

The quest for elk forage

Courts remind managers of looming disease threat on National Elk Refuge.

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In August, a nearly decade-long analysis of wildlife management on the National Elk Refuge finally concluded.

In a sweeping environmental study, officials decided they would reduce the elk population wintering on the refuge from roughly 7,000 to 5,000. The move is designed to bring the herd more in balance with the available habitat and let the animals spread out — helpful in stemming the spread of diseases.

Of the many maladies transmitted among crowded elk, chronic wasting disease looms as an existential threat to the 12,000-strong Jackson Elk Herd and the economy that's grown around it. Always fatal, the disease has no known cure and is marching west across Wyoming, infecting a moose near elk winter feedgrounds in Star Valley.

“There's no way we can prevent it from coming to the refuge,” Steve Kallin, manager of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service refuge, said last week. His statement underscores a challenge: How does his agency provide enough elk to satisfy a public that's grown to expect thousands of the ungulates, while spreading out animals as much as possible to prevent contagion?

Even under its new plan, endorsed by a court this summer, the refuge will be an overstocked winter range that makes elk susceptible to the spread of disease, critics say. Former National Elk Refuge biologist Bruce Smith, author of the new book “Where Elk Roam” and a subsequent op-ed on disease and ungulates, says refuge elk can best be protected by wintering only 2,700 of the animals on the preserve just north of Jackson. That way, they can spread out and forage on their own.

Kallin, however, is bound by the management plan and the court ruling, and is hemmed in by social and political considerations just as the elk herd is hemmed in by encroaching human development.

“We're moving as quickly as we can to try and reduce the potential for elevated transmission of that disease,” Kallin said.

Despite fears chronic wasting disease could decimate the refuge herd, the reserve's current biologist can't confirm that scenario. He has tried to estimate its spread using biological models, without success.

“The results were so variable so as to not yield any useful information,” National Elk Refuge biologist Eric Cole said. “Anyone who is making certain predictions on what will happen here is being disingenuous.”

Kallin agrees. “There are no conclusive answers as to what CWD will do when it

arrives," he said.

Kallin is moving quickly in the best interest of elk. He understands his management plan was affirmed in court, where judges tickled his ribs with their legal spurs.

Reducing herd size

"The whole point of a National Elk Refuge is to provide a sanctuary in which populations of healthy, reproducing elk can be sustained," the appeals court wrote.

"The refuge can hardly provide such a sanctuary if, every winter, elk and bison are drawn by the siren song of human-provided food to what becomes, through the act of gathering, a miasmic zone of life-threatening diseases. There is no doubt that unmitigated continuation of supplemental feeding would undermine the conservation purpose of the National Wildlife Refuge System," the court wrote.

The word "unmitigated" put refuge managers on notice. They must do what they can to reduce the concentration of elk to help stop the spread of disease.

"We're trying to reduce herd sizes," Kallin said and ticked off measures being taken to insulate refuge elk from maladies. Refuge workers have increased forage by installing a \$5.1 million irrigation system, helping to reduce supplemental feeding.

Each day in winter, feeders try to move to "clean snow" to reduce the chance of spreading disease. When alfalfa pellets are dispensed, they are spread out in long, serpentine lines.

"We drive as fast as we possibly can," Deputy Refuge Manager Paul Santavy said of efforts to string out the feed and the herd.

Elk spend less time on the refuge today, harassed off the winter range by hunters in the fall. If they linger too long in the spring, they're given the boot.

Meantime, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, in conjunction with the Wyoming Game and Fish Department and Grand Teton National Park, all partners in the refuge plan, is keeping a keen eye out for CWD. Testing of hunter-killed animals is widespread around Jackson Hole.

"Essentially every animal that dies on the refuge that we can get to before it's scavenged is put through an intensive necropsy," Kallin said.

Animals killed in the Grand Teton elk reduction program also are tested. Wildlife managers are 99 percent confident they will detect CWD before it infects more than 1 percent of the animals.

While the refuge plan calls for 5,000 elk, the Jackson Elk Herd numbered 12,000 at last winter's count. The annual census counted 7,746 on refuge feed.

Wyoming Game and Fish has an objective of 11,000 animals for the Jackson Elk Herd that winters on the refuge, in the Buffalo Valley and up the Gros Ventre River drainage. Wyoming Game and Fish operates three feedgrounds along the Gros Ventre.

That means under the plan, 6,000 animals would be wintering in the Gros Ventre if the

state objective is met. In both locations, elk would be concentrated around artificial feeding.

□The tough medicine from Smith's book is if we as a community don't phase out feeding soon, the repercussions could be catastrophic,□ said Lloyd Dorsey, the Wyoming representative for the Greater Yellowstone Coalition.

□The science is clear,□ he said. □The best opportunities to re-establish free-ranging healthy elk are in Jackson Hole and the Gros Ventre.□

Smith writes the best protection for elk would be to see no more than 2,500 on the refuge. Up to 9,000 elk have wintered naturally in the Gros Ventre drainage in the past, he says. Bridger-Teton National Forest Jackson District Ranger Dale Deiter recognizes why that area is valuable.

□One of the things that makes the Gros Ventre special is it's in the rain shadows of the Tetons,□ he said.

Retired Wyoming Game and Fish habitat biologist Steve Kilpatrick believes 9,000 might be too many elk for the Gros Ventre in a snowy winter.

□I think 9,000 is high, said Kilpatrick, now working at the Conservation Research Center of Teton Science Schools.

More elk in the Gros Ventre

□In heavy snow years the area could hold only about 4,000 without feeding,□ Kilpatrick said.

□The public would have to stomach a non-average winter,□ he said. But a smaller herd □ □that's not consistent with the public's expectation [for] the number of elk on the landscape.□

Kilpatrick has been among a coalition of habitat managers working since 2003 through the Jackson Interagency Habitat Initiative to improve winter habitat in the Gros Ventre drainage.

Managers have set fires to rejuvenate approximately 15,000 acres of the landscape there. Natural fires have covered another 21,000 acres, and cattle grazing allotments have been changed to reserve even more winter range for wildlife.

□What I personally observed is wildlife has used those areas extensively,□ ranger Deiter said.

□The burned areas will green up faster. The new vegetation is more palatable,□ he said.

The forest wasn't as thick before humans began to put out fires, Deiter said. Still, educating the public about the benefits of setting forest and range fires is a challenge.

□Nobody really sees too many trees as a disturbance,□ he said, □but it is if it's too dense.□

Agencies have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars improving habitat in the Gros Ventre drainage, a project initially launched for elk but now benefiting many species. While elk are still being fed at state feedgrounds, Kilpatick said the habitat work remains important. He sees the open hills as a safety net for elk, should chronic wasting disease infect feedgrounds.

Author Smith says managers are playing with fire, that worries by hunters and others who fear a world with fewer elk must be put aside to protect an invaluable resource.

□Better a smaller elk herd than an overstocked range riddled with disease,□ he writes.

Smith□s replacement suggests science isn□t as cut-and-dried as some believe.

□Science doesn□t tell us the right thing to do,□ biologist Cole said. □It allows us to predict outcomes and make recommendations.□

In affirming the refuge plan this summer, judges found no reason to put refuge managers on a strict schedule for changes and were satisfied Wyoming Game and Fish does not hold veto power over the federal agency. Despite the clear language about diseases the appellate judges used in their ruling, they had to cough up another passage supporting supplemental feeding and some crowding of elk. In doing so, elegant prose gave way to governmentspeak and cliché.

The Department of the Interior, they said, in choosing to continue some feeding, also selected a long-term plan to spread elk out. It was □an approach that is geared toward ending the practice over time while maintaining the flexibility needed to respond to facts on the ground,□ the court wrote.

Kallin puts the issue in his own language. The refuge program now has an □adaptive management□ component that will allow him to make changes if CWD shows up. □We can adjust,□ he said.

□There will never be consensus on answers that will satisfy everyone,□ Kallin said. □That□s why, I□m assuming, it took nine years to get through the [management plan] process.

□The biological information has to be viewed in the context of other considerations □ social considerations,□ he said.□We tried to come up with the most reasonable approach to managing the herd.

□Wildlife management would be easy,□ Kallin said, □if it wasn□t for people.□

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