

# WYOMING GAME AND FISH NEWS

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## **Test-and-Removal Pilot Project Continues**

[Pinedale]— Wyoming's experimental elk test-and-removal project, begun last year on the Muddy Creek feedground near Pinedale, will continue this winter. The five-year project was a key recommendation of the Governor's Brucellosis Coordination Team (BCT).

This year, researchers and wildlife managers from the Wyoming Game and Fish Department (WGFD) and a variety of other state and federal agencies will again attempt to capture and test as many adult female elk as possible in the portable trapping facility at Muddy Creek. Those elk that test positive, or show antibodies for brucellosis, will be shipped to Idaho for slaughter in a USDA approved facility. The meat from the slaughtered animals will again be donated to the public throughout Wyoming.

The Wyoming Game and Fish Department is adjusting personnel work schedules throughout the State to accommodate for three potential trapping dates from January through February.

In 2008 and 2009, the WGFD plans to expand the project to nearby Fall Creek and Scab Creek feedgrounds, respectively. The recommendation of the BCT was to implement the pilot project on the three feedgrounds in the Pinedale elk herd unit for five years. The BCT also

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specified that no more than 10 percent of the herd objective, or 190 elk, could be removed during any given year. The current herd objective of 1,900 elk was recently reviewed by the public and approved by the WGFD Commission.

In the winter of 2006, 58 seropositive cow elk were removed from the Muddy Creek feedground. The cost of the first year's trapping effort was estimated at \$342,848, which is about \$5,900 per elk removed. "We now know that it is possible to trap and process a large number of elk efficiently in the new portable facility," said Scott Werbelow, Game Warden Coordinator. "We also know that it is a very expensive operation."

Meat from the slaughtered elk, approximately 10,000 lbs, was donated to the public at all of the WGFD regional offices on a first come-first served basis on April 12th, 2006.

Tissue samples were taken from all the slaughtered elk to help determine if the animals were truly infected with brucellosis and capable of transmitting the disease. At this time, 18 of the elk removed have had tissues that cultured positive for the disease. Further tests are being conducted on these tissues. However, researchers warn that culture negatives are often inconclusive, because the process is dependent upon selecting the exact tissue that harbors the bacteria. The series of five blood tests used to identify which elk would be removed indicate only that the animal has been exposed to the disease.

Research on the correlation between culture positive and seropositive elk is an important component of this project. "After 3-5 years of conducting this project we'll have a much better knowledge of our tests and cutoff levels, meaning we'll have a better idea of which animals are actually infected based on the blood test alone," said Hank Edwards, Wildlife Disease Specialist. "We also won't know if we're effective at reducing overall prevalence in the herd until we have data from multiple years."

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This pilot project is a large cooperative effort between the WGFD, Animal Plant and Health Inspection Service (APHIS) Veterinary Services, Wyoming Livestock Board, the University of Wyoming, Wyoming State Veterinary Laboratory, US Forest Service, and Sublette County Sheriff's Office.

"The test and removal experiment is only one of the tools we're using as part of a comprehensive approach to combating brucellosis in Wyoming," said Game and Fish Department Director Terry Cleveland. "Working with other state and federal agencies, nongovernmental organizations, landowners, and other partners, we're committed to continuing the fight the disease."

The BCT outlined this experimental program as critical research for managing brucellosis in wildlife. Brucellosis transmitted to cattle herds from elk caused Wyoming to lose its brucellosis free status in 2004. Wyoming recently regained its Class Free status in September 2006. Ongoing research is part of the effort to eliminate brucellosis in wildlife and maintain Wyoming's brucellosis free status.

WGFD recently completed a comprehensive report on the first year's trapping effort of the Muddy Creek elk test-and-removal pilot project. The report is available on the G&F website at <http://gf.state.wy.us/wildlife/Brucellosis/index.asp>.

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