



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
National Elk Refuge

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NATIONAL ELK REFUGE MANAGER ANNOUNCES SUPPLEMENTAL FEEDING START DATE

National Elk Refuge Manager Steve Kallin announced that the supplemental feeding program for elk and bison wintering on the refuge will begin on January 27 this year, approximately one week later than the 10-year average start date. Last year, feeding began on January 14.

Supplemental feeding is a management practice which enables the National Elk Refuge to maintain a larger number of animals than the winter range would otherwise sustain. When making the decision to initiate supplemental feeding, managers weigh the need for the additional feed with the increased risk of disease brought on by higher concentrations of animals. Biologists from the National Elk Refuge and Wyoming Game & Fish Department begin regular monitoring of conditions in December from various sites on the refuge, closely examining a variety of factors. Both snow conditions and forage availability are routinely measured. In addition to estimating the amount of pounds per acre of forage available, biologists note the ability of elk to access natural forage on the refuge.

This year, refuge-wide forage production was near the long-term average, an increase from last year when limited rainfall led to a 30% decrease. Fall conditions were relatively dry and warm with little significant snow on the valley floor until December 21. These factors, combined with disturbance from hunting, helped reduce elk numbers and consumption of forage on the south end of the refuge during the fall period. This allowed animals to find enough standing feed to meet their nutritional needs through most of January. However, recent frigid temperatures have hardened the snow pack, locking up most remaining forage in wet meadow areas under a layer of very dense snow and ground ice. Biologists have determined that most of the high quality forage on the south end of the refuge will soon be depleted, leading to the decision to initiate supplemental feeding.

When supplemental feeding begins, refuge staff will distribute small rations of approximately three pounds per elk daily to allow the animals to adjust to the new high protein diet. Elk will begin receiving a gradual increase in feed before reaching a full daily ration, which averages eight pounds per animal. However, the amount of supplemental feed can vary with conditions and may be increased during severe winter conditions.

Approximately 4,000 elk are estimated to be wintering on the south end of the refuge. Most of these elk have been foraging in wet meadow habitats to the south and west of Miller Butte. An additional 2,000 additional elk have been observed foraging east of the National Elk Refuge on U.S. Forest Service lands in winter closure areas. Once supplemental feeding is initiated, the number of elk on the refuge will likely increase. Travelers on U.S. 26/89/191 north of Jackson should use additional caution when driving to reduce collisions with wildlife that may be moving to and from the refuge.