



KEEP YOUR MULE DEER WILD

Due to severe drought conditions in many parts of Wyoming, the Wyoming Game and Fish Department is warning that there may be significant losses to wildlife this year, regardless of winter conditions. Mule deer and pronghorn are already in poor condition as they head into fall, and there is very little food available on their winter ranges. “This is one of the worst droughts in history, and according to some individuals who have lived here their entire lives, it is the worst they can remember,” says Jason Hunter, Lander Regional Wildlife Supervisor.

Virtually all wild animal populations experience significant and dramatic fluctuations. People often mistakenly believe that feeding mule deer is as beneficial as feeding other

wildlife. Though those who support feeding mule deer have good intentions, it can cause problems for the animals and their habitats.

Mule deer may still starve even if fed in winter. They are highly selective feeders due to their specialized digestive system, which requires specific types of bacteria in their rumen to aid in digesting naturally occurring foods. Because their digestive systems cannot adapt quickly enough, mule deer fed supplements often die with stomachs full of undigested food. Supplemental feeding programs have been effective for other species, such as elk because their digestive systems are more adaptable to different types of forage.

Additionally, supplemental feeding can lead to:



Increased predation and prevalence of diseases and parasites

Winter feeding programs create unnaturally high concentrations of mule deer at feeding locations, making them more susceptible to predation, diseases, and parasites.



Reduced carrying capacity of winter ranges

If mule deer populations remain artificially high due to supplemental feeding, it can lead to habitat degradation at feeding locations. This results in environments that can support fewer wildlife overall.

Both advocates and opponents of winter feeding care about the wellbeing of the deer. However, even well-designed and executed winter feeding programs do not significantly increase mule deer survival. It is important to consider the long-term biological impacts on the habitat, other species, and the mule deer population itself. We must prioritize the sustainability of the mule deer population for future generations—rather than just focusing on a single winter.