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Elk Arrive Back In Show-Me State This Month

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*SMT Report From The
Missouri Department of Conservation*

JEFFERSON CITY Mo – The first group of elk that are part of the Missouri Department of Conservation's (MDC) elk restoration project are scheduled to arrive in the state on April 30.

The 34 elk will complete their 90-day quarantine and final health testing in Kentucky before being transported by a semi-driven livestock trailer to Missouri. The elk will be released from Kentucky pending approval by the Missouri Department of Agriculture (MDA).

The elk also have been fitted with ear tags, microchips and GPS collars. After their overnight journey, the elk will be unloaded into a three-acre, double-fenced holding pen on MDC's Peck Ranch Conservation Area in southeast Missouri.

The pen is divided into four sections with one for young bulls, one for yearling calves, one for cows and one for pregnant cows.


Peck Ranch is part of a 346-square-mile elk restoration zone covering parts of Shannon, Carter and Reynolds counties. MDC will record the elk arrival and unloading into the holding pen through video and photography and post the images on its website

(www.MissouriConservation.org) the afternoon of April 30.

“We know Missourians are very excited to have free-ranging elk back in the state and are eager to see them,” said MDC Elk Project Coordinator Ron Dent. “While we would like to allow public viewing of their arrival and while they are in the holding pen, that is not compatible with the animals’ welfare.”

Dent explained that MDC’s first priority is the health and safety of the elk.

“These are wild animals that have a strong natural fear of humans,” he said. “The elk can become very nervous if they hear, see or smell people nearby. Minimizing contact with humans while the elk are in this confined space is vital to keeping them from getting more stressed, and possibly hurting themselves or other elk by trying to flee.”

Dent added that MDC staff caring for the elk will also minimize their  contact with the animals. While the elk are in the holding pen, MDC staff will provide food and water daily and keep daily logs on each animal’s activities. MDC staff will also provide around-the-clock security at the holding pen.

The elk will remain in the holding pen for up to two weeks pending results from the final round of health tests performed in Kentucky. Elk will be released from the pen following approval of the final test results by the MDA.

Once the elk have been approved for release from the holding pen, MDC staff will open the gates and allow the elk to move on their own into the 12,000-acre Refuge Area of Peck Ranch.

The Refuge will remain closed to the public for a few months to allow the elk to acclimate to the immediate area. During this time, the elk may move on their own from the Refuge into the larger restoration zone where public viewing is unrestricted.

Dent explained that this “soft release” into a temporary holding pen is strongly preferred over a “hard release” where the animals are unloaded from a livestock trailer directly into open country.

“We’ve learned from other states with restored elk, such as Kentucky and Tennessee, that a hard release with a crowd of people around increases stress on the elk,” he said. “A hard release prompts them to bolt from the trailer and immediately spread out into a much

larger area as they flee human contact. Our soft release into the holding pen will give the animals time to become more comfortable in their new environment. Allowing them to then leave the holding pen on their own will make them less likely to travel far from the release site.”

He added that catching sight of elk in the restoration zone may be a challenge for people.

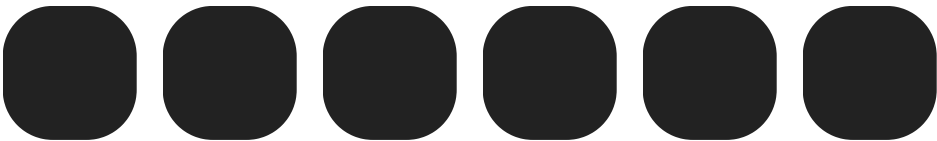
“This is not a zoo-type environment,” Dent said. “These several dozen animals will have more than 221,500 acres in the rugged terrain of the restoration zone to call home. It will take some time to figure out where they congregate and where good viewing locations are. As we learn more and as the herd grows, viewing will get better and better.”

For more information on Missouri’s elk restoration efforts, visit www.MissouriConservation.org and search “elk restoration.”

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