



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
National Elk Refuge

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FINAL ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT APPROVED FOR IRRIGATION EXPANSION PROJECT

National Elk Refuge Manager Steve Kallin announced today the approval of the Final Environmental Assessment (EA) for the Irrigation Expansion Project at the Refuge. Regional Director Steve Guertin approved the Final EA by signing the Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) in early July 2009. Two alternatives were presented in the draft Environmental Assessment (EA), with Alternative B selected for implementation.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) explored the potential to improve and expand the existing irrigation system during the planning process, engaging in public outreach as well as consultation with others. A public scoping meeting was held in early March 2009 to outline plans for the proposed irrigation expansion and to receive comments from the public. The Service followed up its initial scoping meeting with a 30-day review period after the Draft EA was released. National Elk Refuge and Regional Service staff also held an open house during the comment review period. Public comments and Service responses can be found in Appendix A of the Final EA.

The National Elk Refuge has irrigated an average of 930 agricultural acres per year from 1996 through 2006 in an attempt to provide more standing forage for wintering elk. Increasing grazing pressure on plant communities by high elk and bison populations, rising demands and costs of the supplemental feeding program, the inefficiency of the existing flood irrigation and water transfer systems, and concerns about disease transmission due to high concentrations of animals, have combined to emphasize the need for better forage production on the Refuge. When implemented, the Irrigation Expansion Project will improve the production and management of winter forage for the benefit of elk and bison populations.

Improvements to grazing habitat were first outlined in the Bison and Elk Management Plan/Environmental Impact Statement completed in 2007. Included in the goals and strategies was the use of center pivots, side-roll, and hand-line sprinklers to irrigate a minimum of 1,600 acres annually. The Irrigation Expansion Project allows managers to use an additional irrigation system and increase the acreage of Refuge irrigated lands by 3,435, bringing the total number of acres to 5,035. Though a larger acreage of land will be irrigated, water usage is expected to decrease because of the efficiency of the water delivery methods, allowing more water to be available to support Flat Creek fisheries resources and riparian habitat growth.

Design work on the Irrigation Expansion Project is expected to begin this summer, with construction scheduled for May 1 through August 31, 2010. The new systems are expected to be functional by Spring 2011.

A copy of the Irrigation Expansion Project Final EA is posted on the National Elk Refuge's web site at www.fws.gov/nationalelkrefuge/NERPublicInput.htm. Hard copies of the document are also available and can be requested by calling (307) 733-9212, submitting a written request to National Elk Refuge, PO Box 510, Jackson, WY 83001, or sending an e-mail to nationalelkrefuge@fws.gov with "Hard Copy Irrigation Expansion" written on the subject line.