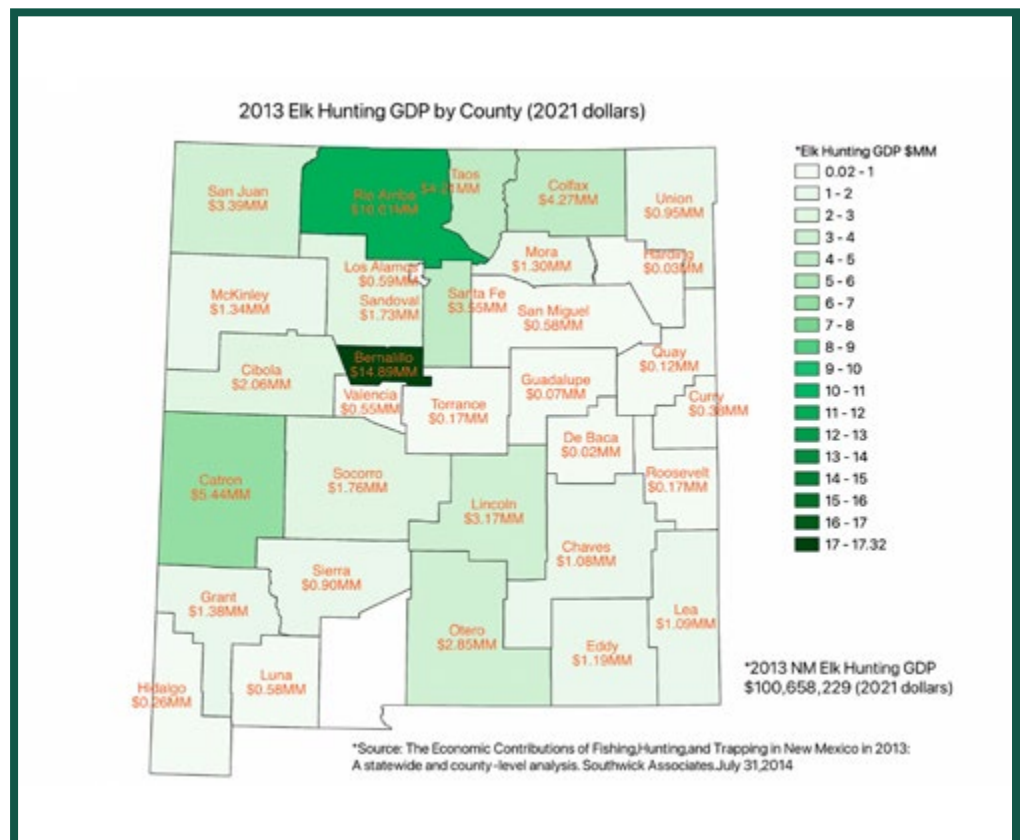
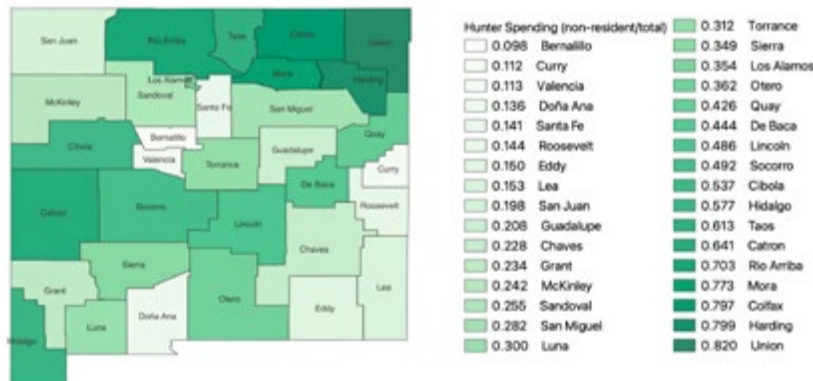


Figure 7

Elk hunting's economic contribution by county

Elk hunters spent nearly \$100 million on the pastime in 2013, the last year for which a full analysis has been completed.

Hunter Spending (Non-Resident) / Hunter Spending (Total)



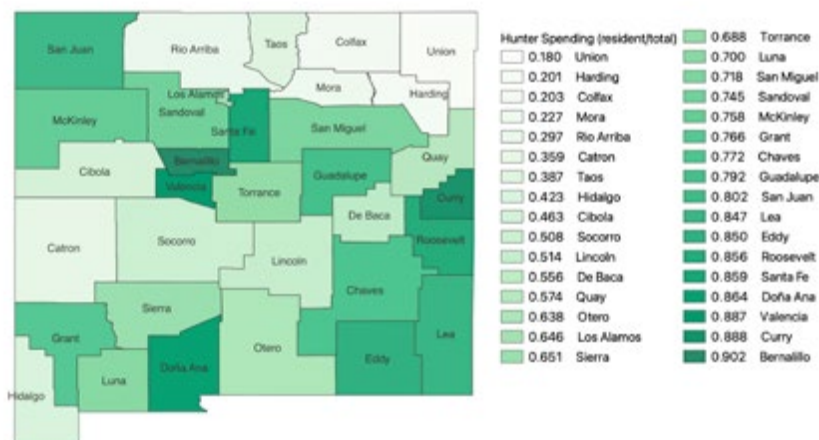
The Economic Contributions of Fishing, Hunting, and Trapping in New Mexico in 2013: A statewide and county-level analysis. July 31, 2014, Southwick Associates for NMDGF

Figure 8

Non-resident hunters spend more in rural communities.

The economic impact of resident vs. non-resident hunting is not equal.

Hunter Spending (Resident) / Hunter Spending (Total)



The Economic Contributions of Fishing, Hunting, and Trapping in New Mexico in 2013: A statewide and county-level analysis. July 31, 2014, Southwick Associates for NMDGF

Figure 9

Resident hunters spend less overall, and mostly close to home, in cities.

Rural communities and small businesses in New Mexico thus rely on non-resident hunters for vital revenue. San Juan and McKinley counties show the spending of local hunters on the Navajo Nation.

Data displayed in Figures 7-9 is from "The Economic Contributions of Fishing, Hunting and Trapping in New Mexico in 2013: A statewide and county-level analysis" by Southwick Associates for NMDGF.



Bull elk rounding up their harems during the rut on public land in GMU 6B.

EPLUS helps target elk hunting economy for maximum benefit

These hunting tourists value the unique experience of hunting in New Mexico's open farm and ranch landscapes and often contribute to local conservation or agricultural organizations as a token of appreciation. New Mexico's elk population and hunting opportunities are renowned around the country and the world. And, because the money hunting tourists spend in New Mexico is imported to the state, it is particularly important to the health of the overall economy.

EPLUS is a good way for New Mexico's wildlife managers to target these benefits to the state's poorest communities, as figure 10 shows.

This phenomenon is not unique to New Mexico. The transferable tag system allows the state to maximize the economic benefits to elk-supporting communities of hunting tourism from around the country and the world. A comparison with other states in the region is provided starting on page 21.

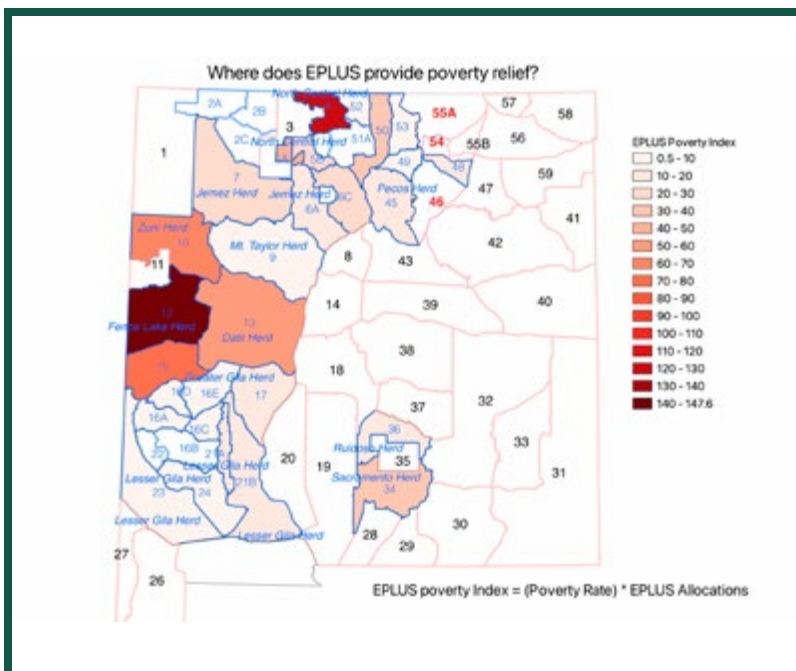


Figure 10.

EPLUS poverty index.

The darkest-colored areas are where EPLUS allocations and poverty were both highest by Game Management Unit. GMUs 1, 11 and 35 are 100 percent tribal land, so no EPLUS allocations can be made there.

How EPLUS Impacts the Resident Elk Draw

There are more people wanting to hunt than there are available elk hunting licenses. Public land licenses are available through a competitive draw. Private land licenses are assigned to qualifying landowners in the EPLUS pool based on their elk habitat scoring by NMDGF. Quotas applied to the draw for public land licenses set 84% of licenses for residents, 10% for residents and non-residents who contract with outfitters, and 6% for nonresidents for each hunt code.

Many applicants in the draw for public land elk licenses continue to apply for the most competitive game management units (GMU). These popular GMUs offer a more attractive hunting experience and/or more trophy bull elk opportunities.

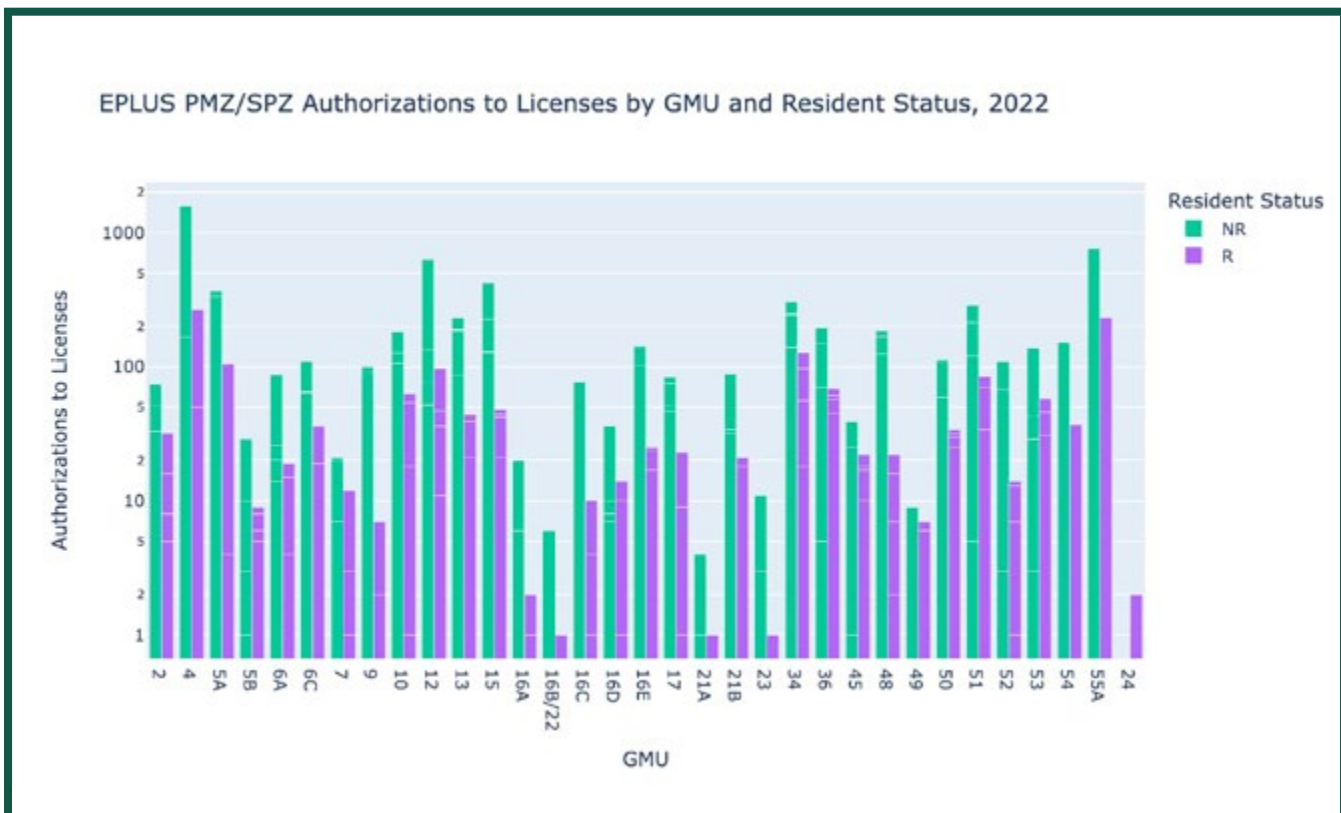


Figure 11

New Mexico residents wait on the draw rather than purchase a tag

The distribution of authorizations converted to private land elk hunting licenses is shown here by GMU and residency status. In competitive GMUs (e.g. 4, 16A, 16C, 34, 55A) more non-residents purchase private land authorizations.

In 2020, 2021, and 2022, a total of 24,381 elk hunting licenses were available. In 2022 alone, there were 103,171 applicants for these licenses. On average, across all choices in the draw, the odds of winning were 0.29, meaning there were 3.39 applicants who did not win for every winner. However, the odds of winning in the most competitive choices were even lower, yet applicants consistently chose them. For instance, the top three choices for residents in 2022 were GMU 34, ES; GMU 6B, ES; and GMU 16A, MB, with availability ratios of 0.065, 0.017, and 0.051 respectively, all indicating relatively low chances of winning in the draw.

Choices in the 2022 NMDGF Public Land Elk Hunting License Draw

Some hunters who are not successful in the draw for public land elk hunting licenses are blaming EPLUS private land authorizations for their loss in the draw or for the increase in the number of non-resident hunters in the state. New Mexico, however, is no different than other states¹⁵, where more non-resident hunters hunt private land than residents¹⁶. Since EPLUS licenses are equal opportunity, they are available to both resident and non-resident hunters alike. However, the majority go to non-residents, who generally are more willing to pay for the opportunity to hunt on private land.

This finding is made clear when looking at non-resident utilization of both the Secondary Management Zone (SMZ) and Primary Management Zone (PMZ). In the SMZ, where elk numbers are not actively managed by the NMDGF and over-the-counter licenses are unlimited, hunters can access hunting opportunities by obtaining written permission and paying for access to the private land, similar to that of a “trespass fee.” Non-resident hunters use the SMZ more than residents. The PMZ’s limited authorizations result in high demand and higher prices, resulting in more non-resident hunters who value the hunting experience purchasing the authorization.

Moving private land licenses into the pool of public land licenses defeats the entire purpose of elk population management and dispersal. The open market of private land authorizations is unrelated to winning in the draw for public land licenses — since the determination of how many licenses go to public land and private is determined by wildlife biology and the public/private land split.

Elk hunting licenses need to be carefully allocated between public and private lands, otherwise elk will congregate on private land, reducing harvest opportunity on public land and causing more damage to private land resources.

“The EPLUS program is one of the best options for locals to hunt their home districts and the landowners do a great job of keeping the land in great condition for the elk populations. I strongly believe the EPLUS program is great the way it is.”

– New Mexico resident hunter

Comparison with other states

Thirteen western states offer landowners permits to hunt wildlife on their property, with seven states allowing landowners to sell these permits. Transferable permits provide a higher revenue potential and a strong incentive to preserve wildlife habitat.

The incentive can be customized to prioritize financial relief to landowners, big-game population growth, habitat conservation, migration corridor conservation, or other benefits, depending on state wildlife agencies' goals.

Many states look at New Mexico's EPLUS positively since it monitors landowners habitat in order for them to receive transferable authorization

“As a low-income rancher every year up to 2/3 of my alfalfa is lost to elk consumption. The EPLUS tag allows me to harvest an elk to put food on my table and feed my family.”

– Rancher

Alternative models such as non-transferable landowner tags, public-access incentive programs, or outfitter permits lack the financial incentive that transferable landowner hunting permits provide to conserve or improve habitat. EPLUS authorizations offer the crucial element, a potential revenue stream, to achieve the goals of conserving and improving habitat while offsetting landowner costs. This is especially important in the economically struggling rural areas of New Mexico.

Colorado, New Mexico and Utah have a unique system where hunting permission and game harvesting permission are separate. Landowners are given transferable “vouchers” or “authorizations” for access to private property, but hunters must still buy a hunting permit from the wildlife agency. This ensures that public hunting permit revenues are not reduced. Landowners can charge for access, but only for the resource they own – habitat and opportunity.

Arizona contains only 16.7% private land compared to New Mexico's 46.6% private land. Arizona does provide some hunting on private land via its Land Owner Compact program (which only involves 13 ranches, compared to 3,031 EPLUS registered ranches in New Mexico, 799 of them being SMZ ranches).

Transferable Landowner Hunting Permit Programs

State	Program	Species	Landowner Eligibility Requirements	Permit Seller	Where Permit is Applicable	Public Access Requirement
Colorado	Ranching for Wildlife	Elk, deer, pronghorn, black bear, turkey, moose, bighorn sheep	- Habitat management performance standard - Minimum acreage - Agreement with state agency	State agency (landowners sell vouchers)	Landowner property	Yes: A percentage of each ranch's permits given to the public
	Landowner Preference program	Elk, deer, pronghorn	- Minimum acreage - Presence of and/or use by wildlife - Demonstrated cost	State agency (landowners sell vouchers)	Landowner property or unit-wide*	No
Nevada	Landowner Damage Compensation Tags	Deer, pronghorn	- Presence of and/or use by wildlife - Demonstrated cost - Agreement with state agency	Landowner	Landowner property or unit-wide*	Yes: Public access to adjacent, inaccessible public lands required
	Special Elk Incentive Tags	Elk	- Presence of and/or use by wildlife - Agreement with state agency	Landowner	Unit-wide	Yes: Public access to adjacent, inaccessible public lands required
New Mexico	Elk Private Lands Use System	Elk	- Habitat management performance standard - Location within state agency's management zones - Agreement with state agency	State agency (landowners sell authorizations)	Landowner property or unit-wide†	Varies: Landowners who receive unit-wide permits must allow access to their land
Oregon	Landowner Preference Program	Elk, deer, pronghorn (pronghorn permits non-transferable)	Minimum acreage	Landowner	Landowner property	No
Utah	Limited-Entry Landowner Permits	Elk, deer, pronghorn	Presence of and/or use by wildlife	State agency (landowners sell vouchers)	Unit-wide	Yes: One public hunter allowed access for every voucher

* Determined by state agency

† Determined by landowner

Source: Western State Wildlife Agencies

Figure 13

EPLUS is not radical

New Mexico's program is similar to other landowner permit programs. From "Conserving Wildlife Habitat with Landowner Hunting Permits", PERC Report Sep. 20, 2021.

“I run a small ranch containing 200 acres on state road 112 south of Tierra Amarilla, a crossing for elk and deer which ruins my fences. But I only get one elk permit. It is not enough to keep up with all the maintenance and all the grass lost.”

– Rio Arriba County rancher

Conclusion

EPLUS evolved to incentivize landowners to maintain critical elk habitat in New Mexico. The fact that many of New Mexico's elk herds spend significant time on private lands indicates that large and intact private lands are sought after by elk.

Other states are expressing interest in moving towards an EPLUS-like system where the number of transferrable private land elk licenses is based on the quantity and quality of the elk habitat the private land provides. Landowners have to demonstrate a continuing commitment to maintaining quality elk habitat in order to receive authorizations. The authorizations must be adjusted relative to the measured carrying capacity of the private land habitat.

Private land elk hunting in New Mexico via EPLUS attracts hunters to the rural areas of the state. These hunters provide significant economic inputs to these rural communities. Elk hunting is a strong attraction for out of state visitors who boost New Mexico's economy. Non-resident hunters are the majority of hunters of private lands in most states.

New Mexico suffers from extreme poverty in many of the rural communities where EPLUS provides food security and vital economic inputs. Rural New Mexicans depend on EPLUS directly for food, and for the economic boost it brings to these impoverished communities.

The draw for public land elk licenses and private land EPLUS authorizations are separate concerns. The allocation of licenses between public and private lands is based on wildlife biology needs to manage elk populations in the state. Moving private land allocations/licenses into the public land draw will decrease the ability of NMDGF to manage elk, distribute elk across the landscape, adversely impact public land hunting and reduce incentives for landowners to maintain elk habitat.

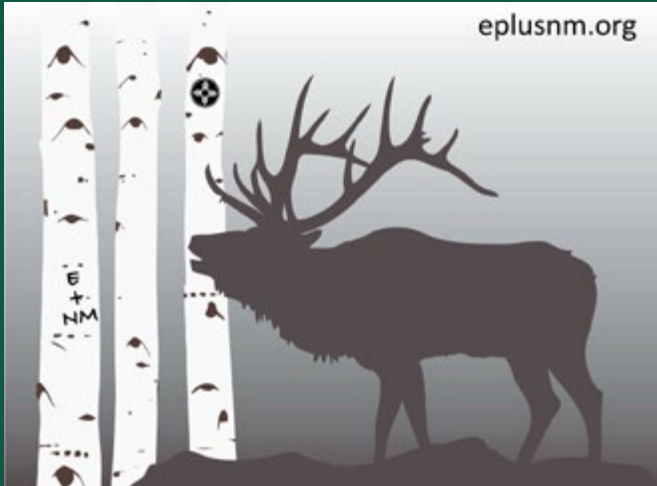


Elk on private land in Abiquiu, New Mexico (April 2023) caused problems for small landowners, damaging vineyards, and other crops, and fences. Some landowners erect elk proof fencing, which reduces elk habitat. The Abiquiu situation is a classic case where unit-wide authorizations are needed to encourage landowners to provide winter and spring habitat for elk.

Endnotes

- 1 New Mexico Statutes Chapter 17. Game and Fish and Outdoor Recreation § 17-1-14; and [NMAC 19.30.5](#).
- 2 New Mexico Statutes Chapter 17. Game and Fish and Outdoor Recreation § 17-1-14.
- 3 Sergeyev, M., B. R. McMillan, L. K. Hall, K. R. Hersey, C. D. Jones, and R. T. Larsen. 2022. Reducing the refuge effect: using private-land hunting to mitigate issues with hunter access. *Journal of Wildlife Management* 86:e22148. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jwmg.22148>
- 4 “Effects of Humans on Behaviour of Wildlife Exceed Those of Natural Predators in a Landscape of Fear”, Simone Ciuti, Joseph M. Northrup, Tyler B. Muhly, Silvia Simi, Marco Musiani, Justin A. Pitt, Mark S. Boyce Published: November 28, 2012 <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0050611>
- 5 For more details and data analysis see the website <https://eplusnm.org>
- 6 Biggs, J. R., Bennett, K. D., & Fresquez, P. R. (2001). Relationship between home range characteristics and the probability of obtaining successful hunter-harvested samples. *Wildlife Society Bulletin*, 29(4), 1222-1228.
- 7 New Mexico Department of Game and Fish. (2019). Brucellosis found in elk in the Sacramento Mountains. In 2019, the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish reported that a hunter-harvested elk in the Sacramento Mountains tested positive for brucellosis. This finding raised concerns about the potential spread of the disease to livestock in the area.
- 8 Biggs, James R., Kathryn D. Bennett, and Phil R. Fresquez. “Relationship between home range characteristics and the probability of obtaining successful global positioning system (GPS) collar positions for elk in New Mexico.” *Western North American Naturalist* (2001): 213-222. The amount of time elk spend on private land is dependent on the GMU in New Mexico. For example, GMU 4 is predominantly private land and has a high elk density. A counter example is GMU 6B (Valles Caldera) where there is very little private land and has a high elk density.
- 9 Leopold, A. (1949) “A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There”. In essay “Conservation Economics”, Oxford University Press, New York
- 10 Pratt, M., & Rasmussen, G. A. (2001). Determining Your Stocking Rate. Utah State University Cooperative Extension.
- 11 An AUM, or Animal Unit Month, is a standard unit of measurement used in rangeland management to quantify the amount of forage consumed by grazing animals. An Animal Unit (AU) is typically defined as a 1,000-pound (450 kg) mature cow with a calf up to 6 months old or its equivalent.
- 12 Smallidge, S. T., & Halbritter, H. (2008). Elk and cattle fence conflicts in northern New Mexico. New Mexico State University Cooperative Extension Service. Circular 657
- 13 VerCauteren, K. C., Lavelle, M. J., & Hygnstrom, S. (2006). Fences and deer-damage management: a review of designs and efficacy. *Wildlife Society Bulletin*, 34(1), 191-200.
- 14 Livestock-Elk Conflict Symposium, Sep. 26, 2022. New Mexico Cattle Growers’ Association.
- 15 Nickerson, P. H., Boxall, P. C., & Watson, D. O. (2018). The Economic Impact of Hunting in Colorado. Alliance for Responsible Wildlife Management. <https://www.responsiblewildlifemanagement.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/The-Economic-Impact-of-Hunting-in-Colorado.pdf>
- 16 Colorado Parks and Wildlife. (2020). 2019 Big Game Hunting Season Summary. <https://cpw.state.co.us/Documents/Hunting/BigGame/Statistics/2019BigGameHuntingSummary.pdf>

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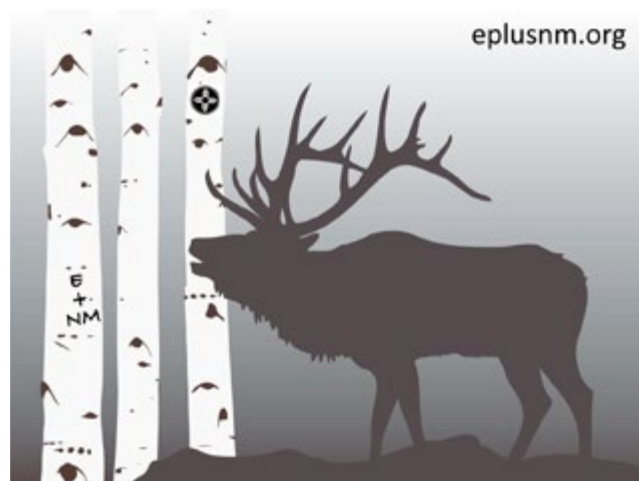
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