

About the Elk Private Lands Use System:

The New Mexico Department of Wildlife (NMDW) established the landowner elk authorization system in 1989, which was then formulated into the Elk Private Lands Use System (EPLUS) in 2005. The purpose was to create a program that acknowledges landowners who provide meaningful benefit to elk and accept elk on their properties and to provide hunting opportunities on private and public land to all elk hunters who wish to recreate within New Mexico's exterior boundaries. The system has evolved over decades into the very efficient program that exists today. EPLUS has become a crucial aspect of NMDW's elk management in New Mexico that supports rural economies and promotes conservation and habitat stewardship throughout private lands across the state.



EPLUS Terminology Reference Guide

Authorizations: NMDW issues private-land elk authorizations to eligible landowners in the Primary and Special Zones. These authorizations can be bartered, sold, or traded to hunters. An authorization is then used by hunters to buy a private-land elk license from NMDW.

License: An elk license is the general big-game hunting license that authorizes the hunting of elk in New Mexico. It is issued by NMDW and is required for all hunters of elk, regardless of whether the hunt is on public or private land. Private-land elk licenses are available by obtaining an authorization number from a landowner.

Permit/Tag: An elk tag is the species-specific permit that authorizes the harvest of an elk. It is separate from the license and must be purchased or drawn for each species hunted.

Primary Management Zone (PMZ): Where elk management is focused and private-land elk authorizations are issued to landowners through an acreage-based formula.

Secondary Management Zone (SMZ): Where no specific elk management goals are set and licenses are available over-the-counter from NMDW. To purchase and use these licenses, hunters must obtain authorization from landowners to hunt on their private land.

Special Management Zone: Where private-land elk authorizations are issued to private landowners by the department on a ranch-by-ranch basis.

Game Management Unit (GMU): Geographical subdivisions used to manage big game species.

MYTH: It's not fair that landowners receive over 13,000 elk authorizations.

FACT: Actually, landowners receive just over 8,200 elk authorizations through the EPLUS program. 3,200 of which are authorizations to harvest cow elk. Outside of the primary elk management zones (determined by the NMDOW and revised every 4 years) hunters may purchase Ranch Only licenses from NMDW, available on an unlimited, over-the-counter basis. These licenses can only be used on deeded acreage within the Game Management Unit (GMU) and require advance authorization by the landowner. Additionally, 50% of New Mexico's elk habitat is located on private land. It is reasonable that a substantial number of elk authorizations are for private land given that roughly half of the habitat is located on private land. Private landowners provide vital habitat, cover, and water resources to elk and all of NM's wildlife.

MYTH: ALL elk authorizations should be Ranch Only

FACT: 80% of private land elk authorizations are considered RO. This means they can only be utilized on the deeded acreage associated with the authorization, or other deeded acreage within the GMU with the other landowner's written permission. Roughly 20% of EPLUS authorizations are considered Unit Wide (UW) and less than 1,000 authorizations are for mature bull elk. Also, if a landowner wishes their authorizations to have UW availability, they must agree to open the private land associated with the authorization to ALL public land elk hunters. New Mexico's UW authorizations provide public land hunters with an additional half million huntable acres. Some UW ranches also open access to additional public land acreage that would be otherwise inaccessible to all hunters.

MYTH: EPLUS violates the public trust doctrine.

FACT: This statement is false. The Public Trust Doctrine is the common law principle that the state manages fish & wildlife within that state, for the benefit of the citizens of the state. The NM case law that establishes precedent for this principle is State Game Commission v. Red River Valley Co. (1945) which stated, "New Mexico wildlife is held in trust for the benefit of the people of the state". It does not say that benefit should be exclusively for hunters. Nor did the lawsuit define the term "benefit". In a more recent precedent setting case in Alaska (Alaska Supreme Court in Cassell v. Alaska - May 9, 2025) the Supreme Court ruled that managing wildlife for the "maximum benefit" of Alaskans include weighing both economic and conservation benefits alongside resident access. The court rejected the argument that the Public Trust Doctrine requires a near-exclusive priority for resident hunters over nonresident hunters. The Alaska Supreme Court went on to state that the state's fiduciary duty to manage resources for the maximum benefit of the people of Alaska includes consideration of economic revenue generated by nonresident hunters.

MYTH: Allowing landowners to sell elk authorizations on the open market is a privatization of a public resource.

FACT: The state's wildlife is considered a public resource. Under EPLUS, ownership of elk is never transferred to a landowner and thus privatization of these resources does not occur. Authorizations are simply the opportunity to obtain a license/tag from the NMDW (the same as with all public draw hunters) and to participate in a fair chase elk hunt, typically on private property. When a landowner sells their elk authorizations, they are selling the opportunity to obtain a license/tag.

MYTH: New Mexico is the only state that allows landowners to sell authorizations.

FACT: This statement is false. Landowner hunting permits are a common tool used to achieve state wildlife conservation objectives in the Western US. There are 13 states that offer landowner authorizations and seven of those states offer transferable (i.e. sellable) authorizations (CA, CO, OR, NV, NM, WA, & UT).

Commonly observed elk-related impacts on private lands in northern New Mexico:

Forage and stored feed loss

Through the primary consumption of forage in livestock grazing areas and the secondary consumption of supplemental feed, such as baled hay, elk presence reduces forage and devalues grazing by an average loss of -\$230.00 per acre and introduces an additional total feed cost of +\$145.67 per cow on average.

Livestock Labor and Maintenance Cost

Elk use of private lands increases labor demands and requires livestock operational adjustments. Increased maintenance is necessary as fences, gates, and corrals are often damaged as elk move across private lands to access forage and water. The total labor and maintenance related costs of stewarding elk on working private lands is estimated to increase 12% per cow from the baseline cost without elk presence.

Cumulative Cost

In northern New Mexico, the average livestock productions are small-scale cow-calf operations that host around 50 cows or less per breeding herd. The cumulative cost of elk presence amidst these operations is estimated to be an additional +\$165.67, or 19%, increase per cow. For a cow-calf operation with 50 cows, the rancher is faced with an average cost of \$8,283.50 to address the feed loss, maintenance costs, and labor attributed to elk activity and presence.

Pilja Vitale, P., Martinez, D., Vitale, J., Spackman, C., & Atcity, C. (2026). Understanding Elk-Related Costs on private lands for livestock producers in Northern New Mexico Mountain Regions (Series 2 of 2) | New Mexico State University Cooperative Extension Service (CES) Publications. https://pubs.nmsu.edu/_z/Z137/index.html

"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

"Elk continuously graze our property. They cause damages to fences and cause overgrazing in our pastures. Because of the elk we have to reduce the number of cattle we can support. The sale of landowner permits to outfitters is the only way we can recoup some of the losses and damage caused by elk. Our other option is depredation. The purpose of the EPLUS is to keep the elk herd at a reasonable level."
- NM Producer

