

National Elk Refuge

Draft, Updated Bison and Elk Management Plan and

Draft Environmental Impact Statement

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the mission of the National Elk Refuge?

The National Elk Refuge protects important habitat for numerous iconic species, including elk, bison, wolves, trumpeter swans, bald eagles, bighorn sheep and cutthroat trout. The refuge was established to provide supplemental winter feed to elk, and to manage and ensure healthy and sustainable populations of these and other species in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem.

Why is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service updating the Bison and Elk Management Plan?

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is updating the Bison and Elk Management Plan to incorporate new scientific information related to disease, habitat conditions, wildlife health and changes in the Jackson Hole community and surrounding landscape. The draft, updated plan will provide long-term direction for managing elk and bison on the National Elk Refuge while considering wildlife conservation, habitat, recreation, cultural values, hunting opportunities and human-wildlife conflict.

Why does the refuge feed elk and bison, and why is that practice being reconsidered?

Winter feeding began in 1910 to reduce elk starvation and damage to private hay supplies. Today, feeding also helps reduce conflicts with people and private lands during winter and reduces the risks of transmission of brucellosis from wildlife to domestic livestock. However, concentrating large numbers of elk and bison on feedlines increases the potential for the spread of diseases, including chronic wasting disease and brucellosis, and contributes to habitat degradation. Current science indicates that reducing reliance on supplemental feeding could improve the long-term health and sustainability of the elk herd..

What is chronic wasting disease, and why is it important?

Chronic wasting disease is a fatal neurological disease affecting members of the deer family, including elk. It spreads through direct animal contact and contaminated environments, with infectious prions persisting for years. CWD was first detected in the Jackson elk herd in 2020 and has since been detected on the refuge. Scientific modeling indicates that continued supplemental feeding could increase CWD transmission and prevalence, while reducing feeding may lower disease prevalence and improve long-term herd health.

What are the current conditions for elk and bison on the refuge?

Approximately 11,000 elk and 500 bison make up Wyoming's Jackson herds, with most spending winter on the refuge. Natural winter habitat on the refuge can support about 5,000 elk and 500 bison without supplemental feeding. High animal densities have affected native vegetation and habitat through heavy grazing and browsing. The Jackson herd also includes both

long-distance and short-distance migrant elk, with short-distance migrants more likely to remain near developed areas, interact with livestock, and create human-wildlife conflicts.

What management alternatives are being considered?

The Draft Environmental Impact Statement evaluates four alternatives:

- **Alternative A:** Continue current supplemental feeding practices.
- **Alternative B:** Phase out feeding within seven years, or sooner if CWD prevalence reaches three percent, while increasing harvest of short-distance migrant elk.
- **Alternative C:** End elk feeding within five years by feeding only enough for approximately 5,000 elk during the transition and discontinue bison feeding.
- **Alternative D (Preferred):** Gradually reduce elk reliance on feeding over approximately 10 years using an adaptive management approach informed by annual monitoring, partner coordination, winter conditions, and herd health. Bison will continue to be fed.

Why is Alternative D the preferred alternative?

Alternative D provides the greatest flexibility by allowing management decisions to adapt over time based on scientific monitoring, CWD trends, winter severity, and herd conditions. The science on disease transmission continues to evolve and flexibility in this alternative allows for adaptive management as new information becomes available. Developed in cooperation with the Wyoming Game and Fish Department, National Park Service, and U.S. Forest Service, it seeks to reduce the number of elk wintering on the refuge to about 5,000 while balancing wildlife conservation, hunting opportunities, and impacts to local communities.

How were these alternatives developed?

The Draft EIS was informed by a structured decision-making process led by the U.S. Geological Survey with participation from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Wyoming Game and Fish Department, National Park Service, and U.S. Forest Service. Feedback received during public scoping, public meetings, workshops, and coordination with Tribes, stakeholders, cooperating agencies, and the public was also incorporated. Alternatives in the Draft Environmental Impact Statement are not all the same as those outlined in the U.S. Geological Survey reports, due to additional governmental feedback.

How can the public participate?

The Draft Environmental Impact Statement and Draft Bison and Elk Management Plan are available for a 45-day public review and comment period beginning August 28, 2026. Public information sessions will be held during the comment period. Additional information, meeting details and instructions for submitting comments are available on the project webpage.