

Week of October 4, 2010



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## Plan Currently Underway to Restore the Elk Population in Missouri

One of the many responsibilities and purposes of the Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC) is to address animal management in our state. The department is currently proposing an elk restoration plan to increase the population of this native species in our state — a native species that has not been around for nearly 150 years. Even though some individuals and conservation groups have expressed ongoing interest in this restoration, there are other groups and citizens who are opposing this plan.

In the late 1990s, MDC conducted an elk reintroduction feasibility study to consider whether or not implementing a restoration plan was beneficial to our state. However, due to chronic wasting disease (a transmissible neurological disease similar to mad cow disease in cattle) habitat issues, and strong concerns raised by the public, legislators and organizations over liability and animal health, the Missouri Conservation Commission suspended the department's consideration of the plan.

Since the time the plan was tabled, MDC staff have been discussing ways to address elk restoration in Missouri. The department held three public meetings this past August in communities around the proposed 365-square-mile restoration zone to answer questions and collect comments from citizens. While I appreciate the department's efforts to seek Missourians' input on this very delicate issue, implementing an elk restoration plan will have huge implications on our state for generations to come. Those opposed to this restoration know that the benefits do not outweigh the risks to landowners in our state who would be affected by the reintroduction of wild elk to Missouri.

First and foremost, the risk of disease transmission is a major concern. According to the Missouri Department of Agriculture, the health testing protocol and guidelines for diseases such as chronic wasting disease are more stringent since 2000; however, farmers are still concerned about the risk of transmitting disease between these elk meant for restoration areas and their livestock. In addition, elk can also spread other diseases that

would be detrimental to Missouri's livestock industry, including tuberculosis and brucellosis.

Landowners and farmers also are concerned about the possibility of trampled fences and decimated crops by these large and powerful animals. Elk commonly impact agriculture resources in our nation, and it would be no different in our state, even if they are confined to a designed zone. And because elk often travel in herds, the incidence and intensity of damage to agriculture area would be increased. The MDC includes steps to address this concern in its restoration plan; however, the damage would already be done to farmland — damage that neither time nor money can repair.

According to the Missouri Farm Bureau, livestock sales in Carter, Reynolds, and Shannon counties (counties that make up the elk restoration zone) exceed \$13 million annually. And when you factor in the eight surrounding counties in the three-county release zone, that number grows to \$151 million. We must listen to the concerns of farmers and landowners who contribute to our state's number one industry — agriculture. This is a difficult economic time for everyone in our state, including farmers. Why throw more hurdles in their way to helping our state get back on financial track?

Then there is the risk of additional road hazards to all Missouri drivers. Elk are one of the largest mammals that roam North America. Females average around 500 pounds and males weigh in at a staggering 700 pounds. Compare that to the average size of our state's white-tailed deer, which ranges between 110 to 300 pounds. Last year alone, there were more than 3,000 deer-vehicle accidents in our state, 251 of those involved injuries. I can only imagine the force of a 500-700 pound animal hitting a vehicle driving on our state's roadways.

Even though the reintroduction zone is located more than 250 miles from the 31<sup>st</sup> Senatorial District, Missourians around our state would see an impact from this plan. I urge you to contact the department and voice your opinion on this matter. Written comments can be shared online at [www.mdc.mo.gov/contact-us](http://www.mdc.mo.gov/contact-us) or write to the Missouri Department of Conservation, P.O. Box 180, Jefferson City, MO 65102-0180.

As always, please do not hesitate to contact my office with your questions or concerns at any time. We look forward to hearing your comments and suggestions and trying to answer any questions you may have. You can reach us by phone at (866) 277-0882 (toll-free) or (573) 751-2272, or by fax at (573) 526-7381.

*Senator David Pearce serves Bates, Cass, Johnson and Vernon counties in the 31<sup>st</sup> State Senatorial District.*

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