



Elk Feedgrounds: A Challenge We Can Take On

July 2021

The Wyoming Game and Fish Department (Department) manages several feedgrounds in northwest Wyoming. Over the years, the supplemental winter feeding of elk has grown in complexity. Among the complexities are wildlife diseases, specifically increasing concerns about the spread of chronic wasting disease (CWD) across the State. While there are benefits to feeding elk on feedgrounds there are also challenges, which is why the Department is preparing to develop a plan that will guide the long-term management of feedgrounds.

To assist future management decisions, the Department is initiating a multi-phased effort to gather public input. The first phase was to hold public discussions, or “listen and learn” sessions, on the many intricacies of elk feedgrounds. The second phase involves a public collaborative process that will formally provide input for the development of a long-term elk feedground management plan.

Some background information on elk feedgrounds in Wyoming:

- The federal government first fed hay to elk during winter on the present day National Elk Refuge in 1912, primarily to prevent starvation and keep elk out of private haystacks.
- In 1929, Wyoming legislation was passed resulting in the Department being financially liable for elk damage to hay crops; state-sanctioned winter elk feeding began that same year.
- The Department found it more efficient and less expensive to feed elk in strategic locations to draw them away from private property and livestock feeding operations.
- Today, keeping elk away from domestic cattle to reduce the risk of brucellosis transmission has become a primary driver of elk feedgrounds, along with the prevention of private land conflicts.

- Operating winter feedgrounds allows for higher elk populations than available native winter ranges can support, increasing opportunities for hunters and wildlife enthusiasts.
- Today, approximately 20,000 elk are fed on the National Elk Refuge and 22 Department-operated feedgrounds in Teton, Sublette and Lincoln counties of western Wyoming.
- An end to Wyoming elk feedground operations would most likely reduce elk populations in western Wyoming.
- In Fiscal Year 2020, the Department's elk feedground program cost \$1.6 million, which includes feed, equipment and personnel to carry out the program.
- Wildlife managers and members of the public are increasingly concerned about how feeding concentrates elk during the winter months and how diseases such as CWD could affect herd health, welfare, and population levels over the long term.
- The Department continues to investigate opportunities to reduce elk reliance on supplemental feeding and manages to reduce existing wildlife diseases (i.e. brucellosis) on feedgrounds by dispersing elk more broadly and by shortening feeding seasons when and where possible.
- Predators such as gray wolves often depend heavily on elk as prey and can sometimes complicate elk management by displacing elk during winter.
- Traditional migratory routes likely once used by elk to leave their summer and fall ranges to native winter ranges are no longer etched into the instinctual behavior of the herds in this part of Wyoming, and many of those traditional routes and winter ranges are now developed.

The Department understands that elk populations of western Wyoming are important to the citizens of our state and beyond, acknowledges the challenges supplemental elk feeding creates, but also believes in looking for opportunities to mitigate these challenges. It will take patience, consideration of the best science and agile decision-makers. It will take teamwork and respect of all interests with a stake in wildlife management in western Wyoming.

To learn more about the *Elk Feedgrounds: A challenge we can take on* public collaborative please visit the elk feedgrounds page on the Department's website at: <https://wgfd.wyo.gov/Get-Involved/elk-feedgrounds> or simply search "elk feedgrounds" when at the home page.

