

NDOW eyes forage and migration

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Kari Huebner, Nevada Department of Wildlife biologist, points to an area north of Interstate 80 that shows the migration pattern of satellite collared mule deer.

ELKO — The Nevada Department of Wildlife unveiled its plans to coordinate with area groups to rehabilitate crucial forage and construct a wildlife overpass that is among the first of its kind in the continental United States — all for the sake of mule deer.

The mule deer in northeastern Nevada have had a tough time in light of the numerous wildland fires that have swept through the area in the past 10 years. The Area 6 herd north of Elko in particular has suffered some of the greatest hardship, including death by starvation.

To try and remedy some of the changes in the rangeland that have been affecting the availability of native forage, NDOW has brought on Lee Turner to try and form coalitions of private citizens, public entities and anyone with a stake in the survival of the mule deer. At Thursday night's Northeastern Nevada Stewardship Group meeting at the Northeastern Nevada Museum, Turner and NDOW Habitat Division Chief Dave Pulliam illustrated the importance of partnerships in establishing fruitful efforts in conservation.

Cheatgrass, according to Pulliam, is to blame for much of the range burning over itself several years in a row, leading to little to no forage for big game animals and cattle. Citing organizations such as the Utah Partnership for Conservation and Development, Pulliam and Turner illustrated how when entities formulate strategies and implement these procedures into an end result, it not only accomplishes a goal, but further strengthens the viability of that group.

“We should’ve started 30-40 years ago when it was first speculated cheatgrass would become a huge problem,” Pulliam said.

Citing his experience working for the Eastern Nevada Landscape Coalition in Ely and with restoring the Truckee and Walker rivers, Turner said, “The collaborative process is the only way to get things done.”

Pulliam said seeding projects and even herbicide use on cheatgrass are reliant now mostly on funds generated from sportsmen. Bigger money from the federal government may be acquired, but that takes a larger group. Pulliam said Utah has been so successful because they started by doing projects in parts of the state that didn’t come with a lot of controversy, and over time built their clout to finally take on the more controversial areas.

“If we can get the collaboration together, we can have political strength,” Pulliam said.

Pulliam said NDOW has spent \$1.5 million on restoration efforts so far.

“That’s nowhere near enough to get the acreage treated that we need,” Pulliam said.

When the subject of predator control was brought up, Pulliam said the local Wildlife Services hunters removed several mountain lions from Area 6, but the targeting of predators can be precarious and the data has to be constantly analyzed.

“With the predator subject we don’t want to get shut down like California,” Pulliam said.

Mountain lions may not be hunted in California due to passed legislation in light of a previously waning lion population. As a result, there is now a large population of mountain lions with a small number of deer left in that state causing an increase in attacks by lions on both people and their pets.

On the end of things is taking extra measures to not only protect the deer the county still has, but also protect human lives in the process.

NDOW biologist Kari Huebner spoke of the wildlife overpass about 10 miles north of Wells on U.S. Highway 93. Although the tunnel is in place, the fill material has not been put into place yet. But when it is, Huebner said it will ideally take the place of the deer’s current method of migrating to their winter range: Trying to cross the highway in groups that lead to not only dead deer, but injured people and damaged vehicles.

One of the things that makes the Area 7 herd north of Wells so special is it travels the greatest distance of any herd in the state.

Huebner said the herd spends summer near Jarbidge and in October starts the long trek across Highway 93 and Interstate 80 and finally ends up in the south Pequop Mountains near Spruce Mountain southeast of Wells. Aside from the danger of being hit by a car, the stress of traveling such distances and on reduced forage can also lead to death.

“It’s essential they get to their winter range,” Huebner said.

Without it, chances of survival are bleak. Although in better shape than Area 6, the Area 7 forage is still limited in the summer, according to Huebner. The location north of Wells was chosen because it is in the middle of a charted migration route. Huebner said 13 deer that were tracked by satellite collar showed the paths the deer took from fall 2008 through winter 2009.

Huebner said the Nevada Department of Transportation spent \$2.8 million on the construction of the overpass and NDOW spent \$300,000 on the fencing to help channel to the deer to the overpass. Another \$50,000 is spent for JBR

to do project monitoring. Federal Highway Safety Funds and stimulus money were instrumental in the building of the overpass.

Huebner said the overpass was built because drainage at that area was a concern. At the two other locations, drainage is less of a concern. Other underpasses are also being eyed for the Pequops where deer are also known to be killed by motorists during the migration.

An important change made in terms of hunting regulations for that area is no hunting is allowed within a half-mile radius of the overpass. Otherwise the overpass would not only make it easier for the deer to cross the road: It would also make it easier for the hunters.

The overpass and subsequent underpasses could be used by elk and pronghorn antelope as well. Huebner said the overpass is tall enough for commercial vehicles to go under.

“The DOT told me this is tall enough for anything that’s ever come down Highway 93,” Huebner said. “Including house trailers.”

Josh Vittori of JBR monitored the site with 22 motion-activated cameras last fall, and noted the deer are definitely investigating the site, although they’re still getting used to the fencing. Cameras also caught hunters walking along and in some cases riding along the fences. But if there’s one thing Vittori hadn’t counted on is how cold it can get in northern Elko County.

“Some of these cameras don’t hold up when it’s negative 20,” Vittori said. “I know I sure don’t want to go out there to change a battery when it’s negative 20.”