



O P I N I O N

10,000 elk are fed to protect 700 cows

The National Elk Refuge said it would start feeding alfalfa pellets to elk and bison on Jan. 19, nine days earlier than the average starting date. Curiously, the news release says the refuge's management plan calls for "a reduced reliance on supplemental feed" and "a reduction in the number of animals wintering on the refuge." The refuge said it's important for it to achieve its objective of "scaling back the need for providing alfalfa pellets to wintering herds." The refuge even expects more elk to come on to the refuge once feeding with alfalfa pellets begins.

In light of the early feeding, one might ask how this winter compares with historic averages so far. Also, what was the forage on and around the refuge before winter began?

So far the Snake River basin is at 105 percent average precipitation with above-average snow water equivalent in the snowpack at 118 percent (WRDS.uwyo.edu/wrds/nrcs).

The elk refuge's last forage production report states that "total forage production was 16 percent above 1998-2014 averages," at 20,195 tons. In addition, the refuge said, late-season precipitation "increased the nutritional quality of the forage." The refuge has also opened some of the south end of the preserve to fall elk hunting to keep elk away and save forage.

Despite all this the refuge is beginning to dispense tons of alfalfa pellets earlier than usual. That doesn't seem to have much to do with winter severity.

According to its Jan. 7 biological update the refuge noticed that historically "elk are likely to leave NER for private lands in Spring Gulch when available forage falls below 300 pounds per acre at key index sites." And in the Jan. 14 edition of the News&Guide the refuge manager said the purpose of feeding this soon isn't to stave off starvation but to keep the elk "on the refuge."

The mandate of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is to manage for healthy wildlife and healthy habitat. If so, why keep thousands of elk densely concentrated for months during the winter in fetid conditions? Such conditions make them sick and prone to become sicker. The elk actually seem to want to roam free. Refuge personnel admit feeding is not to stave off starvation but to keep elk

from getting into haystacks and mingling with livestock.

Nowaday there are approximately 700 or so cattle spending the winter in the Jackson Hole area north, northeast and west of town. Refuge officials imply that they don't want elk to mingle with livestock. Thus they and the Wyoming Game and Fish Department at the three feedgrounds in the Gros Ventre Valley combine to feed approximately 10,000 elk to keep them away from 700 cows and some horses.

The National Elk Refuge promised in its 2007 management plan to mitigate conflicts with private lands and livestock, helping folks with tried-and-true methods like high fencing to keep livestock separated from wildlife. Rather than follow through with this pledge the refuge protocol is to bait the elk into even denser concentrations for the remainder of the winter. Elk from surrounding native ranges are expected

to come into the lines of alfalfa pellets, where they will stand in their own feces and urine, eat trucked-in pellets off the contaminated ground week after week, month after month. Hoof rot will kill calves by the dozens. Parasites and microbes will ravage the herds.

"We're causing the disease, and feeding enhances disease transmission," Fish and Wildlife Service biologist Lee Jones said in 2013.

Teton County is composed of 2.7 million acres, with almost 2.5 million acres of protected federal land. Of the 77,000 acres of private lands in Teton County, about 20,000 acres are in conservation easements. Very few livestock winter in Jackson Hole, and most of our private lands aren't densely developed. Even the town of Jackson is only about 2,500 acres in the middle of a 2.7 million-acre county in the least populated state in America. There are accessible, protected winter ranges for wildlife to range free. Some elk seem to want to leave the refuge and go elsewhere.

Rather than knowingly concentrating our elk and making them sick, the refuge would do better to help with a few fences, as it pledged to do, and allow elk to range healthy and free.

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GUEST SHOT

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