

## Summary Report of Aerial Survey of Elk

May 22, 1998

### Background

Wildlife conflict with Agricultural interests in the BC Peace have been of growing concern due to recent expansions of the wild ungulate populations. Loss of stored hay crops, damage to un-harvested grain and forage crops, loss of cropping options, and costly changes to grazing tenures are escalating on lands where considerable agricultural developments have occurred over the last two generations. Little if any elk were reported occurring in these farming areas during the period of agricultural development.

Despite round table discussions with various interest groups, cattlemen have been unable to change regulation and policy that ultimately determines the amount of financial loss the agricultural industry suffers due to wildlife damages. Fundamental differences of opinion exist on how many animals are causing problems, the magnitude of the damage and wildlife management strategies.

The purpose of this project was to provide a reliable indication of the need for using wildlife inventories as a basis for proposing sound problem wild ungulate strategies. Cattlemen were convinced that part of the reason why their interests were not being addressed was lack of an understanding by others of how many problem animals there are. Although Cattlemen demonstrated a willingness to address this problem on their own, they recognized that all agricultural development in this region faces a similar challenge and that attention to the need for wildlife inventories is the fundamental question. To date, accurate, frequently updated inventories of the number of wild ungulates in problem areas have not been available for use in addressing the conflict.

### Methodology

Following a relatively sudden change in a grazing tenure administration in an area that has experienced growing elk populations and elk damage, cattlemen met with government and wildlife managers to convey their knowledge of how the local increase in elk populations have led to increasing financial losses to cattlemen. The debates seemed to revolve around disagreements on how many elk there were and how many there should be. Cattlemen decided that personal reports and photographs alone could not portray the magnitude of the herds which they were suffering from. Aerial survey with an experienced wildlife survey pilot and an independent observer was chosen as a suitable means to demonstrate their point.

Fixed wing aircraft was chosen as the cheapest means of meeting the objective. Prior to embarking on the aerial portion of the survey, fieldmen for the Upper Cache and Upper Halfway Cattlemen's Associations conducted a telephone survey and an aerial survey by private aircraft to locate the most recent locations of elk on members farms and ranches. This was done to increase the efficiency of the formal aerial survey and to reduce the flying time costs of the commercial aircraft and pilot. This was done immediately prior to the scheduled aerial count. The aerial count was conducted by Mr. Carlos Finsterbush (fieldman for Upper Cache Cattlemen's Association), Mr. Bruce Simpson (Upper

Halfway Livestock Association), Dr. Tom Pittman (Chairman, Peace-Liard Regional Problem Wildlife Committee) and Ron Mechum (pilot for Caribou Air) in a Cessna fixed wing aircraft. Carlos, Bruce and Ron individually counted each sighted elk group, agreed on the exact number they saw, and Tom verified and documented this number. (Appendix #1)

### Results

In approximately four hours of commercial flying time, 636 elk were counted on farmlands in the Cache and Halfway watersheds. It was immediately apparent at the time that the numbers of elk being counted were far less than what other circumstances and sign indicated there likely were present. These circumstances included: animals in cover, animal dispersion due to time of day, weather and time of year, and countless tracks in the new fallen snow. It was agreed amongst the observers however, that despite this observation, the numbers seen were indication of a significantly higher number of problem wild ungulates than had previously been recorded and that their primary wintering area was deeded farmland. Numerous damaged stored feed supplies were also seen.

In the days following the aerial survey, numerous telephone calls and personal communications with the landowners of the area provided more evidence that the numbers counted were likely below the tally of the actual existing elk population that was causing damages. There was general agreement that the survey had accomplished the goal of demonstrating that a significant growth of elk numbers had occurred in recent years, that these animals were homesteading on agriculturally developed lands and that the need to undertake scientific inventories is a fundamental information need to address this problem.

### Implications of This Project to Regional Agricultural Development

Active demonstration of a leadership role in addressing obstacles to agricultural development in the Peace has been well facilitated by access to this fund. This project also drew attention to a resource management issue that faces the entire Peace Region agricultural community because of our close approximation to vast areas of wildlife habitat. Failure to actively seek remedy to problem wildlife would denigrate the agricultural community reputation as good stewards of their resource.

Continuing efforts in problem wildlife conflict resolution are expected, and the results of this project are expected to aid in the formation of improved objectives and strategies for wildlife management adjacent to agricultural land.

Appendix #1

Mid-day survey of approximately 4 hours flying time, taken between 10 AM and 2 PM, Tuesday February 10, 1998. Weather mild and slightly overcast, 48 hours previous fresh snow, clear weather, and rising full moon.

<u>Approximate Area</u>	<u># of Elk Counted</u>
Bear Flats	86
	23
	5
	1
	27
Yorke, MacElaney, Large Kelly	112
	24
	108
MacDonnough (Countless fresh tracks and beds)	11
Bovee (none seen although reported 17 in stack yard this AM)	0
Lower Cameron River	27
Federal Ranch	61
Mid Halfway River area	36
Scobie (tracks and beds judged to be in excess of number counted)	74
Trask (tracks and beds judged to be in excess of number counted)	14
Dave Simpson	5
Weitzels	22
<b>TOTAL ELK COUNTED</b>	<b>636</b>

In addition bison were spotted on cleared land near Pink Mountain but a thorough survey was not done due to low fuel level in the plane.

Aerial photography was attempted but turned out to be impossible for practical purposes. The most conservative estimate possible would be approximately 650 elk (636 + 17 from Bovee's confirmed sightings that AM). However, some additional factors also suggest that this tally is likely to be an significant underestimation of the numbers likely present.