



Senator Luann Ridgeway – Serving Clay County

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Taking a Close Look at Elk Restoration in Missouri

How many times have you been driving and seen a dead deer beside the road, killed by an auto collision? If you travel on Missouri's roads often, like I do, you realize that deer-car collisions happen frequently. Now, what if that 150 pound deer was replaced with a 700 pound elk? If this concerns you, continue reading.

Last month, the Missouri Conservation Commission made a decision to enact the Elk Restoration Plan, with elk being released in a three-county (Shannon, Reynolds and Carter Counties) radius in early 2011.

I am deeply concerned about the Conservation Department's plan to release 150 elk in southeast Missouri next year. Because the counties initially affected are so far away, you may not have heard very much about this project yet. However, I feel there may be some unintended consequences all Missourians need to consider.

When I was raised in Missouri, one rarely saw a deer. Today, deer are plentiful all across Missouri. Because all Missouri has such fertile feeding grounds, it is only reasonable to assume that, as the original 150 elk reproduce, they will forage for new food plots. An expanding wild elk population cannot be expected to remain in a 3 county area anymore than wild deer are currently contained. Missouri already has more road miles than any other state of comparable size. Many roads plus an expanding wild elk population may spell disaster for Missouri travelers.

A similar plan was considered in 2000, but the public opinion against restoring elk to

Missouri was extremely negative. This year, the Missouri Conservation Department (MDC) solicited opinion in a much faster process than ten years ago and in meetings, did not allow public discussion as before. Because of this, and after review of public comments received from the Department, I question the assertion that the public truly supports this plan.

The concerns of landowners, farmers and local residents echo my own:

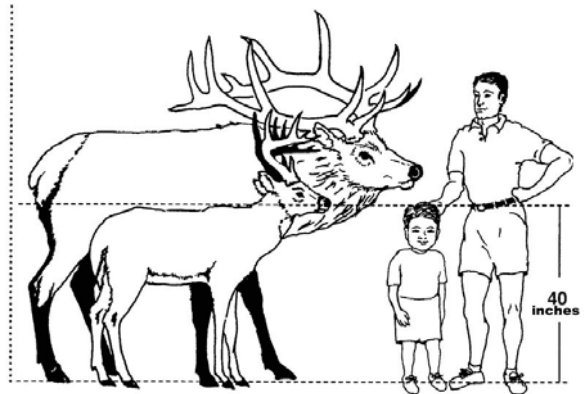
- The devastation to crops as elk herds move through an area. These large animals are grazers, just like cows and unlike our current deer population that simply browse;
- Infectious diseases that can be spread to cattle populations and would be very expensive and difficult to ever eradicate;
- And most disturbing, the potential for severe injury and vehicle destruction if an elk is on a highway, just as white tailed deer often are. Should our tax dollars be used to introduce a public safety hazard that is potentially lethal?

The MDC has responded to these concerns by saying: "...*The 2000 Missouri Elk Reintroduction Feasibility Study showed that the two key elements of suitable elk restoration sites were adequate habitat and minimal potential for conflicts with human activities. The wild area of our restoration zone in southeast Missouri is mostly public land, has suitable habitat, limited roads and limited agricultural activity.*"

<http://mdc.mo.gov/landwater-care/animal-management/elk-restoration/elk-restoration-plan-faqs>

Let's examine these statements. Missouri's largest industry is agriculture, valued at \$7.5 billion in 2007. Cattle and calves made up \$1.6 billion of that amount. Looking at the eight counties surrounding the initially affected area, livestock are valued at approximately \$152 million. In Shannon, Carter and Reynolds counties alone, livestock value was more than \$13 million. These figures are no small amounts. An infectious disease in elk is easily transferred to cattle. Poor livestock health would be disastrous and extremely expensive for Missouri cattle farmers to combat.

Now let's compare the size of deer versus the size of elk. A male white tailed deer weighs 150 pounds and stands at around 3.5 feet tall at the shoulder. A male elk weighs 700 pounds and stands at around 6.5 feet tall at the shoulder. I've included a drawing to scale at right – I was astonished at the incredible difference in size. Vehicle collisions with deer are already costly and dangerous for Missourians.



According to a recent study by State Farm Insurance, deer-vehicle collisions cost \$3,000 on average and 9,000 to 11,000 Missourians will hit a deer this year alone according to MDC statistics (<http://mdc.mo.gov/landwater-care/wildlife-management/nuisance-animal-management/controlling-deer-damage/humans-and-dee>). A simple calculation of those numbers tells me that the total annual cost of deer-vehicle accidents is \$33,000,000!

A well-recognized voice for Missouri agriculture, The Missouri Farm Bureau, is very much opposed to reintroducing wild elk to Missouri. You can find their official position on elk restoration at: <http://www.mofb.org/NewsMedia/Articles.aspx?articleID=99>

The Missouri Conservation Department (MDC) operates in a more independent manner than most state departments. While others may be funded by legislative appropriation and gubernatorial approval, the MDC is funded directly through a 1/8 cent sales tax, in addition to revenue generated through the sale of hunting and fishing licenses, as well as other miscellaneous fees and sales. This money goes straight to MDC with virtually no oversight by your elected officials.

I need to know your thoughts on this issue. This is your opportunity to let me, and the Missouri Department of Conservation, know your support, opposition, questions or concerns.

This is an issue that may impact your family’s safety and our state’s economy.

I may be contacted either by replying to this e-mail or by mail at my Capitol office address below.

Let your voice be heard!

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