

WYOMING GAME AND FISH NEWS

Elk Hazing Efforts Continue in Buffalo Valley

Contact: Mark Gocke, (307) 733-2321
Chris Colligan, (307) 733-2321

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JACKSON-- Early winter conditions have been favorable for avoiding potential elk conflicts in northwest Wyoming so far this year. Wyoming Game and Fish Department (WGFD) personnel have been working to haze elk out of commingling and damage situations in Buffalo Valley, where emergency feeding occurred last winter.

This winter, Department personnel have hazed between 50 and 150 elk on at least four separate occasions into nearby Spread Creek out of Buffalo Valley, where cattle feed lines are a temptation for elk that winter in the area.

"We are making a concerted effort to keep elk out of trouble in the Buffalo Valley this winter," said Bill Long, North Jackson Game Warden. "We're simply trying to encourage them to use other areas to avoid commingling and the need for emergency feeding."

A portion of elk that winter in Buffalo Valley generally do not migrate to established feedgrounds, instead choosing to winter on native winter habitat. However, depending on winter severity, late winter conditions may force elk from native winter range to nearby private lands. Concerns over damage and the risk of brucellosis transmission from elk to local cattle herds, prompted Game and Fish officials to authorize emergency elk feeding in Buffalo Valley during the winter of 2005-06, to increase the distance between elk and cattle. However, there are

Information and Education Services

Jackson Regional Office
360 N. Cache, P.O. Box 67 • Jackson, Wyoming 83001
Fax (307) 733-2276 • Web site: <http://gf.state.wy.us>

concerns over the fidelity elk may show to a site where they have received food in past winters, creating a management issue for years into the future.

Game and Fish biologists in partnership with Grand Teton National Park, Bridger Teton National Forest, and the National Elk Refuge have been working through the Jackson Interagency Habitat Initiative (JIHI) to improve habitat conditions in areas likely to draw elk away from adjacent private property. This cooperative effort has recommended habitat treatments on elk winter range south of Buffalo Valley. In the past two years, managers have implemented prescribed burns on 2,100 acres in the Spread Creek drainage, in two areas known as the Diamond L and Eynon Ridge. Prescribed fire is a management tool commonly used throughout the West to enhance elk habitat and generally improve watershed functionality, providing long-term benefits for the vast array of wildlife that use the ecosystem.

However, there is some concern that habitat treatments may have the opposite effect and draw more elk into close proximity with cattle operations, especially if winter conditions worsen. Through the JIHI group, officials have been able to cooperatively identify areas where habitat improvements can be applied on the landscape, in efforts to reduce the risk of disease transmission.

Recent research suggests that there may have been an increase in brucellosis seroprevalence, from less than 5% to 20%, in the Buffalo Valley segment of the Jackson Elk Herd. Researchers caution against reading too much into these data as fluctuations in seroprevalence have been noted in other places where data has been collected for several years and this jump in seroprevalence represents only one year. Also, the earlier lower results were collected from hunter-harvested animals in the fall, while the most recent results were collected as part of an elk capture done in mid to late winter when bacteria may be more prevalent in an

animal. Furthermore, it is not known how much interchange of elk there is between the various wintering areas from one year to the next.

However, it is known that feedgrounds unnaturally congregate elk, and that feeding increases the prevalence of density dependent diseases, such as brucellosis. Current research hopes to explain some of the trends in Buffalo Valley's seroprevalence, as well as provide links between seropositive and culture positive elk, which are known to be capable of transmitting the disease.

Game and Fish officials reiterate that if winter conditions worsen, forcing elk into damage and commingling situations, emergency feeding is an effective tool that can be used to sustain elk and keep elk and livestock apart. The use of emergency feeding is reserved as a last resort, after other tools such as hazing, habitat enhancements, and late season elk hunts have been attempted. Feedgrounds create the dilemma of maintaining brucellosis occurrence in elk herds, but also effectively mitigate elk damage and commingling, reducing the possibility of transmission of brucellosis to cattle.