Utah's Cooperative Wildlife Management Units
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Abstract
Cooperative Wildlife Management Units (CWMU) are managed by both the Utah Division of Wildlife (UDW) and private landowners. The goal of this program is to give sportsmen greater access to well-managed hunting land and provide compensation for landowners who maintain a healthy habitat for a variety of wild game species. The success of this program is measured by the number of participating landowners and the success of hunting on CWMU property. Private landowners are responsible for maintaining their land well enough to support game habitat, and the UDWR issues hunting permits for use on CWMU property.
The Problem

The UDWR oversees hunting on over 21 million acres of state land. Maintaining that much land requires a significant amount of state resources and management techniques differ throughout the state due to the diverse ecosystems found in Utah. What is not managed by the state of Utah is managed by the federal government. Over 33 million acres of land (64% of the state) fall under the responsibility of the Bureau of Land Management, the United States Forest Service, the National Parks Service, the Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Department of Defense. There are, however, many acres of private land that can provide significant hunting opportunities. The problem for landowners is that they might own the land but the state owns the wildlife. Under current legislation, only landowners and their immediate family are eligible to receive big game hunting permits for their own land. They are unable to allocate permits to anyone else, greatly restricting their incentives to manage for wildlife.

There is also the issue of conservation versus development. As the population in Utah continues to grow, landowners are presented with opportunities to sell their land to developers, much to the chagrin of conservationists and recreationists. Besides individual philanthropic passion, there are few other alternatives incentivizing landowners them to maintain the land as wildlife habitat.

The CWMU program is an attempt to work with landowners to support wildlife and recreational activities on private lands in Utah and avoid development pressures.

The State’s Experiment

CWMUs were established initially in 1993 as an experimental program that gave landowners financial support to maintain their land to support wildlife species for hunting. The UDWR provides compensation for landowners who meet all the qualifications. The minimum land requirement for participation is 5,000 acres for deer, pronghorn, and turkey, and 10,000 acres for elk and moose.

Since 1993, the CWMU program has created public access to an additional 2 million acres of hunting land in Utah. As of 2010, there were 109 participating units across the state. The state recognizes that providing incentives for landowners is an effective way to encourage responsible environmental stewardship. Although the state oversees the CWMUs, the primary responsibility lies with the landowners. The CWMU program aims to establish collaborative management techniques that ensures all Utah land, both private and public, can adequately support wildlife.

Several surveys of CWMU participants -- both operators and hunters -- have concluded that the program is functioning as intended when looking at hunter satisfaction. The increasing number of landowners participating in the program also suggests that operators are satisfied. A study conducted in 2011 using aerial imagery concluded that parcels participating in the CWMU were less likely to be developed than non-participating parcels in neighboring areas.

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“In general, participating parcels have not split as severely as non-participating parcels, indicating, at least on paper, that private land participating in CWMUs is fragmenting at a slower rate than private land that is not enrolled in the program. Further, the number of structures built on participating parcels tends to be lower than that of non-participating parcels, even though participating parcels occupy a disproportionately large portion of the landscape.”

From this, it can be inferred that wildlife habitat is better protected within CWMUs than in surrounding areas.  

Conclusion

Cooperative Wildlife Management Units are realistic solutions for the future of wildlife management in Utah. The state establishes rules, both ecological and legal, to provide consistency throughout the state. The day to day maintenance, however, is left to the landowner themselves. This allows a certain level of freedom for landowners, while still providing financial support from the state.

Incentivizing landowners is an effective way to encourage collaborative methods for managing wildlife. Participation in the program has only increased since its launch, therefore suggesting that the amount of land available to hunters in Utah is also increasing. Landowners collaborate with the state to establish an initial set of rules, but beyond that, state regulation is kept to a minimum. If other states implement a similar management program, they could encourage effective environmental stewardship, economic development, and quality hunting.

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8 Perschon,^ Ibid.