



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
National Elk Refuge

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NATIONAL ELK REFUGE ENDS SUPPLEMENTAL FEEDING FOR THE SEASON

Supplemental feeding on the National Elk Refuge ended for the season on Sunday, April 20, only two days short of the latest ending date in the past 27 years. This year's feeding season began on January 14 and totaled 98 days, easily surpassing the 74-day average that elk and bison are fed on the refuge. Elk have begun to show less interest in the alfalfa pellets and are now gravitating toward the nutritious green grass starting to emerge on the refuge.

Over 8.4 million pounds of alfalfa pellets were fed to elk and bison this season. Because of the severity of the weather, up to 100,000 pounds of alfalfa pellets were fed daily during much of the winter at a cost of approximately \$8,200 per day for the feed alone. "That's a tremendous amount of pellets," said Refuge Manager Steve Kallin. "It's hard to comprehend how large and expensive this feeding program has become." Refuge officials anticipate needing 170 semi truck loads of pellets to replenish the supply for next year. Kallin provided a visual reference by noting, "If those 170 semi trucks were parked end to end, the line would extend for over two miles."

The cost of the feeding program is putting a strain on the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's regional budget. Budget constraints, however, are secondary compared to the agency's concerns about the health of the elk. "Concentrating this many animals for this length of time is certainly placing the elk at risk of a major disease outbreak," Kallin explains. To date, mortality has been low with only a 1.1% loss, factoring in all causes including disease and predation. "We can't expect to be this lucky every year, especially at these high population numbers," Kallin added. Though general observations show the elk to be in overall good condition despite the severity of the winter, 90 animals currently display advanced symptoms of foot rot. The disease appears when animals are in areas heavily contaminated with feces, a condition that results from high concentrations of animals over an extended period of time.

The Bison and Elk Management Plan for the National Elk Refuge and Grand Teton National Park was finalized in April 2007, calling for reduced reliance on winter supplemental feeding and winter population objectives of 5,000 elk and 500 bison. This would lower the chances of a major disease outbreak and decrease the damage to habitat resulting from high bison and elk numbers. This winter, elk and bison numbers exceeded those target objectives by 66% and 84%, respectively.

Kallin believes that for the long-term health of the elk population, it's imperative the populations be reduced and natural feed on the refuge increased. Fewer animals and more standing forage will reduce the length of time animals are on refuge feed lines. It will also lower the concentration of animals on the feed lines as the animals spread out while grazing on natural food sources. In this manner, supplemental feeding will not be eliminated, but will be reduced during most winters. The refuge will continue to explore ways to refurbish and enhance its irrigation infrastructure in order to significantly expand the amount of natural food grown to be used by wintering elk.

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www.fws.gov/nationalelkrefuge