

To: Director Cal Groen and Commissioners  
From: Steve Alder  
Date: 3-5-2008  
RE: **Clearwater elk: Why we have earned the right to be concerned!**

It was 11 years ago this spring that we were beating down the IDFG doors declaring we have lost 50%+ of the elk in the Lochsa due to the worst winter kill in documented history. This was the winter of 1996-1997. We had been hiking the Lochsa over the winter of 96 and spring of 97 and knew we were in serious trouble with our elk herds above Fish Creek to the Montana border. We also knew based on observing storm patterns that the upper North Fork of the Clearwater, Cayuse and Kelly creek regions would be in serious trouble also. We knew a small elk herd was being fed near Powell Ranger station and they were doing fine. We were alone in our hiking and elk monitoring trips, as we saw no other footprints that might be from concerned biologists from the IDFG who might even be curious about our elk herd's status during this horrible winter. We didn't blame the department for the winterkill on the Lochsa as the elk were trapped at the 4-5,000 foot level and the elk didn't die along the Llochsa river like they did in the winter of 68-69. We did blame them for not trying to provide emergency winter feeding up the North Fork of the Clearwater Road which could have been accomplished. In fact in the spring of 1997, hundreds of dead elk were found along the North Fork road where they could have received emergency feed to sustain them. In fact one friend took 100 sets of ivory out of cow elk in the North Fork of the Clearwater in the spring of 1997 and saw another 200 dead elk comprised of mostly calves and numerous bulls! The local's also complained about seeing an increased number of dead elk and came forth publically but were also ignored and marginalized as typical rhetoric from hunters.

In May of 1997, Cal Alder met with IDFG Biologist Jay Crenshaw to discuss Cal's grim observations of the Lolo elk herd in the Lochsa. Cal pleaded with Jay to suspend the 500 cow elk permits that were scheduled in the Lolo Zone for the 1997 fall season as he knew elk populations were in Peril. Jay's reaction was to set Cal straight on the facts by taking him to his office and showing him computer data indicating dad was unequivocally wrong with his facts and that according to Jay's computer the elk were doing fine. He proceeded to inform Cal that the winter of 96-97 was just a normal winterkill for our Lolo elk and that maybe the losses were on the high side of the normal 7-10%. Jay also mentioned the warm thaw from January 1997 had helped saved the elk and not to worry. Then in the spring of 1997, I called IDFG biologist George Pauly from Kamiah to report how dire things were in the Lolo. Pauly was the biologist responsible for the Lochsa and he basically told me the same thing indicating it was an average winter kill using the 7-10% average losses and he said it was probably more on the 10% side. He obviously wasn't happy with my attitude questioning him about a much higher mortality rate due to

my lack of credentials and not having his expert background and knowledge. I recall him saying, "That's a thousand dead elk", as he was defensive to my accusations of the mortality being much, much higher. The department had lost at least 50% of its elk in units 10 and 12 instead of the claimed 7-10% and the only ones that didn't know it were the experts!

The Dept claimed they did an aerial count in the spring of 1997,(See newspaper article below), which they later indicated it was not an actual flight but an interpolated count (Artificial elk count created on their computer)! The dept published this data anyway as if it really had legitimacy and claimed the elk were doing fine in the Lolo. This was just another attempt to appease the public and demonstrate sound scientific management practices were in place and Sportsman's dollars were hard at work! It wasn't until the aerial counts during the winter of 1998 that IF&G realized the elk were in serious trouble. (See article below). In fact one of the biologist's who flew the Lochsa in 1998 and normally hunted where our group hunted told me that after he flew the Lochsa that spring and saw the lack of elk he and his hunting buddies left the Lochsa for good and decided to hunt elsewhere in the state. Our hunting group also relocated to a different area but since we had been proactively monitoring the elk we obviously relocated in the fall of 1997 a full year before these IF&G's employees did!

After the winter kill of the upper Lochsa we found the elk were still plentiful in the lower elevation areas of the Lochsa from mile post 120 at Fish creek to Lowell and in the Selway from Race Creek to Lowell. We had tremendous elk hunting in these lower areas of the Lochsa and Selway until 2003 when the wolves really began making an impact on the elk herd. The big herds around Bimmerick meadows and Coolwater Ridge are almost gone.

We have been concerned that since the department still employs many of the same biologists that it did in the 1996-1997 period, the probability of its management practices would still be consistent and this is putting it kindly! As the saying goes, "The best way to predict future behavior is past performance". If this were a corporation, heads would have rolled because smart businesspeople know that you can't manage what you don't monitor.

What I recommend is to hire a \$30,000 a year wildlife tech that can hike, snowshoe, snow machine and keep tabs on these vital resources. This person will have to go afoot on occasion, take pictures and document all data. In our opinion, this person will know more about what's going on in the field than the entire regional department combined with all their computers and biology degrees!!!! If each region could find a way to fund this program it would truly payoff long-term. Another sad issue is the only thing that saved a few elk in the upper Lochsa that horrible winter was the old growth forest pockets. The elk were eating bark off of the cedar trees and lichen hanging down from the trees. Obviously the snow wasn't as deep in these old growth areas and this protective

blanket saved a few elk. The department later claimed the need to burn this old growth to provide better habitat for wintering!!!!!! If the department would require the reading of Bud Moore's book entitled "The Lochsa Story" they would understand this. In the old days, Forest Service officials like Bud Moore worked very close with the Fish and game monitoring elk herds during the winter. I recently asked Canadian wolf expert Dr Val Geist about this monitoring issue and he states this problem started in the late 60-70 because of funding and values priorities. He says the department's claim they can't afford to monitor their big game herds like they used to and we are paying for it later as this experience indicates.

The Lolo elk would never recover from 1996-1997 because the previous year (1995) was when the wolves were introduced and in addition the Fall Bear hunts were also suspended during this time by the recommendation of predator loving biologist Steve Nadeau who was concerned about the lack of mature bears in this region that were inadvertently being shot in the Fall season. Many of us felt the incredible elk herds could have returned in 5-7 years but with the presence of the wolf and the increase in bear numbers the already diminished elk herds could never rebound regardless of habitat or any other element.

We realize we have habitat issues in the Lochsa and the remnant of the 1910 fires is almost gone, but the carrying capacity is abundant enough for far more elk than we currently have. We can show biologist's good habitat and ample uneaten elk feed to support the claim that its not primarily habitat that's devastating our elk herds but every biologist in the state sounds like a broken record repeating itself and to others that its all habitat!

The basis of studying history is that we can learn something for the future. Pro-active management requires pro-active monitoring.. That's why some of us got very frustrated in the spring of 2007 when Jim Unsworth boasted in a meeting that the department knew more about the wolf numbers than they did about the elk numbers!

We honestly are concerned for the welfare of the Clearwater elk. We have been criticized and discredited by the experts in IDFG for what we were seeing and witnessing in the Lolo. In our opinion, IDFG should have been the ones out watching our elk more closely and doing their jobs instead of us.

Following are newspaper articles that prove how the IDFG never knew they had lost thousands of elk during the winter of 1996-1997. They didn't admit this until 1998 after their counts. This sad story truly suggests how out of touch our Wildlife biologists are with the wildlife they are commissioned to manage!

## **IDFG Biologist Jay Crenshaw claims it was an average winter**

Big game; Harsh winter took a toll on region's elk

Bill Loftus

Published: Lewiston Tribune

1997-05-29

Page: 1C

**The elk in the Clearwater Region took a harder hit than usual during the winter just past. But the losses to the long winter marked by record mountain snows isn't outside the normal range, Idaho Fish and Game Department officials say.**

Jay Crenshaw, the agency's regional wildlife manager at Lewiston, said Fish and Game biologists have been monitoring conditions and the herd since January.

**The agency this spring also sent biologists out into the heart of the region's elk ranges to check for the carcasses of elk that didn't survive the weather.**

*"There's no doubt we had some losses," Crenshaw said, "but we haven't seen anything to suggest it's outside the normal range."*

*About 5 to 10 percent of the elk herd dies off during the winter most years, Crenshaw said, adding this year's losses might be pushing that upper end of the range.*

Crenshaw said most of the region's elk herd wintered at elevations low enough to avoid the deepest snows. During surveys of game units 10A and 12 along the Clearwater River's North Fork, however, it appeared some elk may have been trapped by deep snow in remote areas, Crenshaw said.

Along the Lochsa River, the worst conditions appeared from about Fish Creek upstream, Crenshaw said.

His memo outlining the health of the herd is in response to worries about the winter kill voiced by sportsmen during Fish and Game Director Steve Mealey's April visit. Tracking the number of elk that die during the late winter and early spring is difficult because of the remoteness of the wintering areas, Crenshaw said.

The spring surveys along the North Fork and other prime areas did turn up some carcasses. Crenshaw said an agency technician found about 50 elk carcasses along the North Fork in mid-April. That's about equal to a local outfitter's report in the same area in 1993, a winter that was relatively uneventful for the elk herd, Crenshaw said.

**Another bit of evidence that the herd survived the winter relatively well, Crenshaw said, was provided by research biologists marking cow elk for a calf survival study this spring.**

**All of the 40 elk marked units 12 and 15 during March appeared to be in at least average body condition, indicating they should survive the winter, Crenshaw said. None died as a result of being in poor condition.**

Crenshaw said hunters may find fewer elk, particularly yearling or spike bulls, in some areas during hunting seasons this fall. The losses of calves during the winter was probably greatest along the North Fork, Lochsa and Selway rivers, he said.

*But the losses are unlikely to be severe enough to require any changes in regulations, Crenshaw said. Nor does he expect long range consequences.*

*"The long term survival of elk in the Clearwater Region is not in jeopardy as a result of the influence of this past winter," Crenshaw said.*

## **1997 Interpolated Count and obvious lies about Aerial and ground surveys that never took place:**

Associated Press

1997-12-04

Published: Lewiston Tribune

Page: 2C

BOISE -- Abundant moisture followed by a mild fall is good for big game but not for hunters.

The Idaho Fish and Game Department said hunter success appears to be off in most regions of the state this fall. Official hunter surveys have not been conducted yet, but indications are that fewer than the normal number of tags were filled.

High big game losses due to severe weather last winter were a factor in the Panhandle. Record snowfalls had a big impact on whitetail deer herds at higher elevations and to a lesser extent on elk. The weather, combined with a lack of snow this fall, halved hunter success from last year.

More deer were found in Panhandle valleys where winter losses were less. But deer also remain a source of depredation complaints in agricultural areas.

*Some Clearwater Region hunters have complained about finding fewer elk this fall, particularly in units around Dworshak Reservoir. Hunter success also was off in that region.*

*Aerial and ground surveys of elk in northern units of the Clearwater Region last spring showed no signs of unusual winter kill.*

## **After The Fact when they finally got off their well paid backsides and decided to check on our elk after listening to hunters for over a year!**

Bill Loftus

1998-02-26

Published: Lewiston Tribune

Page: 1D

Spurred by increasing worries about one of the state's top elk herds, Idaho Fish and Game Department officials want to cut the number of hunters along the Lochsa and North Fork of the Clearwater rivers next fall.

The Clearwater Region staff proposed limiting the numbers of general rifle hunt permits for bull elk to 1,500 in the Lolo Zone, which includes game units 10 and 12.

The agency suspended sales of non-resident permits Friday until the Fish and Game Commission meets next week at Idaho Falls to set fall hunting regulations and figure out how the department will divvy up the available permits. Commission member Keith Carlson of Lewiston said he expects the proposal to pass because the Lolo Zone's problems are well-known and documented. Elsewhere in the state, elk herds are prospering. In 1996, the most recent season for which totals are available, agency officials estimate 3,000 hunters pursued elk during the general rifle season in the zone east of Pierce and Lowell.

*During helicopter game surveys this winter, the agency found elk numbers had dropped dramatically in unit 10 since 1994. Much of the problem was blamed on the long, hard winter of 1996-97.*

Other persistent problems, ranging from predators to a decline in elk habitat caused by aging brushfields, have also been long recognized in the area.

*The total number of elk dropped by nearly half, while the number of bull elk dropped by 71 percent.*

The survey reinforced reports from hunters in unit 10 and neighboring 12 from the past several years that elk numbers were dropping and bulls in particular were becoming harder to find.

From the 1999 Idaho Elk management plan:

The winter of 1996/97 was marked by severe conditions including extremely deep snow exceeding 200% of average snowpack in some areas. These conditions caused higher-than-normal winter mortality leading to a modest decrease in the Unit 15 population (-10%) and a dramatic decline in the Unit 10 population (-48%). Anecdotal information suggests a moderate decline may have occurred in Unit 10A. If so, additional reductions in cow and bull harvest levels will be necessary.

### *Biological Issues*

Poor productivity since the late 1980s and winter losses in 1996/97 have contributed to dramatically decreasing elk herds within this zone. Across the history of sightability surveys (1985-present), cow elk declined 4%/year, bull elk declined 12%/year, the bull:cow ratio declined 8%/year, and calf recruitment (calf:cow ratio) declined 14%/year. The current population is well below objectives.

The winter of 1996/97 was marked by severe conditions including extremely deep snow exceeding 200% of average snowpack in some areas. These conditions apparently caused higher-than-normal winter mortality leading to a dramatic decline in the Unit 10 population (-48%). In addition, a survey was conducted in Unit 12 during the 1996/97 and those results suggested a 30% decline to that time. This data, in combination with overwhelming anecdotal information suggests that catastrophic winter losses occurred in Units 10 and 12.