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LANDOWNER PERSPECTIVES ON EPLUS



Presented by: **DONALD MARTINEZ**

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INTRODUCTION

- 7th generation rancher and Rio Arriba County Extension Agent
- 3rd generation allotment owner on the Carson National Forest
- Co-authored publication by NMSU in March 2026
- This presentation is primarily based on Rio Arriba county producer's farmland along the Rio Chama corridor but could serve as a case study for other NM counties and producers



Understanding Elk-Related Costs on Private Lands for Livestock Producers in Northern New Mexico Mountain Regions (Series 2 of 2)

Pilja Vitale, Don Martinez, Jeffrey Vitale, Casey Spackman, and Cherylin Atcitty*

PRIVATE LANDS IN NEW MEXICO



- ~50% of New Mexico is privately owned
- 250,000 acres of working lands are lost to development each year in NM¹
- Landowners are aware of their responsibility to conscientiously manage land, water, and wildlife but need the appropriate economic support to do this
- EPLUS is a program specifically made to:
 - Incentivize private land habitat conservation for elk presence
 - Offset the significant costs landowners face from elk presence

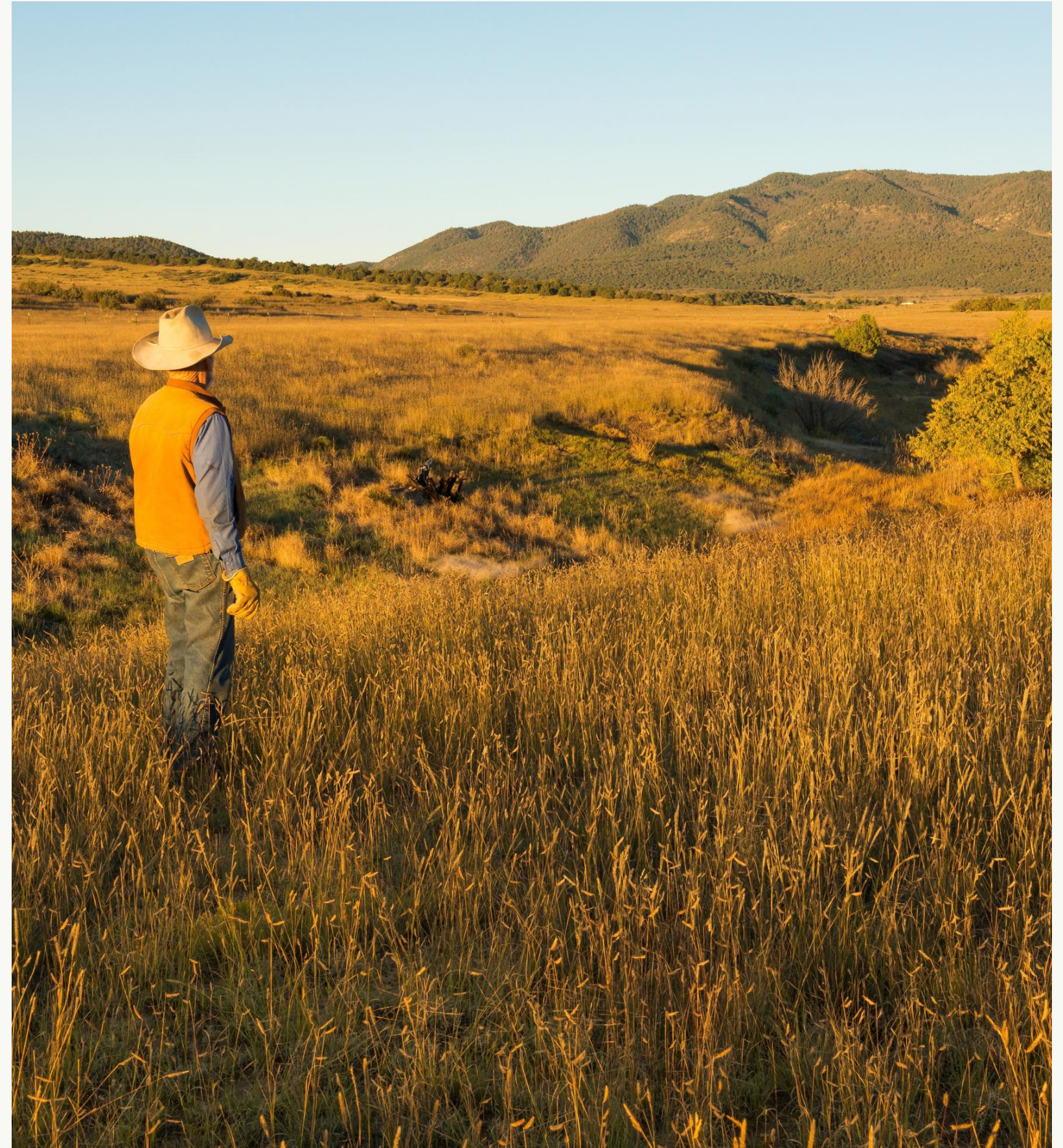
“This program allows me to dedicate my land to wildlife habitat. [EPLUS is] the best program to provide habitat for elk.” - NM Landowner

¹New Mexico Property Tax Study: Agriculture, Working & Natural Lands. UNM BBER. (2021). <https://bber.unm.edu/research/publications/new-mexico-property-tax-study-agriculture-working-and-natural-lands>

BACKGROUND: WHO ARE NM LANDOWNERS?

- Of the >25,000 farms in NM:
 - 1/3 are owned and operated by Hispanic/Latino producers (4% national avg)¹
 - 1/4 are owned and operated by Native American producers (2% national avg)¹
- Average age of a NM producer is 60.6 years of age¹
 - Those aged ≤35 make up about 7% NM's ag workforce
- Landowners grow food, supply water and fiber for New Mexicans

"I'm a participant of EPLUS and I would hate to see it go away. I get one authorization and usually don't sell my permit because I have grandkids that are hunters, so I give it to [them]."
- NM Landowner



¹New Mexico Property Tax Study: Agriculture, Working & Natural Lands. UNM BBER. (2021). <https://bber.unm.edu/research/publications/new-mexico-property-tax-study-agriculture-working-and-natural-lands>

BACKGROUND: LIVESTOCK PRODUCTION SYSTEMS IN NM



- Northern NM producers primarily operate small-scale cow-calf operations with breeding herds of fewer than 50 cows
 - National avg is now 47 head
- Producers typically own relatively small acreages used for both hay production and winter grazing

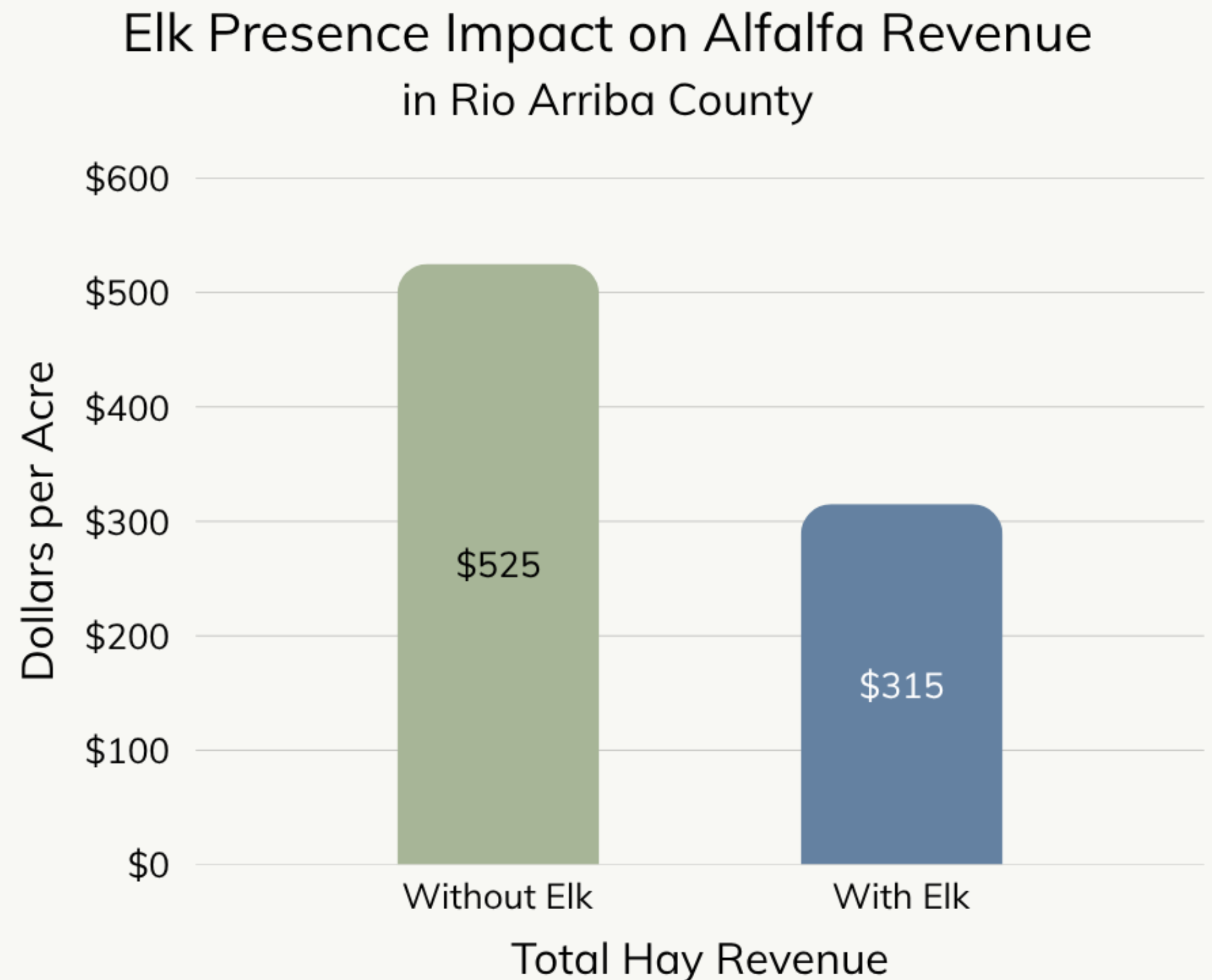
“I purposely exclude cattle or domestic livestock from grazing on my land so that wildlife will have a food source. In return I get one elk permit which I usually give to a nephew or friend to enable them to experience the thrill of hunting and the outdoor experience. I never sell a permit.” - NM Producer

OBSERVABLE ELK-RELATED COSTS ON LIVESTOCK OPERATIONS

CATEGORY 1: FORAGE AND STORED FEED LOSS

- Ranchers rely on standing forage in grazing pastures, including hay & other agricultural forage
- Elk regularly consume and trample hay
 - Devalues hay and reduces revenue
- Elk presence costs \$230 per acre to alfalfa production in Rio Arriba county

“As a low-income rancher every year up to 2/3 of my alfalfa is lost to elk consumption. The EPLUS tag allows me to harvest an elk to put food on my table and feed my family.” - NM Producer



OBSERVABLE ELK-RELATED COSTS ON LIVESTOCK OPERATIONS

CATEGORY 2 : CHANGES IN FEEDING PRACTICES

- Response to reduced forage availability:
 - Producers often begin winter feeding earlier than planned
 - Extended feeding periods increase total hay and supplemental feed use
 - Requires additional labor for feeding and livestock management

"We used to run 90 pairs, we had to cut them back to 50 pair. And I get it, it's part of the elk management. Not only did we reduce our cows but we leave our USFS pasture a month early so that the elk can have enough habitat."

-NM Producer



OBSERVABLE ELK-RELATED COSTS ON LIVESTOCK OPERATIONS

CATEGORY 3 : INFRASTRUCTURE WEAR AND DAMAGE



- Elk move across private lands to access forage and water
 - Fences, gates, and corrals often damaged
- Likelihood of damage to infrastructure increases with large herd sizes and concentration of herd near gates
- Ranchers that install "elk proof" fencing are not eligible for the EPLUS program

“My husband is retired and we rely heavily on this food to get us through the year on fixed incomes. We have also helped other families by donating the tag so other families are able to hunt and put food on their tables.” -NM Landowner

OBSERVABLE ELK-RELATED COSTS ON LIVESTOCK OPERATIONS

CATEGORY 4 : LABOR AND OPERATIONAL ADJUSTMENTS

- To prevent damage and manage elk presence: producers monitor property in the early morning and nighttime
- Uneven forage removal by elk can disrupt planned grazing rotations
 - Producers modify grazing plans, relocate livestock, or utilize alternative pastures
- Adjustments require additional labor, time, and management effort
 - Increases the indirect costs associated with elk use of private lands

“I am an 80-year-old on a fixed income and depend on my EPLUS permit to maintain my water well and pump in operable condition for water for all wildlife.”

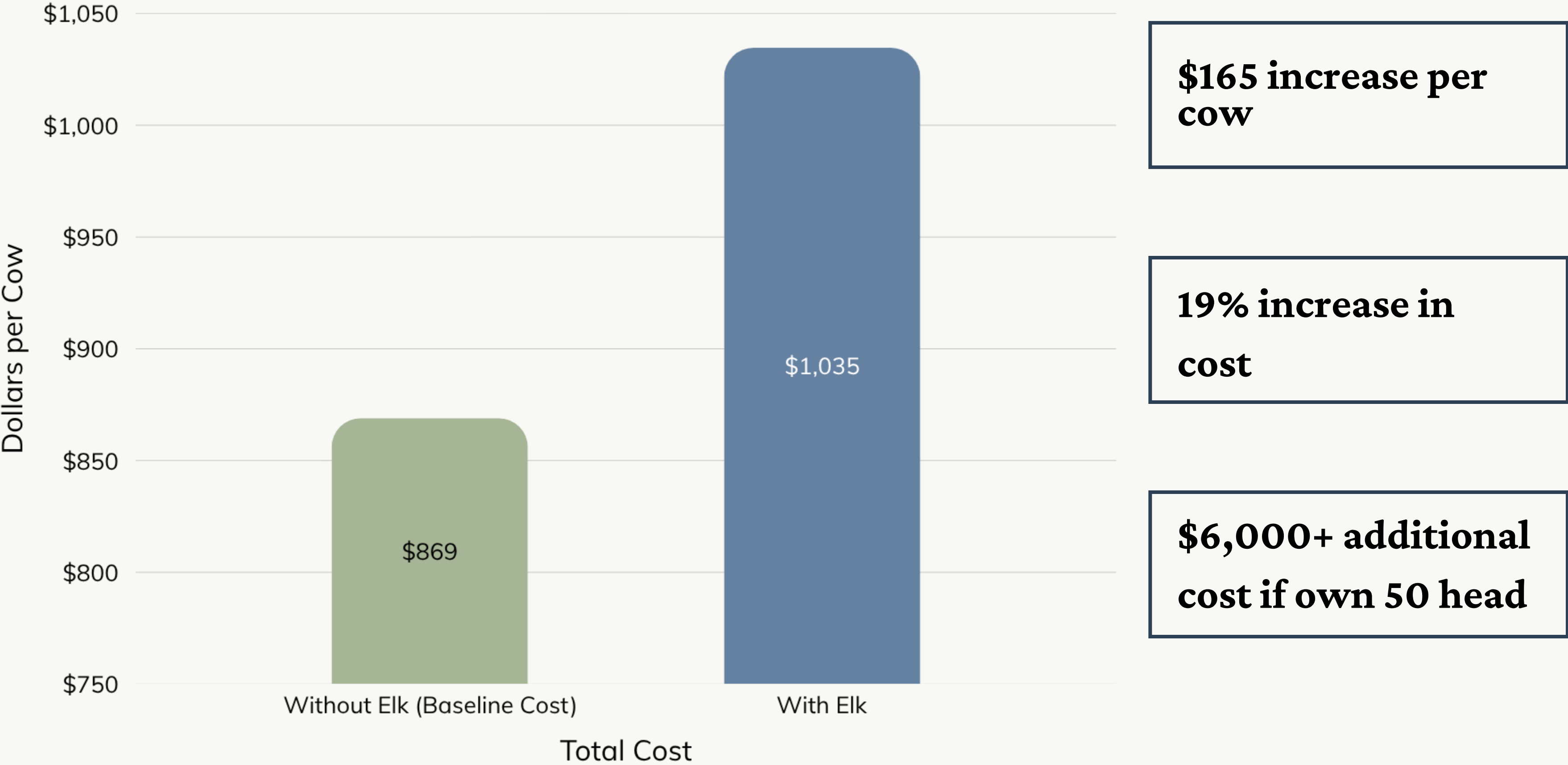
-NM Landowner



IMPACTS OF ELK ON PRIVATE LANDS PER COW, North Central Mountain Region 2024

Cost Item (Direct Impact Only)	Unit	Without Elk (Base line)	With Elk	Change Due to Elk (%)
Required hay	\$/cow	\$506.67	\$652.34	+\$145.67
Protein supplement	\$/cow	\$114.33	\$114.33	+\$0.00
Salt & mineral	\$/cow	\$70.00	\$70.00	+\$0.00
Total feed cost	\$/cow	\$707.20	\$852.87	+\$145.67(21)
Ranch maintenance	\$/cow	\$83.33	\$93.33	+\$10.00
Operating costs – vehicle	\$/cow	\$51.50	\$56.50	+\$5.00
Operating costs – equipment & machinery	\$/cow	\$26.95	\$31.95	+\$5.00
Total labor & maintenance costs	\$/cow	\$161.78	\$181.78	+\$20.00(12)
Total livestock cost	\$/cow	\$868.98	\$1,034.65	+\$165.67(19)

IMPACT OF ELK ON PRIVATE LANDS PER COW



CONCLUSION:

HOW DO NM LANDOWNERS USE EPLUS AUTHORIZATIONS?



- Authorizations can be sold, donated, or used
- If sold, money helps to offset the significant costs to conserve land, maintain operations, and improve habitat
 - Costs include property taxes, insurance, infrastructure and land management
- Well managed private lands have a spillover effect
 - Improves hunting & habitat quality on adjacent public lands
- EPLUS recipients are New Mexican families with hunting traditions
- Supports New Mexico's agricultural economy, rural communities, culture, and livelihoods

“The EPLUS program is one of the best options for locals to hunt their home districts and the landowners do a great job of keeping the land in great condition for the elk populations. I strongly believe the EPLUS program is great the way it is.” -New Mexico resident hunter

Thank you!



"EPLUS has allowed my husband and I to improve our property. We have been able to buy equipment, improve water systems which allows us to plant our pastures with feed. This enables us to provide habitat for elk and all wildlife." -Catron county rancher