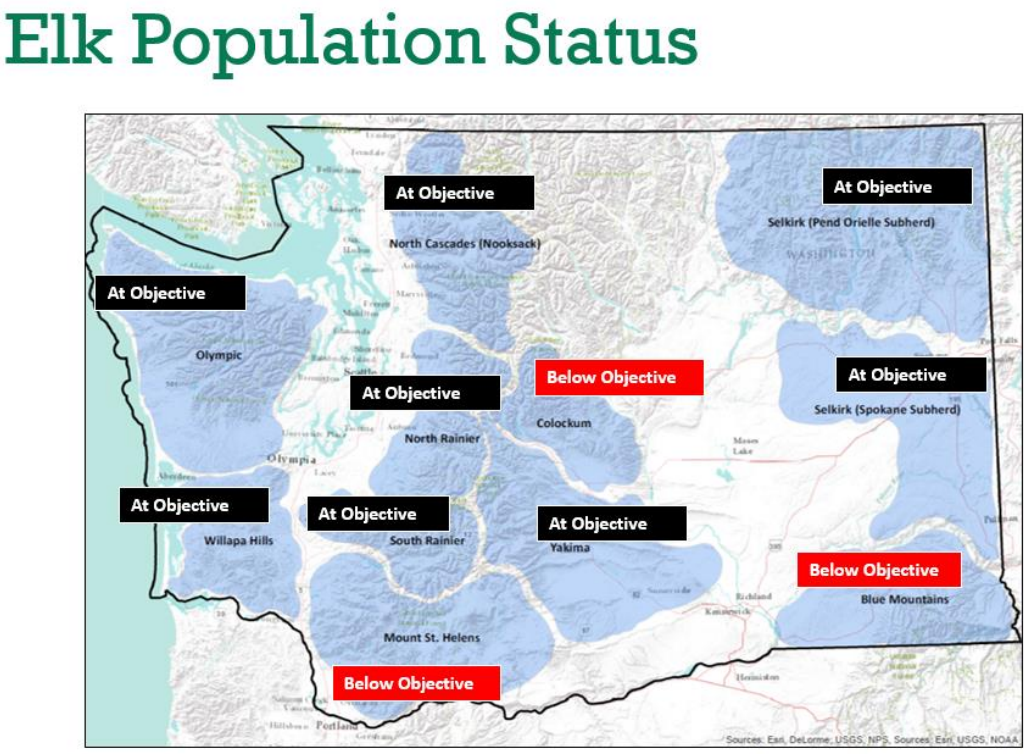
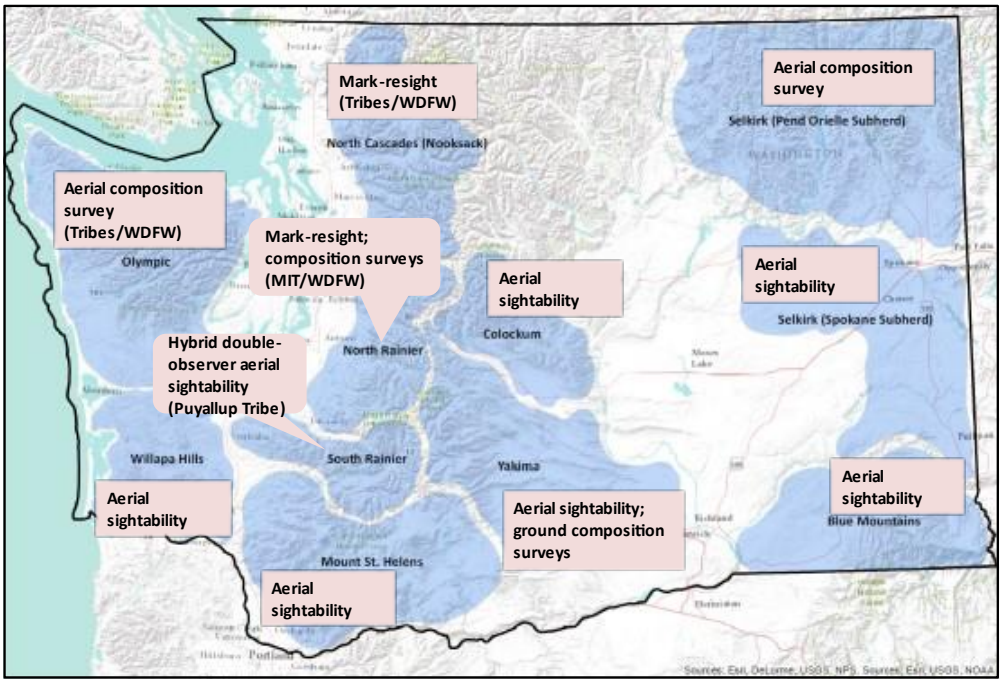
Elk Status and Trend Summary

Elk In Washington are managed in eleven distinct herd units depicted in the map below. All but 3 of these herds are currently meeting their management objectives (Summary table below). The three herd units that are not currently meeting objective are the Mount St. Helens, Colockum, and Blue Mountains herd (See figures below for declining herds). All three face differing challenges. The Mount St. Helens herd is dealing with a closing forest canopy that is reducing quality and quantity of habitat in conjunction with a high prevalence of hoof disease. We have substantially reduced antlerless harvest in this herd unit to try and help this herd rebound. The Colockum was above objective in 2016 and we had a large number of antlerless permits in that unit to bring the population back down to objective. In the same time frame (Winter of 2016) a dry summer and harsh winter reduced this population further. We have reduced antlerless permits in the Colockum and are already seeing it recover. The "at-risk" assessment has all the information regarding the decline of the Blue Mountains herd.

Elk populations in Washington are challenged by human encroachment habitat conversion (closing Canopy) and in some instances predation and disease issues. In Washington elk are a finite resource, and we have the highest hunter per elk density in the west. Even though the elk herd units encompass large landscapes, most of it has a large human influence. Elk herd objectives are set to manage for the largest possible population while minimizing agricultural damage and balancing other human uses of the landscape. This is not an easy task in such a populous state.



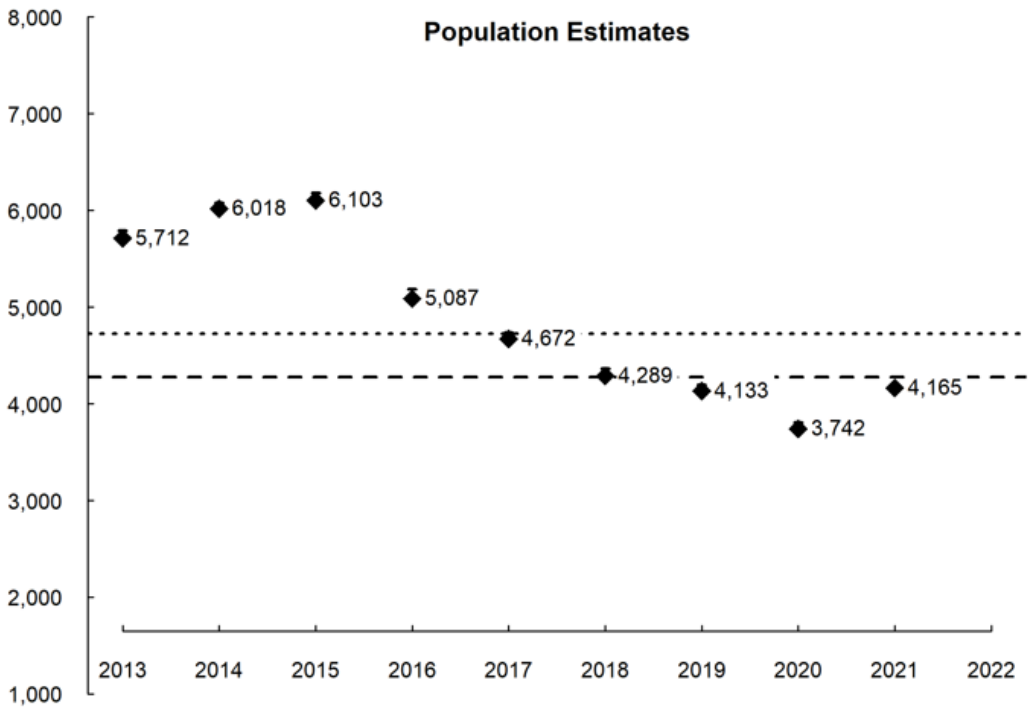
Elk



Department of Fish and Wildlife

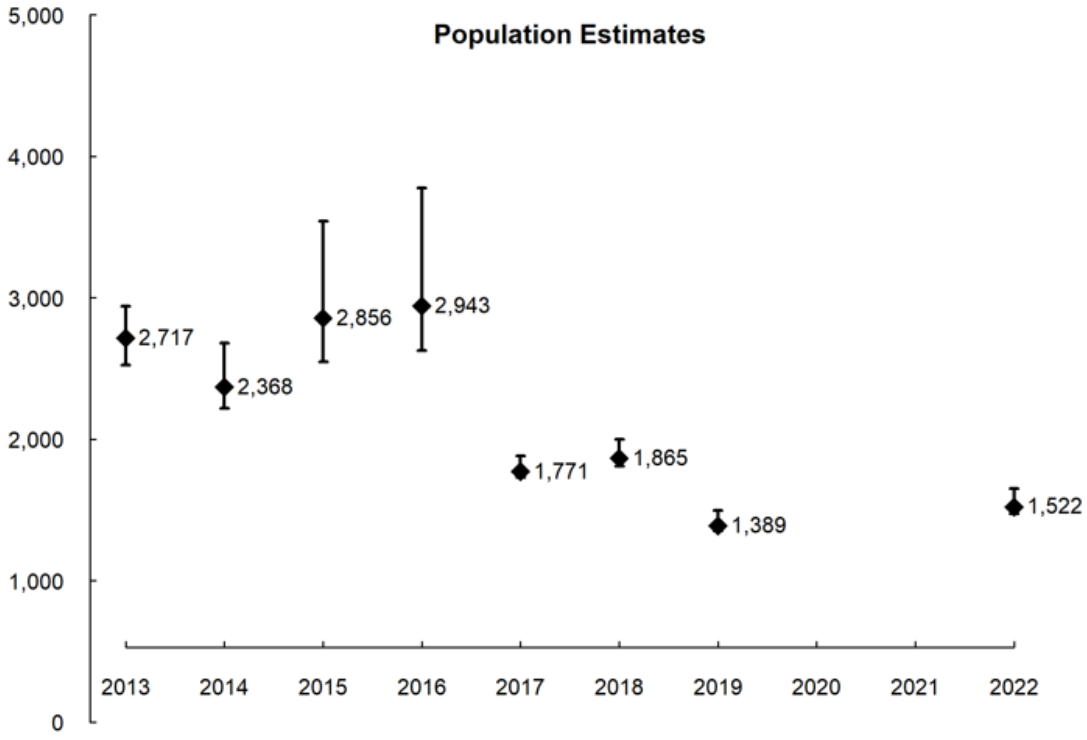
This map depicts the different elk herds and how they are monitored.

Colockum elk



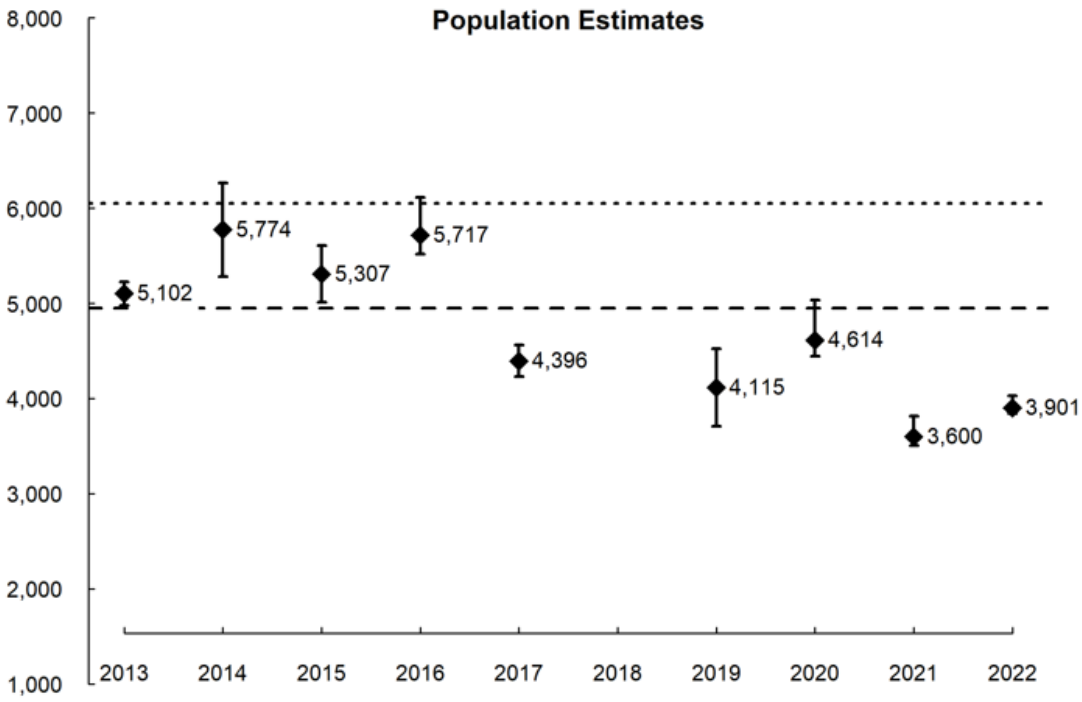
The dotted line is the upper bound and the dashed line is the lower bound of this population's objective range. The population is approximately 7% below the midpoint (4,500 elk) of the objective range based on the most recent survey (2021).

Mount St. Helens Elk



This is a population estimate of only the core GMUs where aerial survey methods are feasible. GMU-based objectives do not exist for this population. However, given the population's abundance relative to past acceptable levels (i.e., 2013-2016), the Department considers this population below objective.

Blue Mountains Elk



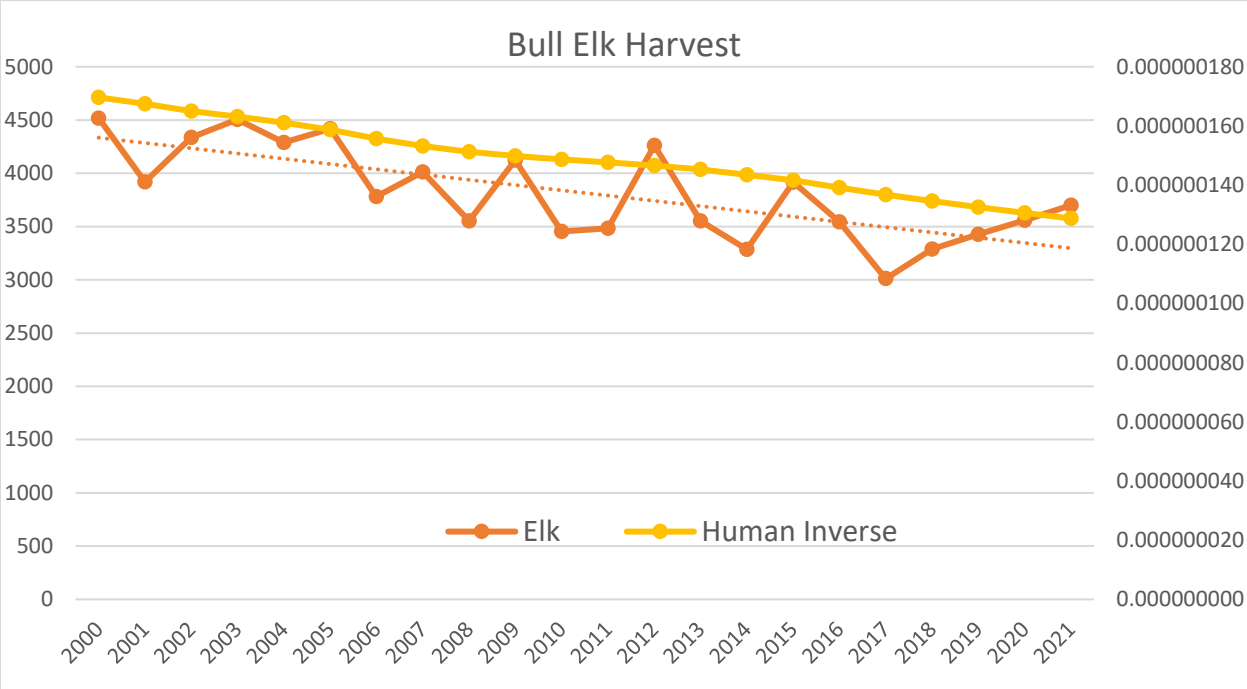
The dotted line is the upper bound and the dashed line is the lower bound of this population's objective range. The population is approximately 29% below the midpoint (5,500 elk) of the objective range based on the most recent survey (2022).

This table summarizes the trends for all Washington elk herds.

Elk Herd	Trend						Mgmt concerns/limiting factors
	Harvest	Bull:cow	Calf:cow	Population	Hunt Effort	Hunt Success	
Blue Mountains	Stable, below historic levels	Declining	Declining	Declining	Declining	Variable	Disturbance on winter range, cougar predation
Colockum	Increasing, below historic levels	Declining	Increasing	Increasing	Declining	Stable, below historic levels	Historic antlerless harvest, intense drought and winter conditions.
Mount St Helens	Stable, below historic levels	At objective below historic levels	Stable	Stable, below historic levels	Declining	Stable	Hoof disease, habitat conversion to closed canopy forest, reduced hunter access
North Cascades	Stable	Declining	Stable	Stable	Variable*	Stable	Hoof disease, habitat conversion to closed canopy forest, hunter access, human encroachment
North Rainier	Stable	Stable	Stable, recent decline	Stable	Increasing	Stable	Hoof disease, habitat conversion to closed canopy forest, hunter access, human encroachment
Olympic	Stable, recent decline	Stable, recent decline	Stable	NA	Stable	Declining	Hoof disease, difficult survey landscape
Selkirk	Stable to increasing	Stable	Stable	Stable	Stable	Stable	Agricultural damage
South Rainier	Declining	At objective	At objective	Stable	Stable	Stable	Hoof disease, habitat on federal land (i.e., increasing canopy closure)
Willapa Hills	Stable	Stable	Stable	Stable	Stable	Stable	Hoof disease, reduced hunter access
Yakima	Stable, below historic levels	Stable	Increasing	Increasing	Declining	Stable	Antlerless hunting, agricultural conflict

*Hunter effort increased steadily until 2020, then declined by ~1/2 in 2021 possibly due to changes in season timing/length

Food for thought



This graph is only a correlation, and no inference can be drawn without more research. I divided 1 by the human population to invert the trend since the real trend is increasing. This helps demonstrate how statewide Bull elk harvest has a similar downward trend to the inverse of population growth.