



Bison and Elk Management Plan and EIS



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General Information

<u>Lead Agencies:</u>	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (National Elk Refuge) National Park Service (Grand Teton National Park)
<u>Cooperators:</u>	U.S. Forest Service (Bridger-Teton National Forest) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service Bureau of Land Management
<u>Partners:</u>	Wyoming Game and Fish Department
<u>Final Product:</u>	A bison and elk management plan for the National Elk Refuge (NER) and Grand Teton National Park (GTNP)
<u>NEPA Compliance</u>	Environmental Impact Statement (EIS)
<u>Decision Area:</u>	Decisions resulting from the planning process will be limited to management activities on the NER and GTNP.
<u>Analysis Area:</u>	Potential effects of management alternatives on biological resources are being analyzed primarily within the ranges of the Jackson elk and bison herds (which include the NER, GTNP, southern Yellowstone National Park, and the Buffalo and Jackson Ranger districts of Bridger-Teton National Forest), but the analysis also covers potential effects on other parts of western Wyoming. Potential effects of management alternatives on socio-economic factors are being analyzed at city, county, and state levels.
<u>Stakeholder Involvement:</u>	Twenty public meetings were conducted during 2001 in Jackson, other cities in Wyoming, and outside of Wyoming. Eleven meetings have been held with tribal governments and tribal organizations. The USFWS and NPS are working closely with the cooperating and partnering agencies (six agencies are represented in the interagency working group).

Purposes of the National Elk Refuge: The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System is “to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans” (16 USC 668dd). The NER was established in 1912 as a “winter game (elk) reserve” (37 Stat. 293), and this was followed in 1913 with another Act of Congress designating the area as “a winter elk refuge” (37 Stat. 847). Nine years after the NER was established, providing birds with a “refuge and breeding ground” was added as purpose for which the refuge is to be managed (Exec. Order 3596). This was followed in 1927 by an expansion of the NER for the purpose of providing “for the grazing of, and as a refuge for, American elk and other big game animals” (44 Stat. 1246). Other purposes address threatened and endangered species, wildlife in general, and wildlife-oriented recreation.

Purposes of Grand Teton National Park: In their management of national parks, monuments, and reservations, the fundamental mission of National Park Service is “... to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such a manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations” (16 USC 1). Grand Teton National Park was established for the purpose of protecting the area’s native plant and animal life and its “spectacular values,” as characterized by the geologic features of the Teton Range and Jackson Hole. Legislation also called for “the permanent conservation of the elk within the Grand Teton National Park” (64 Stat. 849).

Planning Process and Management Issues

Where We Are in the Planning Process

After formulating elk and bison management alternatives, we have been analyzing the potential effects of the alternatives on elk, bison, other wildlife, plants, habitat, cultural resources, a variety of socio-economic factors, and on the agencies' ability to meet their legal mandates. The analysis involves working with experts in a variety of fields, reviewing policy and scientific information, and modeling potential effects. This work is more complex and involved than we had anticipated, but we have made much progress and the draft planning document is almost finished.

Upon completion, the draft planning document – which will include all requirements of an environmental impact statement – will be reviewed internally and by the cooperating and partnering agencies before it is printed and distributed for your review. We anticipate distributing the draft planning document/EIS in early December 2004 and estimate the final decision being made in the spring of 2006. The public will have the opportunity to comment on the draft in the winter/spring of 2005.

Management Issues

Management plans provide guidance on two things: (1) how to continue to produce conditions that are deemed worthwhile, and (2) how to resolve problems. Regarding the first aspect of a management plan, contributing to healthy populations of elk and bison in the Jackson Hole area is one of the major management issues being addressed in the planning process. There has been overwhelming agreement among stakeholders that elk and bison are worth conserving on the National Elk Refuge and Grand Teton National Park. While some people have expressed their disapproval of bison on the refuge, this opinion is not pervasive and, regardless, both agencies are required by law to sustain this native species. Bison that winter on the National Elk Refuge summer throughout the eastern parts of Grand Teton National Park where they are seen by many thousands of visitors each year.



Elk that winter on the refuge spend the remainder of the year throughout Grand Teton National Park, the Buffalo and Jackson Districts of the Bridger-Teton National Forest, and southern Yellowstone National Park. Elk figure prominently in Jackson Hole's history and culture, and the refuge's winter feeding program has played a major role in sustaining consistently large numbers of elk in the Jackson Hole area despite the loss of winter range and abandonment of migrations to historic wintering areas outside of Jackson Hole.

An important part of this planning process is to explore ways for the refuge and the park to continue to play prominent roles in sustaining healthy populations of elk and bison in the Jackson Hole area.

While it is well understood that winter feeding has been central to the refuge's ability to consistently contribute to sustaining large numbers of elk in the Jackson Hole area, additional analysis was required to better understand the problems related to elk and bison management on the refuge and park (which addresses the second part of a management plan). Just as the current management planning process is being used to explore ways to sustain elk and bison populations over the long term, it also provides an opportunity to take a hard look at the problems facing the future of elk and bison in the valley and how to address these issues.

Management Issues (cont'd)

Although we are addressing a variety of issues identified by the agencies and the public, three problems have emerged as key management issues needing attention. The first and second problems listed below have the greatest potential to hinder the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's and National Park Service's ability to meet legal responsibilities for wildlife and habitat.

- (1) **Major Wildlife Diseases** – Non-endemic infectious diseases such as chronic wasting disease and bovine tuberculosis could potentially have major adverse consequences to elk, bison, other ungulates, and other wildlife on the NER and GTNP. By facilitating disease transmission, the annual high concentrations of elk and bison on the NER feedgrounds would elevate the magnitude of the impact if one of these diseases were to become established and could greatly hinder the two agencies' ability to accomplish their missions and related policies (e.g., to conserve healthy populations of wildlife over the long term).



- (2) **Habitat** – Willow and aspen habitats have already been seriously degraded on the NER and parts of GTNP. If management does not address the issue, willow and aspen communities would continue to



be degraded and lost due to excessive concentrations of elk and bison. Impacts are most pronounced on the NER where the impacts hinder the agency's ability to meet refuge purposes (e.g., to provide breeding habitat for birds) and the Refuge System mission (e.g., to conserve fish, wildlife, and their habitat). High numbers of elk have also contributed to the degradation of aspen habitat on GTNP.

- (3) **Brucellosis** – There is a high level of brucellosis in bison and elk on the NER and GTNP due to the concentration of animals on winter feed lines. The potential for transmission of brucellosis to livestock continues. This major issue, which is primarily of interest to the livestock industry, has become even more prominent with the 2003 discovery of brucellosis in two Wyoming cattle herds, the loss of Wyoming's brucellosis-free status, and possible connection to an infected elk herd.

All three of the key resource issues have been exacerbated by high concentrations of elk and, more recently, bison on the refuge, which is a consequence of winter feeding. However, winter feeding itself is not the core problem because it was initiated and continues today as a solution to address a deeper rooted problem:

The core problem is an insufficient amount of winter range for the numbers of elk that have been sustained in the Jackson Hole area and the growing bison population.

So, in looking back on the two things for which a management plan provides guidance, a key question has become, how can we reduce disease risks and habitat problems while at the same time continue to satisfy public demands for the elk and bison populations?

Range of Alternatives

Range of Alternatives

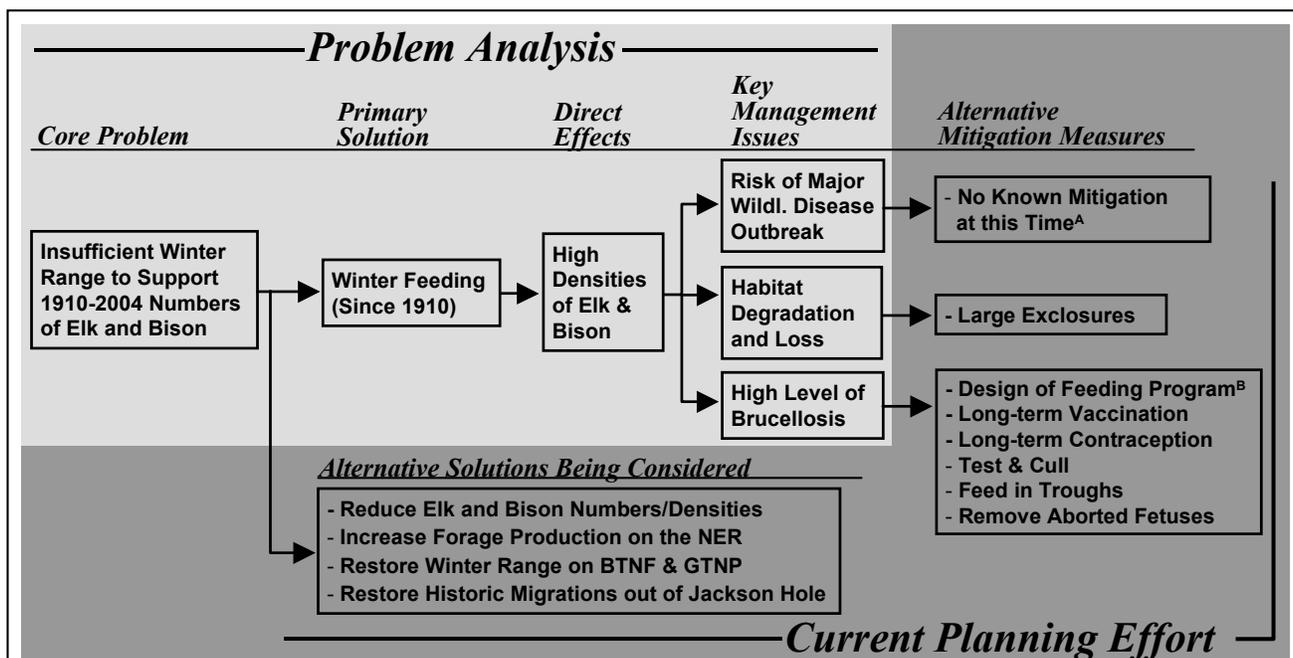
To fulfill legal directives and to address issues identified by the public and the agencies, several alternative management plans have been developed. The illustration below shows how different management approaches fit into the resolution of the key management issues and the core problem.

“...how can we curb disease risks and habitat problems while at the same time continue to satisfy public demands for the elk and bison populations?”

The flow chart in the light gray area shows how the key management issues ultimately trace back to an insufficient amount of winter range for the number of elk and bison being sustained in Jackson Hole (the core problem). Not shown are the root causes of the core problem, which deal with changes in land use and other decisions we have made as a society.

The flow chart also shows the two levels at which problems can be addressed through management (dark gray area). First, the key management issues discussed on page 4 can be addressed by lessening adverse impacts through mitigation measures listed at the right-hand side of the chart reducing winter feeding on the refuge. Second, alternatives to winter feeding on the refuge are also being evaluated to address the core problem. Not only is the examination of alternatives to winter feeding a logical step in reassessing options for addressing the long-standing core problem, a court order requires the agencies to do so.

The mitigation measures and alternative solutions, which vary widely in effectiveness, can be implemented individually or in combination. The various management plans being considered in the planning process range from no changes in winter feeding and reliance on mitigation measures, to reductions in winter feeding combined with some of the mitigation measures, to the elimination of winter feeding and no reliance on mitigation measures. (Note: the range of alternative management plans being evaluated includes a variety of other actions for addressing other issues.)



^A There are no known methods to reduce adverse impacts of chronic wasting disease and other non-endemic infectious disease (if they were to become introduced) without addressing winter feeding and elk and bison numbers.

^B For example, having several feeding sites, feeding in long lines, and changing feeding sites daily.

Estimated Timeline for Actions and Products

Situation Assessment (completed)	September 21, 2000
Prescoping Meetings (completed)	February 10 - May 5, 2001
“Notice of Intent” published in <i>Federal Register</i>	July 18, 2001
Scoping Meetings (completed)	July 20-August 3, 2001
Alternative Development Meetings (completed)	November 2001 - April 2002
Formulation & Analysis of Management Plan Alternatives	November 2001 - June 2004
Draft Plan/EIS available to the public	December 2004
Final Plan/EIS available to the public	March 2006
“Record of Decision” published in <i>Federal Register</i>	April 2006

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