



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
National Elk Refuge

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NATIONAL ELK REFUGE RELEASES DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT FOR IRRIGATION EXPANSION PROJECT

Refuge Manager Steve Kallin announced today the release of a draft Environmental Assessment for an irrigation expansion project on the National Elk Refuge in Teton County, Wyoming. The Environmental Assessment evaluates impacts of irrigation expansion on the south end of the refuge. Two alternatives are evaluated in the draft Environmental Assessment, including a no-action alternative and an outline of the proposed expansion.


The irrigation expansion is part of a comprehensive plan to annually produce more high-quality standing forage on the refuge. The increased forage production would benefit the long term health of wintering wildlife by reducing reliance on supplemental feeding, delaying the start of seasonal supplemental feeding, and reducing the risk of disease transmission by dispersing concentrations of elk and bison.

The irrigation expansion would also allow for water to be used more efficiently. Most cultivated fields on the refuge are flood irrigated, using the same ditch systems created by original homesteaders. The flood irrigation process involves diverting water from sources such as Flat, Cache, and Nowlin creeks and conveying it through open irrigation ditches. The water is then directed onto fields by using permanent water control structures or temporary dams. Flood irrigation, however, is much more inefficient than other methods, in part due to the porous nature of soils on the refuge. Though a larger acreage of land would be irrigated under the new proposed irrigation plan, water usage may decrease because of the efficiency of the new water delivery methods. Currently, only an estimated 10 – 15% of the water that is being diverted reaches its destination. Rather than relying primarily on center pivots and wheel line irrigation systems, the proposed irrigation expansion would integrate newer technology, reducing visibility of the equipment on the landscape.

Copies of the Environmental Assessment are available on the National Elk Refuge's web site at www.fws.gov/nationalelkrefuge/NERPublicInput.htm. Interested persons can also request a copy by calling the National Elk Refuge Headquarters at (307) 733-9212.

The public is invited to comment on the document by close of business on Thursday, May 28, 2009. Written comments may be mailed to National Elk Refuge, Attention Irrigation EA, PO Box 510, Jackson, WY 83001. Comments can also be sent by email to nationalelkrefuge@fws.gov with "Irrigation EA" written on the subject line.

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An open house has been scheduled for May 19, 2009 from 5:00 to 7:00 PM to discuss the draft Environmental Assessment with U.S. Fish and Wildlife staff from the Region 6 Planning Office and the National Elk Refuge. The open house will be held in the Teton County Commissioners' Chambers located at 200 S. Willow Street in Jackson, Wyoming.

Public notification of the issuance of the final Environmental Assessment will be made following the public comment period by posting a notice on the National Elk Refuge web site and issuing a public news release.

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www.fws.gov/nationalelkrefuge