OREGON HUNTERS ASSOCIATION
Protecting Oregon's Wildlife, Habitat and Hunting Heritage
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November 18, 2025

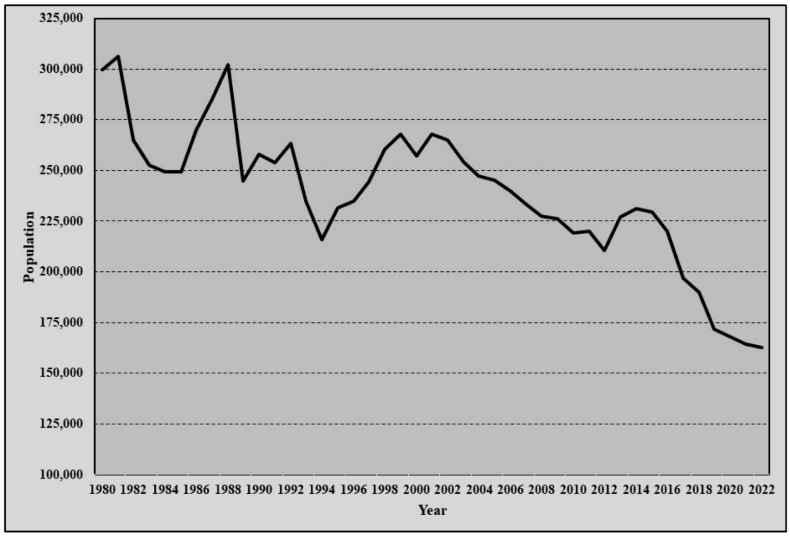
Senate Interim Committee on Natural Resources & Wildfire
RE: Oregon's Ungulate Population and Its Related Impacts on Working Lands and Rural Landscapes Presentation

Chair Golden, Vice-Chair Nash, and members of the Committee,

The Oregon Hunters Association (OHA) is Oregon's largest state-focused hunter and conservation organization. We represent over 12,000 sportsmen and women in 26 chapters throughout the state. Our mission is 'to protect Oregon's wildlife, habitat, and hunting heritage' and we strongly support data-driven, science-based wildlife and habitat management.

The panel topic is expansive with broad representation of sectors interested in ungulate populations and their impacts on working lands and rural landscapes. For our portion, OHA will focus our comments on the impacts of predation on ungulates, as well as human factors that have negative impacts on their populations and cascading effects for agriculture and livestock producers.

Ungulate populations, in general, are down across both species and regions. ODFW's survey data, as presented, supports these assertions. Mule deer populations, in particular, are down across the state with some herd ranges seeing significant impacts.



Mule deer population numbers have declined due to habitat loss, degradation, and fragmentation, predation, and other limiting factors.

Elk populations along the west slope of the Cascades are also down significantly and we have concerns about the Rocky Mountain Elk populations in Northeast Oregon where survey data has not been available in recent years.

Predation is, generally speaking, the biggest mortality source for any ungulate population in Oregon and, of the predators on the landscape, the greatest amount of data currently available shows cougars to be the largest impact on ungulates.

Cougar populations in Oregon are currently operating at, or very close to, their carrying capacity based on long term population modeling which is the maximum number of individual cougars that the landscape can support.

The impacts of cougar predation on ungulate species has been well studied. A 2014 study, headed by ODFW's Darren Clark, showed the following impacts from cougars on both deer and elk:

- **Ungulate species made up over 95% of cougar kills, equating to 1.03 ungulates killed per week**. The diet of male cougars is roughly equal between elk and deer while female cougars predate mainly on deer at 74.6%.

- **Cougars select for juvenile elk and deer** and the study asserts that wildlife managers should consider the potential negative effects of cougars on ungulate populations in areas where juvenile recruitment has been chronically low.

- Landscape conditions (i.e., forage quality and quantity) substantially influence population dynamics of ungulate species, however additive effects of predation should not be ignored. **Cougars can be a strong limiting factor for elk populations, therefore, wildlife managers should consider the potential top-down effects of cougars and other predators as a limiting factor of elk populations.**

Currently ODFW is studying mule deer population survivability metrics in two areas: Aldrich and Klamath Basin herd ranges. In 2025, OHA worked with Rep. Owens to bring HB 3596 which would have expanded that study to include the Steens Mountain area. That bill was unfortunately not funded, however, these studies will provide data on where predators might be having impacts on mule deer populations in an additive aspect, as opposed to compensatory, based first on body scores and juvenile recruitment factors.

The definitive effects of predation on ungulates due to wolves is less known at this time. This does not indicate that predation is not happening, or that it is not potentially limiting ungulate (primarily elk) populations, but rather because surveys for elk populations in areas of known wolf activity, such as NE Oregon, have not been conducted in recent years due to ODFW staff constraints. Without this data we cannot define the scope of impact to elk populations beyond anecdotal evidence from livestock producers and hunters in the field.

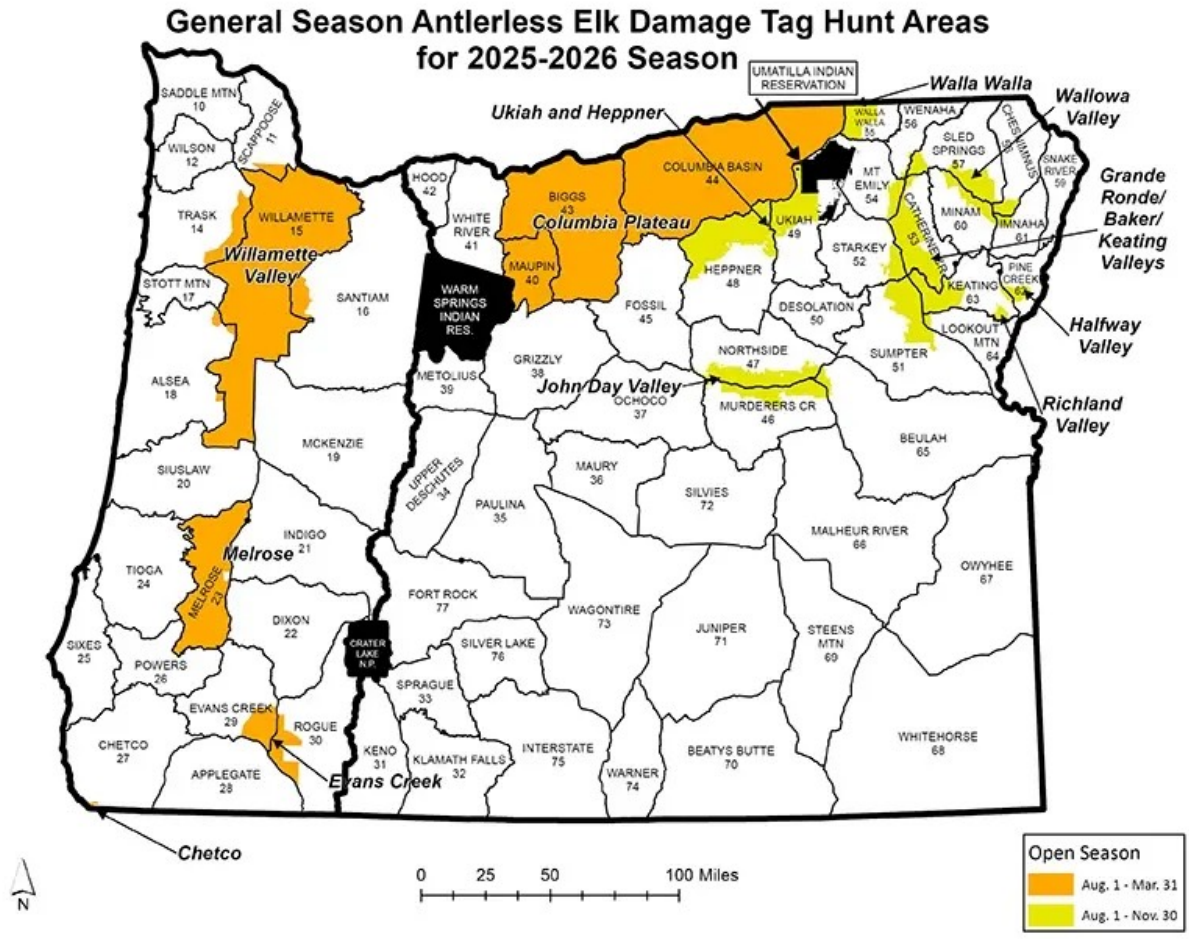
As the human population expands throughout the state, the scope of human impacts on wildlife populations also expands. Increased pressures from expanding urban centers, renewable energy siting, recreation, and road use continue to push the human element into conflict with wildlife and their habitat. Specific to ungulates, the fragmentation and degradation of critical range habitats and migration corridors exacerbate these impacts.

In addition to these factors, public land management policies and their effects on forage availability have impacted ungulate use of Oregon's public lands dramatically.

Habitat, including critical summer and winter range, and security cover are needed to attract and keep ungulates on public lands as much as possible. Additionally, early seral habitat, which requires open canopy areas, is most beneficial for ungulate populations. ODFW research conducted in Western Oregon by Dr. DeWaine Jackson showed ungulates heavily utilize both the established timber stands and open clear cuts of managed forestland; the open areas are key for necessary forage while the established stands provide security. This mosaic of mixed age class stands, which is most beneficial for our ungulate species, is less prevalent on public lands due to management policies that prioritize older aged, closed canopy stands.

In response to a lack of nutritional forage on public lands, ungulates have increasingly moved to private lands in lower elevations, staying in these areas throughout the summer when they historically have migrated back to higher elevations. With this shift in behavior, the conflicts between ungulates and agricultural producers has increased dramatically.

In response to these conflict issues, ODFW has a scalable list of resources for agricultural producers to assist in alleviating some of the impacts of damage to crops and infrastructure. As an example, the General Season Anterless Elk Damage Tag was established in 2020 to address chronic elk damage in specific areas of the state.



In the three years since it's inception, between 4,000 and 5,000 hunters have participated each year with success rates averaging between 41% and 52%. This tag option serves as a way for hunters to work with landowners as part of the solution to addressing damage issues.

Oregon's ungulate populations are facing pressures from numerous factors which require continued study and potential intervention. OHA is encouraged by ODFW's ongoing mule deer studies and the agency's commitment to completing elk surveys in NE Oregon to provide important data on the status of elk herds and potential impacts of wolf predation. When predation impacts are shown to negatively effect ungulate populations, regardless of the predator species, management of those predator populations must be implemented.

Similarly, human impacts resulting in ungulate displacement and mortality must be mitigated to the degree practicable. Thoughtful regulation of renewable energy facility siting, investments in wildlife crossings, proactive habitat improvement projects, and wildfire mitigation are all necessary to ensure healthy ungulate populations across the state.

OHA encourages continued conversations, such as today's panel discussion, to highlight the needs of our ungulate species and any interventions necessary to ensure viable populations for this generation and those to come.

Thank you for your time today,

Amy Patrick
Policy Director