

# Wildlife as a Farm and Ranch Business

Fact Sheet No. 6.514

Natural Resources Series | Wildlife

by D.E. Benson\*

Wildlife is a big business in Colorado. Hunters and anglers spend about \$2 billion in the state each year. Many wildlife, born and raised on private lands, are enjoyed by landowners and recreationists. However, the association between farmers, ranchers, recreationists and wildlife has not been as positive as it can be. Some landowners treat wildlife and recreationists as assets while others consider them to be negative.

A business needs a supply of products and a demand to use them. Elk have increased in Colorado since the turn of the century and have become the state's number-one generator of hunting revenues. Deer have their ups and downs. Pronghorn antelope maintained a relative static level due to management goals of keeping numbers within tolerable limits on private lands. If landowners want more antelope, the population can increase. Hunters want more antelope and they usually must wait to accumulate preference points before being awarded a license. Demand exceeds supply!

## A Ranching Business

Wildlife are part of the ranching business, no matter how one looks at it. Landowners can manage private lands by tolerating wildlife, by making claims for damage payments, or by planning for wildlife as a part of normal operations.

Wildlife provide recreational opportunities and a cash flow potential without additional investments or out-of-pocket cash expenditures. However, wildlife have a cost to landowners either directly through forage used by wildlife or indirectly through time and effort associated with managing hunters and other recreationists.

Landowners manage hunters indirectly, regardless of the system, either by allowing access, closing and patrolling land, or

charging an access fee. The combination of wildlife presence and good hunting possibilities can mean good business for landowners.

A lot can be learned about rancher/hunter relations and livestock/wildlife management from the way things are done in Texas. Texans are proud of their cattle and their hunting. They coexist nicely because ranchers profit from wildlife. Some ranches have decreased cattle numbers to encourage more wildlife and greater profits. Ninety-eight percent of the land is private. Texas private land supports 10 percent of the cattle and 20 percent of the deer in the 48 continental states.

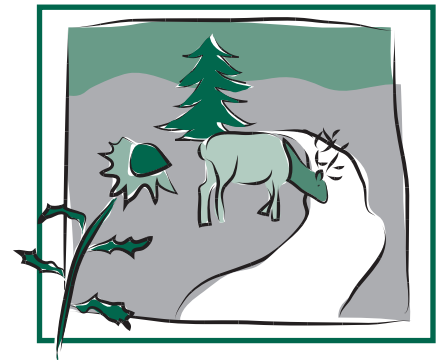
Colorado is the best overall big game state. One-third of Colorado's land is publicly owned, but private lands support significant quantities of wildlife and can provide higher quality experiences for hunters than public lands. Thirty percent of big game populations in Colorado are on private lands, and 80 percent of animals likely use private lands some of the time. Many hunters prefer experiences on private property.

## What Hunters Want

Speculation about the value of private lands for hunting in Colorado led Colorado State University to conduct several studies the last 30 years. One study indicated that resident big game hunters thought private land access needed to be improved. That same study showed that 25 percent of nonresident hunters paid access fees, and 50 percent of the nonresidents desired private/public land combinations for hunting.

A 1979 survey reported that 78 percent of the nonresident and 48 percent of the resident hunters would consider paying fees.

Hunters want good experiences for their money. A 1975 University of Colorado study and a 1979 Colorado State University study identified respectively that hunters desired larger game populations and greater chances



## Quick Facts

- Wildlife is a big business in Colorado; ranching and wildlife are an integrated business.
- Season-long or daily leases are two ways to grant access for a fee.
- Developing a contract that outlines responsibilities of landowner and hunter provides for quality behavior from the hunter and quality experiences for both.
- Free systems should prevail as long as producers and consumers are happy and wildlife are abundant. Fee systems provide incentives for landowners and hunters.

\*Colorado State University Extension specialist and professor, fishery and wildlife biology. 6/2010



of getting a deer. One study also indicated that hunters prefer few other hunters in the same area where they are hunting. About one-third of hunters and anglers in a 1992 study from Colorado State University were concerned with on-site crowding.

For most hunters, the combination of good wildlife populations, higher chances of success and few other hunters can be found only on private lands.

## Leasing Systems

There are two main ways to grant access for a fee: season-long leases and daily leases. Season-long leases generally are most popular. A specified number of hunters are given access rights for the entire season.

Formal agreements, not necessarily complicated, between landowners and clients are made. They can include payments, procedures and acceptable behaviors. Lodging can be provided or a place to set up camp determined. Guide services and horses can be part of the agreement.

More profits and higher landowner satisfaction generally are received when recreational services are provided. An advantage to the season-long system is that hunters take pride of possession on the property and help patrol it. Landowners also benefit since they know who is around.

Daily leases are simple to operate. Usually only land and water resources, with

no recreational services, are offered. The biggest disadvantage is having to process and direct more people each day. Profits could be higher than for season-long leases.

When one of the two systems or a combination is selected, landowners should provide quality experiences for and expect quality behaviors from hunters. Eliminate any surprises by developing a lease contract that outlines responsibilities of the seller and the buyer.

## Cooperatives and Partnerships

Some ranches or farms are large enough and have sufficient number of wildlife to be independent. When land areas are small and when wildlife populations roam unpredictably over several properties, cooperatives or partnerships among landowners are best.

Write contracts among or between landowners to ensure thorough understanding of how the operation will function and the responsibilities of each party. Usually one or more people within the cooperative run the operation.

Cooperatives are useful when animals feed on one property then leave by the hunting season. Profits from access to some partners' lands are shared with partners whose land helps feed and maintain the game animal supply.