



What Happens When Elk Feeding Ends

Prepared for Wyoming Wildlife Advocates

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According to public comments to Environmental Impact Statements^{1 2}, many wildlife enthusiasts see the wisdom of carefully phasing out winter elk feeding to help ensure healthier herds in the future. Some stakeholders, however, both individuals and groups, are uneasy or opposed to ending a century-long practice of artificially feeding thousands of elk hay or alfalfa pellets on 23 feedgrounds in three Western Wyoming counties (Sublette, Lincoln and Teton) during the winter months.

This report lists some of the oft-repeated concerns over the ramifications of ending feeding followed by responses to those concerns. End notes contain the sources of supporting information to the responses, or additional explanation, as needed.

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1. Eliminating elk feedgrounds is "foolishly impractical"³.

There are several examples where ending or significantly reducing winter elk feedgrounds has already been successfully accomplished. Those successes were in Yellowstone National Park in 1937⁴; eastern Idaho, beginning in 1998⁵, North Piney in Western Wyoming⁶, and the Deseret Ranch in Utah⁷. In fact, *it is out of the ordinary* for Rocky Mountain elk to be artificially provisioned during winter months (or any months) throughout its range in North America. From New Mexico north through all the Rocky Mountain States and Canadian provinces to the Yukon Territory, elk range free year round. Indeed, only 3 percent of Rocky Mountain elk are artificially fed⁸. Therefore, the most common and "practical" method of managing wild elk is to allow them to range freely, not to concentrate them on small plots of ground and feed them hay or alfalfa pellets. *Practically speaking, Rocky Mountain elk do well without artificial feeding during Rocky Mountain winters and all other seasons.*

2. Most of the elk winter range in Jackson Hole and throughout Western Wyoming has been developed, no longer exists, and therefore could not sustain many elk.

The three counties where elk are fed during winter in Wyoming, (Sublette, Lincoln and Teton) are comprised of 83 percent federal land. Their combined acreage is almost 8.6 million acres with more than 7 million acres managed by the National Park Service, the US Forest Service, the US Fish and Wildlife Service or the Bureau of Land Management⁹. There exists today approximately 1.74 million acres of big game winter range designated by the Wyoming Game and Fish Department and the federal agencies in these three counties alone^{10 11 12 13}. In adjacent counties there is even more winter range^{14 15}. Despite some development on these public lands for energy (oil and natural gas) and other uses, the majority of these winter ranges are undeveloped and available for winter elk, deer, moose and pronghorn. Indeed, these critical habitats have some better protections for wildlife than they did during settlement times in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Federal agencies and the WGFD restrict or prohibit human activities on winter ranges to protect wildlife.

Teton County alone is comprised of 97 percent federal land. Of the remaining 3 percent, about 79,000 acres of private lands, 20,000 acres are under conservation easement for protection of wildlife habitats^{16 17}. Essentially, Teton County is about 98 percent protected wildlife habitat. There is ample room for wildlife to roam free.

The Gros Ventre Valley east of Jackson Hole contains 100,000 acres of designated winter range on US Forest Service lands¹⁸. Hundreds of thousands of acres of wind-swept public, private and tribal land in the Upper Wind River Valley around Dubois, Crowheart, Pavillion and Riverton, provide winter range for all big game. In Eastern Idaho, around Montpelier, Idaho Falls, Ashton, and Island Park, the Idaho Fish and Game Department manages designated winter ranges for thousands of elk and other big game¹⁹.

The 20 million-acre Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem is comprised of 80 percent federal lands with vast areas of winter ranges where big game and their habitats thrive far better than on feedgrounds.

Wyoming has the fewest residents of any state in the U.S. and its three feedground counties are no exception. Wyoming is approximately the same size as Colorado²⁰, but Colorado contains a human population nine times that of Wyoming²¹. Colorado also has nearly 3 times the amount of elk as Wyoming²². Despite the large human population, three times the number of elk, and twice as many cattle in Colorado as Wyoming, Colorado doesn't feed any of their 280,000 elk during winter. Nor does Montana or almost any other jurisdiction in the Rocky Mountains.

Because of exceptionally successful conservation efforts during the past decades, bountiful herds of elk and other big game throughout the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem use protected winter ranges including those in western Wyoming.

3. Balancing elk numbers with available habitat will require reductions of 60 percent of the elk numbers.

Believing that virtually all elk must be on feedgrounds or perish has been proven incorrect for generations. We know that during the past 100 years elk have recolonized or have been

reintroduced to their historic ranges by the hundreds of thousands. There are now more than 850,000 elk roaming private and public lands from New Mexico to the Yukon Territory, and nearly everywhere in between²³.

The purpose of ending artificial feeding is to spread elk out, and allow them to roam naturally and be healthy. Therefore wintering elk numbers in Jackson Hole and immediately around feedground locations in the three Western Wyoming counties will certainly decrease. Areas like the Gros Ventre Valley, however, are underutilized and can winter more elk than at present ²⁴. Wyoming's elk population is at 112,000, and the objective is only 81,275, so Wyoming is already 37 percent over objective²⁵. Most of the Montana and Idaho hunt areas within the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem are also at or over their objectives for elk^{26 27}. It is generally accepted that there are more elk in the region than managers want.

The Jackson Hole area, consisting of the Buffalo Valley, Gros Ventre Valley and the Jackson Hole valley itself, can winter approximately 8,850 elk (median between low estimates of 7,600 to upper end estimates of 10,100), plus other big game, without artificial feeding ^{28 29 30 31 32}. Without artificial feeding, there will be abundant populations of healthier free-ranging elk in all seasons for the public to enjoy.

4. Biologists say that half of the elk will starve to death in a harsh winter if feedgrounds are phased out.

What killed off most of the elk herds a century ago were bullets, not starvation. Some winter loss of elk and deer is natural in the Rocky Mountains, and it always has been. If feedgrounds were necessary to maintain thousands of elk, every state would need them. They don't. If feedgrounds were phased out, particularly if elk numbers were reduced first through hunting and predation below the carrying capacity of regional winter ranges, the elk would spread out and thrive. Other regions of the Rocky Mountains have similar climates to Teton, Lincoln and Sublette counties, and their elk range freely and remain healthy during winter. Moose, bighorn sheep, pronghorn antelope and deer also range freely without supplemental feed and do well.

Some small percentage of winter loss is normal and helps the herds remain healthy. Once the herds are reduced close to the carrying capacity of the surrounding or migration-distance winter habitats, feeding can end. Elk, deer and other wildlife have proven that they can find protected winter ranges as long as we protect the migration corridors to get there. The elk will do well without feedgrounds, just as they do everywhere else in North America.

5. If elk aren't fed during winter, they will be in neighborhoods and destroy flowers, shrubbery, trees and lawns.

As with other wildlife in the Rocky Mountain states and Canadian provinces, some elk will roam into settled areas. Fortunately, by far the greatest amount of their habitat is peripheral or some distance away from towns and neighborhoods. Wildlife prefer to avoid people and neighborhoods, and will use habitat farther away for the most part. Additionally, the Rockies are sparsely settled; there's significantly more open, undeveloped land than developed land. But the occurrence of some wildlife is not uncommon in settled areas in the Rocky Mountains and all neighborhoods coexist well with wildlife. In fact most people value the wildlife in their areas. If people don't want their shrubs disturbed by moose, deer, or elk, they can fence around them. Many people and towns do

this already. If palatable plants are off limits, or aren't planted, in neighborhoods, the elk, moose and deer will move through onto large expanses of habitat that characterize the Rocky Mountain states and Canadian provinces. There are many resources, such as the 2011 Teton County Rural Living handbook, that counsel homeowners about coexisting with wildlife and how to protect their landscaping³³.

6. If elk aren't confined to feedgrounds, they will get in rancher's haystacks and mingle with cattle and other livestock.

Virtually all haystacks in the feedground counties, and surrounding counties in various states, are already fenced to prevent deer, elk and moose from getting the hay. That's the normal way to store hay outside in the Rocky Mountains and has been for generations. State wildlife agencies and conservation districts typically offer materials free to ranchers to fence their haystacks. Fencing around cattle and horse winter feedlines is also common throughout the Rocky Mountain states and Canadian provinces. Teton, Sublette and Lincoln county livestock owners can easily follow suit. Money is available from the above sources as well as the Wyoming Wildlife and Natural Resource Trust (WWNRT) account and other non-profits to help the livestock owners pay for the fences. One of the purposes of the WWNRT is to mitigate conflicts and reduce the potential for disease transmission between wildlife and livestock, so this is a perfect execution of this state fund that pays out hundreds of thousands of dollars annually³⁴.

Idaho legally requires livestock owners in the brucellosis endemic area of eastern Idaho to fence in their haystacks, as well as cattle and horse winter feedlines to prevent comingling with elk³⁵. This is a widely practiced and practical way to coexist with free ranging elk and other wildlife especially where disease transmission is of concern.

7. If elk aren't maintained on feedgrounds by the tens of thousands, predators may go hungry. If predators are hungry, they will threaten people.

There are hundreds of thousands of elk, deer, moose, bighorn sheep, antelope and buffalo in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. Most of them are not on feedgrounds. As long as this is the case, apex predators will never suffer from lack of prey. The American people have done an exemplary job of protecting or restoring prey and predator wildlife species in this region, and this is undeniably the pattern for the future. Bears, wolves and mountain lions have never posed a significant threat to people, and people know how to behave if ever confronted by these wildlife species that they value (e.g., bear spray). Each year in the U.S., horses kill 20 people; cows kill 22; pet dogs kill 30 to 35 people every year in the U.S.³⁶. Yet, no one thinks that horses, cows, or dogs-as species- pose a threat to humans.

8. If elk aren't sustained by feedgrounds, and take sanctuary within neighborhoods, predators will follow.

This is quite true. Even when elk are mostly kept for the winter months on feedgrounds in Jackson Hole, some elk (and deer and moose) find sanctuary in neighborhoods, and a very few predators follow and scare some people. Unfortunately, the WGFD then either relocates or kills the "offending" cougar, wolf or bear. All that's needed are for neighborhoods not to plant palatable plants, or high-fence those shrubs in proximity to their houses. Elk and deer will then pass through

and not stay near homes and attract predators. It works. In April 2003 Teton County passed an ordinance prohibiting feeding of deer and elk precisely because of this concern ³⁷.

9. Reducing the Jackson (or any feedground) elk herd, or not having thousands of elk on feedgrounds consistently in view of tourists, will harm the local economy.

Wildlife populations naturally wax and wane in numbers according to natural influences. Over the span of decades, some elk herds and other wildlife species have decreased in Yellowstone National Park, some herds and species have increased. Tourism hasn't been harmed. Jackson's economic indicators are increasing and there are no indications that fewer elk in one location (e.g., on the Elk Refuge during winter), or more elk in other locations (e.g., on native winter ranges) will cause our local economy any harm. The Jackson Elk Herd exceeded 18,000 in the mid 1990's ³⁸, and has decreased to approximately 12,000 in 2013 ³⁹, and the local economy nevertheless has improved ⁴⁰.

What *may* someday affect the wildlife viewing and hunting segments of the tri-county area of Western Wyoming would be the loss of elk (and deer and moose) to the long-term persistence and high prevalence of chronic wasting disease engendered by the dense concentrations of elk on feedgrounds. The experts tell us to phase out feedgrounds, spread elk out, conserve abundant predators to help keep the herds spread out and healthy, so disease doesn't cause the loss- and prevent the recovery- of our wildlife ^{41 42 43}. To protect the wildlife-dependent sectors of our economy, phasing out feedgrounds will pay long-term dividends.

10. If thousands of excess elk aren't kept on feedgrounds, providing abundant hunting licenses, the Wyoming Game and Fish Department funding will suffer.

The WGFD is already experiencing a fiscal crisis despite managing 22 feedgrounds and providing support to the National Elk Refuge. ⁴⁴ The department could save more than \$2.13 million dollars each year by closing the feedgrounds, which are the most expensive elk management system in North America. The WGFD is desperately seeking alternative sources of funding, and would do well to invite the non-hunting wildlife enthusiasts into their tent.

Fewer elk do not mean fewer licenses or less revenue. Since Wyoming's elk hunter success rate is more than double that of surrounding states, more than 40 percent success vs. approximately 20 percent and less ^{45 46 47}; the WGFD could still sell the licenses and allow the success rate per license sold to decline a bit towards the success standards of other Rocky Mountain states. There will still be abundant hunter opportunity and success.

11. If elk aren't kept on feedgrounds, they will cause havoc on our roads.

Since most surrounding states have more elk than Wyoming does, and since the number of elk on feedgrounds during winter is a small segment of the region's elk numbers, the risk of elk on roads if feedgrounds are phased out isn't going to be affected one way or another. All Rocky Mountain communities deal with deer, elk and other wildlife crossing their roads and in their neighborhoods. That's the norm throughout the Rockies. We have long perfected the tools to mitigate risks to wildlife and people alike.

12. Elk can't learn to migrate, so they must be kept on feedgrounds.

Nonsense. Most of the elk in the Rocky Mountains are descendants from elk transplanted into areas they'd never seen in the early 20th century. The elk in Colorado and New Mexico, Utah, Idaho, etc., are descendant from elk transplanted from Wyoming. And yet most of them migrate twice a year, sometimes only a few miles, sometimes many miles. The behavior is innate to elk and they readily make these choices to move from harsh climates to less harsh, if we manage their habitats well. Throughout the Rocky Mountains, we obviously have managed herds, their habitats and migration routes well since elk populations grew from about 50,000 at the beginning of the 20th century to nearly one million today. Protected lands are not only vast, but also connected. That means elk and other migratory wildlife can disperse across seasonal ranges, if we allow it. In Western Wyoming, mule deer, pronghorn, and some elk migrate significant distances between summer and winter ranges⁴⁸. Such healthy behaviors are readily learned by new generations of deer, elk and pronghorn if the choices are available to them. That is why the conservation of these species has been so successful over the past century in the Rocky Mountains and beyond.

13. What happens in the future if elk aren't fed?

Elk will be healthier and more spread out. The Jackson Elk Herd, and each currently fed elk herd, will likely have a larger migratory component than today. Some elk that summer in and around Jackson Hole, including elk in the Gros Ventre Mountains, the Tetons, and southern Yellowstone Park, will spend some winters outside the Buffalo Valley, the Gros Ventre Valley and Jackson Hole, and then migrate back into lush summer ranges each May. That's what many elk did for thousands of years. Some elk will also choose to spend winters roaming on the approximately 150,000 acres of winter range in the Buffalo, Gros Ventre and Jackson Hole valleys.^{49 50} Since winter ranges and migration routes are functional and mostly protected, the elk will have choices that are healthy and sustainable.

We don't have far to go to restore the natural historic, healthy patterns that elk and other wildlife evolved with. The basic necessities are in place in the form of large protected landscapes. We developed the appropriate sciences in the past century. Science informs us about the best ways to manage for healthy wildlife, which includes having predators on the landscape. Predators help keep the herds dispersed and healthy.

14. Conclusion:

Given the impending arrival of CWD into the three Western Wyoming counties with elk feedgrounds, given the fact that most other jurisdictions manage elk as free ranging herds⁵¹, given that elk do well in Rocky Mountain winters without being artificially fed, given that we have perfected the tools such as fences and over or under passes to mitigate consequences of free-ranging elk, and given the modern science and the experts supporting ending feedgrounds, it would be "foolishly impractical" not to carefully but quickly phase out elk feedgrounds, before it's too late.

Endnotes

¹ US Fish and Wildlife Service-National Park Service, 2007. Final Bison and Elk Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement. "About 65% of the commenters expressed a preference for Alternative 6 (ending feeding)." P. xxiii, parentheses added. Jackson, WY.

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 - ⁵ Smith, B.L. 2013. Elk Winter Feeding = Disease Facilitation. *The Wildlife Professional*. Winter 2013.
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 - ¹² Bureau of Land Management, 2014. Rock Springs Field Office Land Status map available at http://www.blm.gov/wy/st/en/field_offices/Rock_Springs.html Last viewed December 16, 2014.
 - ¹³ Wyoming Outdoor Council, unknown year. Restoring Wild Patterns: A conservation plan for free-ranging health wildlife populations in the southern Greater Yellowstone Area. Map. Lander, WY.
 - ¹⁴ Bureau of Land Management, 2011. Draft Resource Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement for the Lander Field Office Planning Office, September 2011. Map 51 Biological Resources Elk Winter Ranges and Parturition Areas All Alternatives. Lander, WY.
 - ¹⁵ Bureau of Land Management, 2011. Draft Resource Management Plan and Environmental Impact for the Lander Field Office Planning Office, September 2011. Map 53 Biological Resources Mule Deer Crucial Winter Range All Alternatives. Lander, WY.
 - ¹⁶ State of Wyoming, 2014. County Profiles. Available at <http://wyoming.gov/general.aspx>
 - ¹⁷ Jackson Hole Land Trust, 2014. Properties Map available at <http://jhlandtrust.org/> Last viewed December 16, 2014. Jackson, WY.
 - ¹⁸ Bridger-Teton National Forest, 1993. Teton Division Winter Travel Map. Revised/reprint 1993.
 - ¹⁹ Idaho Fish and Game Department. 2014. Idaho Elk Management Plan 2014-2024. Pp 109-119. Boise, ID.
 - ²⁰ National Geographic Road Atlas, 2012. Colorado: 104,091 sq. miles, p.135; Wyoming: 97,809 sq. miles, p. 142.
 - ²¹ U.S. Census Bureau, 2014. www.census.gov/popfinder 2010 Wyoming population: 563,629; 2010 Colorado population; 5,029,196. Last viewed December 17, 2014.
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 - ²⁷ Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks. 2014. Website [http://fwp.mt.gov/fishAndWildlife/management/elk/Montana Statewide Elk](http://fwp.mt.gov/fishAndWildlife/management/elk/Montana%20Statewide%20Elk%20Numbers) Elk numbers are estimated at 127,000-158,000. Last viewed on December 18, 2014. Per the Elk Population Objective Status by Hunting District- 2014 map, most of the GYE Hunt areas are at or above objective.
 - ²⁸ US Fish and Wildlife Service and National Park Service, 2007, Final Bison and Elk Management Plan and EIS. P. 52 describes 2400 - 3200 elk being able to winter on the Elk Refuge without supplemental feeding. Jackson, WY.
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- ³⁸ Ibid. p. 239.
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