Sustaining Elk on the Rocky Mountain Front: The Importance of Private Lands [TWS]

Thomas Baumeister
Boone and Crockett Wildlife Conservation Program, University of Montana, Missoula, MT

Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Ranch plays an important role in the distribution of elk on the Rocky Mountain Front, Montana. The ranch is

Title footnote indicates organization, location and date presentation was made:

[MAS] *Montana Academy of Sciences, Helena, MT, April 1995*
[TWS] *Montana Chapter of the Wildlife Society, Billings, MT, March 1995*
[AFS] *Montana Chapter of the American Fisheries Society, Chico Hot Springs, MT, February 1995*

managed as a working cattle operation. The difference in seasonal distribution of cattle and elk allows both ungulate species to use the ranch with a minimum of competition for forage. Both the historic creation of state-managed winter ranges, current land use practices on private lands, and a conservative hunting regime have helped establish a healthy elk herd of about 500 animals north of the Teton River. Without extensive use of private lands, current elk numbers could not be maintained because public lands lack suitable winter habitats. The value of private lands as elk habitat is primarily a function of the type of land use. Livestock grazing managed below the full capability of the land to support a cattle operation throughout the year provide the most valuable elk habitat in this region. This form of ranching maintains healthy and productive grasslands that provide quality forage for both livestock and elk. Heavy use by both domestic and wild ungulates, however, has the potential to cause local overuse that subsequently may result in a reduction in quality grasslands. Sportsmen's dollars have traditionally been spent to help purchase lands on the Rocky Mountain Front to preserve habitat for elk. On these lands, modern management practices include the use of cattle to maintain quality forage production for elk. This management strategy could also be applied to existing ranching operations and may accomplish similar results without the initial cost of land purchase. Such a conservation strategy, however, requires close cooperation between private landowners and the state wildlife management agency. Some form of compensation may be necessary to provide the incentive to initiate cooperation with some private landowners. Compensation could include an expansion of the existing landowner preference program for hunting permits or tax reductions for good stewardship programs of natural resources, among others.