

Rocky Mountain National Park

Fact Sheet

October 2008

Title: Elk and Vegetation Management Plan

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, will guide 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.
- A variety of conservation tools will be used in the plan including fencing, elk redistribution, vegetation restoration, and culling. Culling is the primary conservation tool that will be 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 will be adjusted annually based on the current population size estimates. Based on adaptive management, actions to control the population would 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 would be responsible for culling operations. To augment NPS personnel, authorized agents could assist in culling operations under the direct supervision of NPS personnel. Cost, efficiency, and effectiveness will be the factors that determine when additional personnel are needed. For purposes of this plan, "authorized agents" could include: professional staff from other federal, state, or local agencies or Indian tribes, or qualified volunteers. The NPS will select and supervise all personnel, including qualified volunteers. Short term closures (most likely a few hours early in the morning) may be implemented while culling activity is occurring.

- Cullers, including NPS personnel and authorized agents, would be certified in firearms training, specially trained in wildlife culling, and be required to pass a proficiency test in order to qualify and participate in culling activities. Cullers would be expected to work in teams under the supervision of a NPS team leader to insure humane dispatch and quality meat recovery.
- Carcasses from culling operations would be tested for chronic wasting disease. To the extent possible, carcasses and meat would be donated, through an organized program, to eligible recipients, including members of tribes, based on informed consent and pursuant to applicable public health guidelines.
- Most culling activity is expected to occur during the winter months, early in the morning, and on weekdays 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 herds 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?
Over the last four years, there has been extensive public involvement and media coverage concerning this issue. Throughout the development of the plan, the NPS has 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.

Current Status:

- 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 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. These preliminary results from this sample population suggest an 11 percent estimated CWD prevalence rate. 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.

Over the next several years, researchers will continue evaluating procedures for testing live elk for CWD. 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. Over the next three years, research elk will be gradually removed from the population as part of the park's annual population reduction targets. Scientists will perform postmortem examinations to evaluate CWD status and also determine efficacy and potential side-effects of the fertility control treatment.

A population estimate research project will begin in late October 2008. This project will be conducted in coordination with the park's standard elk survey in order to 1) test a new method's ability to estimate the elk population and its cost-effectiveness, and 2) compare the new method with the standard survey method. This two-year effort will require fixed-wing and helicopter surveys, as well as ground surveys. Aerial activity will begin with the deployment of global positioning system (gps) collars on 10 elk in October/November 2008 and continue through March 2009 with survey and research activities.

- FENCING

- A prototype elk-proof fence was constructed to protect a restored area in the Endo Valley area that was damaged by the 1982 Lawn Lake flood. This elk-proof fence minimizes viewshed impacts, maximizes protection of vegetation from elk, and provides for visitor and other wildlife access.
- In October 2008, construction of three similar fences will begin – two additional fence enclosures in Horseshoe Park and one in Moraine Park.

- ELK POPULATION REDUCTION AND REDISTRIBUTION

- Analysis of annual population monitoring data from the winter of 2007-08 revealed that the current estimate of elk is likely within the historic range of variability, as described in the Elk and Vegetation Management Plan. These data suggest a limited cull to remove fewer than 100 elk would be appropriate for winter 2008-2009.
- The principle objective and focus of the limited culling effort will be on the humane removal of animals, as well as the health and safety of team members and the public.
- Qualified Volunteers - A work group of NPS and Colorado Division of Wildlife staff are developing a process to identify qualified volunteers to assist NPS staff in potential elk culling operations.
 - Recruitment for volunteers will begin in October 2008, for winter 2008-09. Information will be posted on the park's website as well as the website for the Colorado Division of Wildlife.
 - Further details of the culling program and the participation of qualified volunteers are being finalized. However, the following information may be useful to those interested:
 - Volunteer applicants will need to submit a comprehensive application and pass a background investigation and interview process.
 - Volunteer applicants will need to complete and pass a comprehensive training.
 - Prospective applicants would be volunteers of the National Park Service (NPS), would be a member of a team led by NPS personnel, and would be required to participate as a team member in the field operations associated with the culling of elk.
 - Volunteers will be eligible to participate in the acquisition of meat through a separate meat donation program. Volunteers may not acquire any meat directly related to their culling activities or activities of their team members.