

HOW WYOMING TREATS YOUR ELK

Camp Creek Elk Feedground 2014: A Valley of Death



Camp Creek elk feedground. May 1, 2014. L. Dorsey

In late April, 2014, travelers on U.S. Highway 191 along the Hoback River south of Jackson Hole reported seeing staggering, emaciated elk and elk carcasses. Just out of the public's view, in nearby Camp Creek, is an 80-acre elk feedground where the Wyoming Game and Fish Department feeds hay to about 2,000 elk during the winter. As a result of public inquiries, the WGFD eventually issued a news release "reporting higher than normal calf mortality at a few feedgrounds, most notably the Camp Creek feedground south of Jackson and the Soda Lake feedground north of Pinedale." They attributed the death of approximately 80 elk at each feedground to "both disease issues and wolf predation."

While there are wolves, coyotes and mountain lions in the area, the agents of death weren't claw or fang, but bacteria. This bacteria thrives in fetid conditions and causes debilitation so painfully horrible that it is an act of mercy if a wolf administers the coup de grace.

The disease, commonly called hoof rot, is caused by *Fusobacterium necrophorum* which persists in unsanitary conditions on feedgrounds where elk are fed for months each winter amidst their own feces and urine. The disease particularly affects elk calves, whose hooves are soft, easily cut, and whose immune systems aren't as robust as adults.

The WGFD said that elk on feedgrounds "were exposed to many freeze/thaw cycles, which formed heavy crusting of snow and areas of sharp, jagged ice and mud. Such conditions can cause lesions to an animal's hoof, or tissues between the toes, allowing bacteria to enter the animal's system. From there, the bacteria can spread to vital organs, often overwhelming the liver, resulting in death." The agency hints that the winter was unusual, but it really was little different than thousands of other winters that elk have spent in the Rocky Mountains. What is unusual are the unnatural circumstances that feedgrounds and hay inflict on the normally free-ranging elk, forcing them to wallow in their own waste for months; 100 tons or more of the stuff. Awful habitat for elk, perfect habitat for pathogens.

The unsanitary conditions that perpetuate the bacteria and results in hoof rot are typical on the 22 elk feedgrounds in western Wyoming, plus the National Elk Refuge in Jackson Hole. Wild, free-ranging elk are not commonly affected by this disease because those elk naturally spread out; the conditions on native winter range are far healthier than on a feedlot with decade's worth of festering disease. But that's how Wyoming "manages" more than 20,000 elk in Teton, Sublette and Lincoln counties. No other state does this to this degree. All other jurisdictions realize that to concentrate wildlife for 4 to 5 months each year is unhealthy in both the short and the long term.

Another insult shot at elk on feedgrounds each winter is in the form of an old cattle vaccine called Strain 19, brucellosis vaccine. Brucellosis can cause elk and cattle to abort fetuses. While the elk are lined up each day to munch hay, a person shoots a freeze-dried pellet containing a modified version of the brucellosis bacteria into the rumps of all the calf elk. The pellet penetrates the hide and is supposed to dissolve and eventually trigger antibodies to fight against the *Brucella abortus* bacteria. If the pellet hits between ribs or in the flank and gets into the body cavity or lungs, the elk can die. The feeder-shooter also shoots a paint ball at the elk, so they're shot twice. The paint ball marks that animal as having been vaccinated.



Dead elk calf, Camp Creek. May 1, 2014. L. Dorsey
The red spot is from the brucellosis vaccine paint ball.

The calf elk, with a very thin hide at this age, flinch each time they're shot. Ironically, the vaccine is worthless. Analysis of the vaccination program, which has been in progress since 1985, concludes that the elk still have brucellosis in the same prevalence as without vaccinations. In fact, the disease has increased over this same time in adult female elk. But since the WGFD is heavily influenced by the cattle ranchers who are very supportive of vaccines, the wildlife managers continue to shoot every calf elk at least twice. The program costs at least \$2,000 to \$3,000 for each feedground each winter. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service allows the WGFD to vaccinate calf elk on the elk refuge each winter, too. The vaccination program costs up to \$54,000 each winter, and over 30 years, that's well over a million taxpayer dollars wasted. Elk not confined to feedgrounds each winter are typically much healthier than feedground elk.

The regular occurrence of hoof rot, brucellosis, pasteurella, scabies and other diseases associated with elk feedgrounds are good reasons to phase them out. Feedground conditions also increase the risk of Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD), another lethal disease of deer and elk that is advancing towards the elk feedgrounds. The CWD endemic zone expands about 1.8 million acres each year in Wyoming. Experts say that if CWD gets into the feedgrounds with their dense concentrations of elk it will accelerate the deadly epidemic among the elk and deer of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem.

Camp Creek is a small picturesque valley facing south out of the Gros Ventre Mountains. On a sunny spring day last year, it was nearly impossible to reconcile that beauty with the scores of rotting carcasses, mostly calves. The sunshine was also cooking the tons of feces and urine that had been deposited by the elk over the past 5 months. Besides the grisly sight of dead and wasted elk in various stages of rot, the putrid smell was enough to label this a valley of death.

This is how Wyoming manages elk. It doesn't have to be this way.

- Essay by Lloyd Dorsey, March 2015, Jackson Hole, Wyoming.

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For frequently asked elk feedground questions and answers, read "What Happens When Elk Feeding Ends" at http://wyomingwildlifeadvocates.org/dashboard/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/What-happens-when-feeding-ends_-Final.pdf

See more photos of the Camp Creek elk die off at <http://wyomingwildlifeadvocates.org/resources/>

See also the CWD Map at <http://wyomingwildlifeadvocates.org/resources/>

See also a related WyoFile article <http://www.wyofile.com/widely-used-elk-vaccine-called-ineffective/>