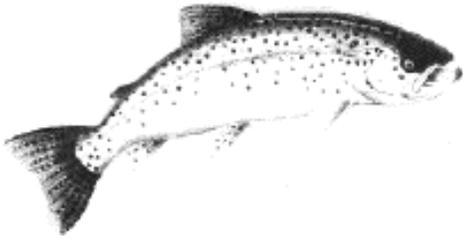


STATE ALLOWS HUNTING OF DECLINING SUNOL TULE ELK HERD



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Sunol, CA – The Alameda Creek Alliance is objecting to hunting of the declining tule elk herd in the Alameda Creek watershed, having learned that the first legal hunt for tule elk in Alameda County opened earlier this month. Tule elk have rebounded from near-extinction in California, and the California Fish and Game Commission this spring approved several new hunt zones, including a new hunt in Alameda County which could put the dominant breeding elk in the Sunol elk herd in hunters' gun sights each year.

“The overall elk population in California is recovering, but there are not enough elk in the Sunol herd to justify hunting and this is the largest herd in Alameda County,” said Jeff Miller, Director of the Alameda Creek Alliance. “The Sunol herd has declined significantly in the past decade, likely due to illegal poaching on private lands. The diminished Alameda County elk population very likely cannot sustain this hunt, which will result in the shooting of the largest elk and the primary breeder in the herd each year.”

Tule elk are endemic to California and over half a million are thought to have once roamed throughout the Central Valley and the central Coast Ranges before European contact. Hunted extensively, tule elk were thought to be completely extinct by the end of the gold rush. A small remnant herd of just a handful of elk was discovered in 1874 on a ranch in San Joaquin County, and protected by the rancher. By 1905 the herd had grown to 140 elk and subsequent relocation and reintroduction efforts brought the population to 500 elk in three herds by 1970. Hunting of tule elk was prohibited by legislation in 1971, in effect until the state population grew to 2,000 elk. Tule elk reached that mark in 1989, at which point legal hunting was initiated. Today there are about 3,800 elk in 21 herds in California, with one of the largest herds of 450 elk located at Point Reyes National Seashore in Marin. Less than 60 elk are estimated to remain in the Sunol herd.

In 1978 tule elk were reintroduced to Grant Ranch County Park in Santa Clara County. By 1980 this herd had split and dispersed, with some elk moving to Mount Hamilton, and the Sunol herd establishing themselves around San Antonio Reservoir. The Sunol herd one of the healthiest herds in the Mt. Hamilton Range and the largest in Alameda County. The herd had 21 elk in 1984 and the documented population peaked at an estimated 70 elk in 1995, although reliable sources in public land management agencies believe there were more than 90 at one point. The herd has since declined to less than 60 elk.

The new Alameda hunt zone provides one elk tag per year for hunting on private lands, south of Highway 580, west of Highway 5, east of Highway 680, extending south to the Santa Clara, San Joaquin, and Stanislaus County lines. This hunt zone primarily targets the Sunol herd, although there are a few smaller groups of elk in eastern Alameda County. The Alameda elk hunt season runs for 16 days beginning the second Saturday in October. This year's hunt ended on October 24th.

“We are trying to get more information from the Department of Fish and Game on the numbers of elk in Alameda County and the information they used to justify allowing hunting,” said Miller. “We do not yet know how many hunters signed up for Alameda hunt tags or whether an elk was shot this year. Reliable sources report that local landowners with access to the herd are offering hunts on their land for \$5,000.”

The Alameda hunt allows one bull tag, which means an elk with one or more antlers at least four inches long can be shot. In practice, hunters try for the largest bull elk they can shoot, probably a ‘primary bull.’ Primary bulls are the largest males, which control harems and are responsible for more than 80% of breeding. Bull elk typically have harems of up to 30 females, so there may be only one or two primary bulls in the Sunol herd. The hunt could be very disruptive to breeding since it occurs during elk mating season, which runs through mid-October. The Sunol elk population has never been legally hunted, and will be sitting ducks for hunters. Fish and Game statistics indicate that collectively, California’s tule elk hunts have a 62% ‘success’ rate, so there are better than even odds that a large or the largest bull will be shot each year.

Fish and Game did not analyze the impact of shooting the largest elk and a primary breeder on the Alameda elk population dynamics during the state’s shoddy environmental review for the new hunting regulations, which simply stated: “These areas currently support adequate numbers of elk to support a limited harvest. Establishing (new) tule elk hunts in these areas is desired to improve hunter opportunity and is consistent with the statewide management objectives for tule elk.” Neither the Commission nor the Fish and Game Department made any attempt to notify or engage local conservation groups or the non-hunting public in Alameda County about the new hunt. The state hunting regulations will not be revisited until 2012.

“Fish and Game has offered no evidence that there are enough elk in Alameda County to support regular ‘harvest’ of primary bulls,” said Miller. “The declining Sunol elk herd is a public resource for everyone to enjoy, and most East Bay residents want to observe the elk and restore their numbers, not shoot them. The Alameda Creek Alliance will be working to shut down this inappropriate hunt.”

The Alameda Creek Alliance (www.alamedacreek.org) is a community watershed group with over 1,800 members, dedicated to protecting and restoring the natural ecosystems of the Alameda Creek watershed. The Alameda Creek Alliance has been working to restore steelhead trout and protect endangered species in the Alameda Creek watershed since 1997.