

Rocky Mountain National Park

Fact Sheet

March 28, 2007

Title: Elk and Vegetation Management Plan

Current Status:

- The Draft Elk and Vegetation Management Plan/Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) for Rocky Mountain National Park was released on April 24, 2006. The plan identifies and assesses various management alternatives and related environmental impacts relative to managing elk and their habitat in the park. The plan, using adaptive management principles, will guide park management for the next 20 years.
- Approximately 1300 substantive comments were submitted on the draft plan. Comments were received on all of the alternatives including lethal reduction, predator (wolf) reintroduction, fertility control, redistribution, and vegetation restoration. In addition, comments were received in support of public hunting in the park, which was addressed as an alternative that was considered but eliminated from further consideration (see below). Concern was also expressed about the high cost of the alternatives, including the preferred alternative.
- In July, 2006, the Colorado Wildlife Commission passed a resolution encouraging the National Park Service to consider using a public hunt to reduce the herd.
- In February, 2007, Representative Mark Udall introduced H.R. 1179 which would allow the National Park Service (NPS) to use licensed hunters as volunteers or under contract to assist in implementation of the plan. Senator Allard introduced the Senate version of the bill (S. 917) on March 19, 2007.
- Culling is the primary conservation tool that is being considered for lethal reduction of the herd. See below for discussion of culling vs. hunting.
- The NPS is currently developing the final plan/EIS (FEIS) after evaluating public comment. Elements from all of the alternatives are still under consideration for inclusion in the final plan.
- As part of the development of the final plan, the costs of the various options are being recalculated to reflect updated information. The focus of public comment was on the cost of the herd reduction activities (culling). In the final plan, the cost of implementing the alternatives including lethal reduction (culling) will be lower than in the DEIS. Other costs include vegetation restoration (fencing), redistribution of the herd, and monitoring to determine if objectives are being met.
- The cost of lethal reduction (culling) in the draft preferred alternative was estimated to be on average \$478,000 per year over the 20 year life of the plan. This was because the park was proposing to remove as many as 700 animals per year for the first four years in order to reduce impacts on the winter range as quickly as possible. In addition, the costs in the draft plan were based on the work being done by contract rather than agency or tribal personnel.
- Other alternatives in the DEIS proposed a slower rate of reduction and use of agency or tribal personnel. Revised cost estimates for the lethal reduction portion of the final plan are anticipated to range between \$95,000 and \$185,000 range per year over the life of the plan. It is anticipated that these costs can be covered within the existing fiscal capacity of the Service.
- The number of animals removed and the costs will vary each year based on annual population surveys and hunter success outside the park. The level of management action that would be taken to control the population size would be adjusted annually based on the current population level estimates. Based on adaptive management, management actions to control the population would not be taken if the population size was within the range specified within the final plan.
- The FEIS is currently scheduled for release in June 2007 with a Record of Decision to follow.

Background Information:

- What is the difference between hunting and culling?

Hunting can be used as a conservation tool, but also includes a recreational experience and the elements of fair chase and personal take of the meat. Hunters are licensed by the state fish and game agency. Hunting is administered by the state fish and game agency. Areas of the park would need to be closed to visitor use while hunting was taking place. The NPS would need to absorb the costs of managing hunters, visitors and the media during a hunt.

Culling is used as a conservation tool to reduce populations that have exceeded the carrying capacity of their habitat. As opposed to hunting, culling is done under very controlled circumstances in order to minimize impacts on park operations, visitors, private inholdings and neighbors. Culling is also an efficient and humane way to reduce herds of animals that are habituated to the presence of humans. Culling is not recreation and does not incorporate the concept of fair chase. Culling is done by agency staff, tribal personnel, contractors and/or authorized agents of the managing agency. The personnel doing the shooting will be responsible for killing and processing several animals in any session. Meat from culling operations will be tested for chronic wasting disease and can be donated to eligible recipients pursuant to applicable public health guidelines. Short term road closures (a few hours most likely early in the morning) would be implemented while culling activity is ongoing.

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

Hunting is prohibited in the park by statute. In 1929, Congress prohibited hunting within the limits of Rocky Mountain National Park. Using public hunting within the park as a tool to manage the elk population raises several issues:

- 1) It would significantly change the visitor experience in the park. Visitors expect to be able to come to Rocky Mountain National Park and not encounter hunters.
- 2) It would require a change in 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 favor the use of specially trained park staff or other qualified agency/tribal personnel to reduce the elk herds under conditions that will minimize the impacts on park operations, visitors, private inholdings and neighbors. There is 90 years of expectations that recreational activities can take place in Rocky Mountain National Park without interference from hunting. Rocky Mountain National Park receives 3 million visitors annually. Given its proximity to Denver and other Front Range communities, it is in many ways an "urban" park and receives visitation year round. 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 wildlife management tool and recreational activity in Colorado. Currently, hunting is permitted on approximately 98% of the federal lands in Colorado, including lands managed by the U.S. Forest Service, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, and numerous national wildlife refuges throughout the state. Further, the NPS recognizes and supports the Colorado Division of Wildlife's management of wildlife in areas outside and adjacent to the park through hunting.

- Can authorized agents (volunteers) be used in a culling operation?

While the NPS has broad legal authority to use volunteers in a variety of capacities in national parks (including culling), we have not contemplated using volunteers in this manner in the past due to the high risk nature of the activity. All volunteers in parks are covered by workers' compensation should they be injured while volunteering. In addition, the federal government is liable for any injury or property damage caused by volunteers. Volunteers require supervision and coordination by park staff, so while they are not paid a salary, their services are not free to the sponsoring agency.

This issue has implications for the entire National Park System; thus, a policy decision on whether it would be appropriate to use authorized agents in a culling operation is being developed at the headquarters office in Washington, DC.

- What public involvement has there been 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 National Park Service 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. Forest Service.

In 2002, a decade's worth of elk research findings were 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 DEIS was released detailing five alternatives, including one preferred alternative. The public was strongly encouraged to send their comments on the DEIS and the comment period lasted through July.

- Is this just a park issue?

No. It's a regional issue. 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. Any action taken inside the park will affect adjoining lands and neighbors as will any action taken outside the park affect park lands. Cooperation among the park, local communities, Colorado Division of Wildlife, and U.S. Forest Service is thus essential in managing the herd.