

# Rocky Mountain National Park

## Fact Sheet

JULY 2011

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### Title: Elk and Vegetation Management Plan

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#### Current Status:

- ELK POPULATION REDUCTION AND REDISTRIBUTION

From December 2010 through January 2011, the park removed 49 female elk and 1 antlerless male elk (34 in support of Chronic Wasting Disease [CWD] and fertility control research and 16 as part of park culling operations). Recent population modeling, conducted by Colorado State University in consultation with the National Park Service (NPS) and Colorado Division of Wildlife (CDOW) biologists, suggested that up to 50 female elk could be removed and the elk population within the park would remain within the range of 600-800 elk as prescribed in the Elk and Vegetation Management Plan.

From December 2009 through February 2010, the park removed 48 female elk (25 in support of CWD and fertility control research and 23 as part of park culling operations). In 2009, the first year of culling, the park removed 33 female elk (20 in support of CWD and fertility control research and 13 as part of park culling operations).

A general agreement between the National Park Service (NPS) and the Colorado Division of Wildlife (CDOW) was signed in October 2009. This five-year agreement establishes a cooperative working relationship regarding respective roles and responsibilities in the implementation of the park's elk culling program.

NPS, CDOW staff, and authorized agents (including qualified volunteers), were part of the cull teams.

A work group of NPS and CDOW staff developed a process to identify and recruit qualified volunteers to assist NPS staff in the elk culling operations. For all recruitment efforts, applicants were required to submit a comprehensive application, pass a background investigation, complete an interview process, and complete and pass a comprehensive training. Recruitment for volunteers first began in October 2008, for winter 2008-09. In 2009, a total of 22 volunteers attended and completed training as qualified volunteers. For the winter of 2009-10, no recruitment of additional volunteers was needed because 15 of the original qualified volunteers returned, completed training and background checks, and participated in culling operations which began in January 2010. Another recruitment effort occurred for the 2010-11 winter operations and seven new volunteers were added to 13 returning volunteers. Applicants selected to participate are volunteers of the NPS, are members of a NPS led team, and are required to participate in all field operations associated with elk culling.

The Colorado Division of Wildlife uses a lottery for meat disbursement of the culled elk. Each animal culled is tested for Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD). Carcasses that test "CWD not detected" are disbursed through lottery with individual informed consent, to a member of the public. Carcasses that test "CWD suspect" are used to support a CDOW captive mountain lion study. Qualified volunteers are able to participate in the lottery; however, they are not eligible to receive meat associated with their direct culling activity. In 2009 and 2010, 11 and 22 animals were dispersed to the public, respectively. In 2011, 14 animals were dispersed.

- RESEARCH

In January 2008, research began in Rocky Mountain National Park to evaluate procedures for testing live elk for chronic wasting disease (CWD). This is the first time free ranging elk have been tested for CWD using this live procedure. This research will also be examining multi-year fertility control in free ranging elk.

Elk were captured from early January through mid-March 2008. Out of 136 female elk captured in Moraine Park and Beaver Meadows, 13 tested CWD positive and were removed. Complete necropsies were performed and confirmed those results. At the time of capture, no elk exhibited obvious clinical signs of CWD.

Researchers were not surprised at the results because the elk herd in Rocky Mountain National Park and the Estes Valley, is larger, less migratory, and more concentrated than it would be under natural conditions. Previous research has also shown that elk densities on the core winter range are the highest concentrations ever documented for a free-ranging population in the Rocky Mountains.

Currently, there is an effective live CWD test for deer, but CWD diagnosis in live elk has received limited evaluation. Until now, the disease could only be reliably diagnosed after death in elk. From late 2008 through 2011, research elk have been gradually removed from the population as part of the park's annual population reduction targets. Scientists performed postmortem examinations to evaluate CWD status and also determine efficacy and potential side-effects of the fertility control treatment. Twenty female elk were euthanized in 2009 as part of the research project, 25 female elk were euthanized for 2010, and 34 for 2011.

A research project for surveying elk began in November 2008. The research project, using standard and GPS radiocollars, will assist in determining elk population numbers and how elk use the park winter range spatially (area or location) and temporally (changes in use through time). This effort also requires ground surveys.

- FENCING

In 2007, a prototype elk enclosure fence was constructed to protect a restored area in the Endovalley area that was damaged by the 1982 Lawn Lake flood. This elk enclosure fence minimizes viewshed impacts, maximizes protection of vegetation from elk, and provides for visitor and other wildlife access. In the fall of 2008, three fences were constructed to protect approximately 70 acres of willow communities, two in Horseshoe Park and one in Moraine Park. In the fall of 2009, an additional ten fences were constructed to protect approximately 44 acres of aspen communities. In 2010, five fences were constructed to protect approximately 74.5 acres of willow communities. In 2011, park personnel will be constructing one elk enclosure (approximately 16 acres) to protect riparian communities in the Kawuneeche Valley.

- WILDEARTH GUARDIANS LAWSUIT

On March 25, 2008 (and amended May 27, 2008), WildEarth Guardians filed a lawsuit in Federal District Court for Colorado against the National Park Service (NPS). The lawsuit alleged that the NPS did not consider a full range of alternatives in its plan and that it violated the Organic Act and the park's enabling legislation. On March 23, 2011, Judge Marcia S. Krieger found that the NPS complied with NEPA when eliminating a natural wolf population as an alternative from the EIS and that the alternative that incorporates the culling of elk by volunteers does not contravene either the Organic Act or the RMNP Act. The Park Service's decision to use authorized agents to cull elk in RMNP was not arbitrary, capricious, or otherwise contrary to law. On April 29, 2011, WildEarth Guardians filed a notice of appeal on the decision.

## Background Information:

- Research has shown that the elk herd in Rocky Mountain National Park (RMNP) and the Estes Valley, is larger, less migratory, and more concentrated than it would be under natural conditions. As a result, willow and aspen stands are declining, depriving other wildlife of the important habitat they need.
- The Elk and Vegetation Management Plan Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) is the result of a seven year research phase followed by a four year interagency planning process. The plan, using adaptive management principles, guides park management for the next 20 years. The FEIS was released in December 2007. The Record of Decision (ROD) was signed February 15, 2008.
- The public commented on all of the alternatives including lethal reduction, intensively managed wolves, fertility control, elk redistribution, vegetation restoration, public hunting in the park, and restoration of a self-sustaining wolf population. Concern was also expressed about the high cost of the alternatives, including the preferred alternative as originally proposed.
- A variety of conservation tools are being used in plan implementation including fencing, elk redistribution, vegetation restoration, and culling. Culling is the primary conservation tool that is being used for lethal reduction of the herd. In future years, the park, using adaptive management principles, will reevaluate opportunities to use wolves or fertility control as additional tools.
- The actual number of animals the NPS may cull, and the costs, will vary each year based on annual population surveys and hunter success outside the park. The level of management action taken to control the population size is adjusted annually based on the current population size estimates. Based on adaptive management, actions to control the population will be taken to manage for a population size within the range specified in the ROD (600-800 elk in the park subpopulation and 1,000 to 1,300 elk in the Estes Park subpopulation) and to meet vegetation objectives.
- National Park Service personnel are responsible for culling operations. To augment NPS personnel, authorized agents assist in culling operations under the direct supervision of NPS personnel. Cost, efficiency, and effectiveness are the factors that determine when additional personnel are needed. For purposes of this plan, “authorized agents” can include: professional staff from other federal, state, or local agencies or Indian tribes, or qualified volunteers. The NPS selects and supervises all personnel, including qualified volunteers. Short term closures are implemented while culling activity is occurring.
- Cullers, including NPS personnel and authorized agents, are certified in firearms training, specially trained in wildlife culling, and are required to pass a proficiency test in order to qualify and participate in culling activities. Cullers are expected to work in teams under the supervision of a NPS team leader to insure humane dispatch and quality meat recovery.
- Culling activity has occurred during the winter months, early in the morning, to minimize impacts on park operations, visitors, private inholdings, and neighbors.
- What is the difference between hunting and culling?  
Hunting is not allowed in Rocky Mountain National Park and is not a part of the elk management plan. Hunting is a recreational activity that includes elements of fair chase and personal take of the meat. Hunting is administered by the state fish and game agency.

Culling is used as a conservation tool to reduce animal populations that have exceeded the carrying capacity of their habitat. Culling is done under very controlled circumstances in order to minimize impacts on park operations, visitors, private inholdings, and neighbors. Culling is an efficient and humane way to reduce herds of animals that are habituated to the presence of humans.

- Why was public hunting considered but dismissed as an alternative?

Hunting is prohibited in the park by law. In 1929, Congress prohibited hunting within the limits of Rocky Mountain National Park. Public hunting within the park raises several issues:

- 1) It would significantly change the visitor experience in the park. Visitors expect to come to Rocky Mountain National Park and not encounter hunters.
- 2) It would require changing the law that has been in place in the park since 1929.
- 3) It would significantly displace the existing recreational use of park visitors and would compromise visitor safety.

Park managers selected culling of elk, using specially trained park staff and authorized agents, to reduce the elk herd and minimize the impacts on park operations, visitors, private inholdings, and neighbors. For over 90 years, visitors have expected that recreational activities can take place in Rocky Mountain National Park without interference from hunting. Hiking, horseback riding, snowshoeing, and skiing in the backcountry are very popular activities along with sightseeing and wildlife viewing along the park's roadways.

The NPS recognizes that public hunting is an important recreational activity and wildlife management tool in Colorado. Currently, hunting is permitted on approximately 98% of the federal lands in Colorado, including lands managed by the U.S.D.A. Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and numerous national wildlife refuges throughout the state. Further, the NPS recognizes and supports the Colorado Division of Wildlife's use of hunting for management of wildlife in areas outside and adjacent to the park.

- What public involvement has occurred in the development of the plan?

There has been extensive public involvement and media coverage concerning this issue. Throughout the development of the plan, the NPS extensively consulted with the town of Estes Park, Larimer County, the Estes Valley Recreation and Park District, the Colorado Division of Wildlife, Grand County, the Town of Grand Lake, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, and the U.S.D.A. Forest Service.

In 2002, a decade of elk research findings was released through a variety of public presentations. In 2003 and 2004, public meetings occurred in Estes Park, Loveland, Boulder, and Grand Lake. In 2003, the public meetings discussed issues and concerns before beginning the planning process. In 2004, the public meetings focused on presenting draft management alternatives. In April of 2006, the draft EIS was released detailing five alternatives, including one preferred alternative. The public was strongly encouraged to send their comments on the draft EIS and the comment period lasted through July 2006. Approximately 2,700 responses, which included about 150 substantive comments, were received on all of the alternatives including lethal reduction, intensively managed wolves, fertility control, elk redistribution, vegetation restoration, public hunting in the park, and restoration of a self-sustaining wolf population. Concern was also expressed about the high cost of the alternatives, including the preferred alternative.

- Is this just a park issue?

No, this is a regional issue. Research shows two-thirds of the population spends at least 7 months outside the park. During the winter (October to May), these elk are concentrated on the east side of the park and adjacent public and private land in and around the town of Estes Park. Actions taken both inside and outside the park will affect adjoining lands and neighbors as well as park lands. Cooperation among the park, local communities, Colorado Division of Wildlife, and U.S.D.A. Forest Service is essential in managing the herd.