

State allows elk hunting for the first time in Alameda and San Joaquin counties

By Rebecca F. Johnson
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The first tule elk hunting season in Alameda and San Joaquin counties has just wound down, and a local conservation group is gearing up a campaign to make sure it never happens again.

Earlier this year, the state Department of Fish and Game expanded its tule elk hunting area for this season, which ran from Oct. 9-24, enabling one enthusiast a tag for a specified area within Alameda and San Joaquin counties.

However, Alameda Creek Alliance leaders are questioning the inclusion of a Sunol area herd in this year's elk hunt and are encouraging alliance members to lobby the department and the California Fish and Game Commission to retract its new regulation.

"We certainly think it's premature to be hunting this population," said Jeff Miller, the alliance's director.

Tule elk, native to California and the smallest elk species in North America, roam Alameda County within lands around Livermore and Sunol including on San Francisco Public Utilities Commission and East Bay Regional Park District properties.

According to the state commission's statement for regulatory action regarding Alameda and San Joaquin, "sufficient numbers of elk occur in this area to provide additional opportunity for the public to hunt elk."

John Krause, an associate wildlife biologist for the Department of Fish and Game, said the department does not have a comprehensive count for the elk in the Alameda County area, but he expects one will be completed in the near future.

Joe Didonato, former stewardship and wildlife manager for the East Bay Regional Park District, estimates that there are about 60 to 70 tule elk near the San Antonio Reservoir in Sunol on SFPUC land as well as other small populations on private properties in the region.

For a hunter, landing the right for a tule elk is considered a coveted and lucky position.

"A California tag is a one-in-a-lifetime deal," said Mike Vaiana, of Walnut Creek, who received this year's tag but was unsuccessful in locating a bull elk.

The department's regulation stipulates that a bull elk with at least 4-inch-high antlers could be killed on private property, but only with permission of the landowner.

"I had no idea how difficult it would be," Vaiana said. "People were just not interested."

Miller said his organization does not think it is appropriate to be hunting the area's elk because the population effects are unclear, adding that the hunt's time frame coincides with the end of the mating season.

"Potentially taking out the big bull elk during hunting every year could be quite disruptive to breeding," he said.

But hunting enthusiast and Livermore resident Rich Fletcher, who has hunted elk in other parts of the country, said he thinks the department should allow it if the bull population is up. Older bulls, such as the ones specified in the department regulations, probably would not be involved in breeding calves, he said.

"It would have no effect on the herd," he said. "It would be irrelevant to the welfare of the tule elk."

There are currently about 3,800 tule elk in California living in 21 herds, according to Fish and Game statistics. Tule elk numbered in the hundreds of thousands in the 1800s but became nearly extinct.

After the elk repopulated and grew numerous in certain areas, the department began relocating them throughout the state.

The other new hunting zones this year include portions of land in Mendocino, Bear Valley, Lake Pillsbury and Santa Clara.