

Planning Update

Bison and Elk Management Plan

National Elk Refuge and Grand Teton National Park

Issue Nine, Spring 2007

We are pleased to announce the completion of the bison and elk planning effort for the National Elk Refuge and Grand Teton National Park. The final plan has been approved and is expected to be printed and released soon. Since 2001, when the public involvement process began, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and National Park Service have engaged the public, tribes, and other agencies in this planning process. We would like to thank all of you who came to our public meetings, reviewed draft planning documents and gave us comments and suggestions. By bringing your issues and ideas to the

table, you helped us work through this long and difficult process. We revised the proposed action in the draft plan after careful thought to the many comments we received from agencies, tribes, other organizations, and the public during the comment period. The final plan balances the most important management issues with the many differing viewpoints expressed and the purposes, missions, and management policies of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and National Park Service. As a result, we believe the final plan provides us with guidance and direction for managing the Jackson bison and elk herds for the next 15 years.

If you would like to receive a copy of the Bison and Elk Management Plan (available about July 1, 2007), please contact us at bisonelk_planning@fws.gov or call 307/733 9212 at extension 251. A limited number of hard copies are available but we will be glad to provide you with a compact disc.

You can also download the final plan, the final environmental impact statement, the Record of Decision, and other planning documents at <http://www.fws.gov/bisonandelkplan/>



Cow elk and her calf in early summer. Over time, the herds will increase their reliance on native and standing forage during the winter months.

Final Bison and Elk Management Plan

Record of Decision

A record of decision (ROD) for the Final Bison and Elk Management Plan was signed on April 26, 2007. The ROD is the decision made by the regional directors for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Region 6, Lakewood, Colorado) and the National Park Service (Intermountain Region, Lakewood, Colorado) on the management of the Jackson bison and elk populations on the National Elk Refuge and Grand Teton National Park/John D. Rockefeller, Jr., Memorial Parkway.

The ROD provides a summary of the planning and analysis process, including the purpose and need for the plan, the issues identified during the public process, alternatives that were considered and analyzed in the environmental impact statement (EIS), the public input process, and the basis for our decision to implement Alternative 4—Adaptively Manage Habitat and Populations, as described in the Final Plan/EIS.

The Selection of Alternative 4

We carefully considered environmental and other relevant concerns presented by agencies, organizations, and individuals on the proposed alternatives to develop and implement a plan to manage elk and bison on the National Elk Refuge and in Grand Teton National Park. Alternative 4 was selected because it will enable us to manage habitat and populations to achieve



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Healthy and sustainable elk populations is a primary goal of the plan.



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Large numbers of elk migrate to the National Elk Refuge in the fall.

desired conditions over 15 years and will balance the significant management issues with the purposes, missions, and management policies of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Park Service, as well as with the interests and perspectives of other agencies and stakeholders.

This planning process, and the alternatives that were proposed, generated a broad range of opinions and preferences among stakeholder groups, other agencies, and the general public. Much of this dialogue was centered on the distinctions between Alternatives 4, 5, and 6. In general, Alternative 5 was not selected because it would have maintained high concentrations of elk and bison on the refuge resulting in elevated risk of brucellosis and other non-endemic diseases, and more damage to woody vegetation. Alternative 5 was supported by some agencies, stakeholder groups, and the public, but there was substantial opposition to it by many commenters. Alternative 6 was not selected because this aggressive approach to eliminating supplemental feeding within 5 years would have been difficult to achieve within this time frame and would have exposed herds to increased risk of winter mortality. Like Alternative 5, it was supported by some agencies, stakeholder groups and many

members of the public, but there was also substantial opposition to it.

All of the alternatives, including the rationale for our selection of Alternative 4, are described in detail in the ROD.



Desired Conditions

By the end of the 15-year implementation period, the National Elk Refuge and Grand Teton National Park will provide winter, summer, and transitional range for large portions of the Jackson bison and elk herds. The environment will support a full complement of native plant, wildlife, and breeding bird species. Refuge and park staffs, working with others, will adaptively manage bison and elk in a manner that contributes to the state's herd objectives yet allows for the biotic integrity and environmental health of the resources to be sustained. As a result, the public enjoys a variety of compatible, wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities.

Final Bison and Elk Management Plan

Population Management

Adaptive Management Framework—Work with the Wyoming Game and Fish Department (WGFD) to develop and implement an adaptive management framework with established criteria to progressively transition from intensive supplemental winter feeding to greater reliance on free-standing forage, based on these considerations:

1. Level of forage production and availability on the National Elk Refuge
2. Desired herd size and ratios
3. Effective mitigation of bison–elk–cattle mingling on private lands
4. Winter distribution patterns of elk and bison
5. Prevalence of brucellosis, chronic wasting disease, and other wildlife diseases
6. Public support

Actions and criteria to reduce feeding could include the following: delaying the onset of feeding each year; decreasing the average daily ration per elk or bison based on winter severity decreasing, the number of days or frequency of years where feed would be provided, and increasing harvest levels. The amount of available forage, snow conditions, and the numbers of overwintering elk and bison will be considered.

Jackson Elk Herd—Work with WGFD to maintain the Jackson elk herd objective of 11,000 following the initial implementation of a phased approach, with about 5,000 elk expected to winter on the refuge. As herd sizes and habitat objectives are achieved, further reductions in feeding or elk numbers could occur based on established triggers and changing social, political, or biological conditions.

Jackson Bison Herd—Work collaboratively with WGFD to reduce and maintain a healthy population of about 500 bison (currently bison number about 1,100).



The Jackson bison herd has grown from 20 bison in 1948 to over 1,100 in 2007.



A public hunt will be used to manage bison and elk populations.

Hunting—Hunting (bison and elk on the refuge) and, when necessary, an elk herd reduction program in the park will be used to assist the state in managing herd sizes, sex and age ratios, and summer distributions. A public bison hunt will be initiated on the refuge and managed in accordance with WGFD's licensing regulations and an approved refuge hunting plan.

Tribes—Native American tribes could potentially remove a small number of bison each year from the refuge for ceremonial purposes.

Habitat Restoration

Restoration Efforts—Initiate habitat restoration projects to improve native and cultivated forage and achieve desired conditions and goals. Initiate restoration of about 4,500 acres of previously cultivated areas in the park to native plant communities.

Public Education

Conflict Reduction—Work with private and agency partners to minimize bison and elk conflicts with adjacent landowners (e.g., by providing human and/or financial resources to manage comingling and reduce crop depredation by elk and/or bison on private lands).

Elk and Bison Ecology—Initiate a public education effort to build understanding of natural elk and bison behavior, ecology, distribution, and disease effects on other species.

Disease Management

Vaccinations—Permit WGFD to vaccinate elk and bison for brucellosis on the refuge as long as it is logistically feasible and vaccines are determined to be safe.

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<http://www.fws.gov/bisonandelkplan/>

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The public will continue to enjoy viewing large numbers of elk.

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Ongoing Public Involvement

We will continue to keep the public informed as the final plan is implemented. Important announcements or documents will be posted on the project website.



Line art: © Cindie Brunner

Contact Information

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