



Elk and Vegetation Management Plan



NPS Photo by Peter Allen

We are pleased to announce the release of the *Final Elk and Vegetation Management Plan/Environmental Impact Statement* for Rocky Mountain National Park.

When the public involvement process began, the National Park Service engaged the public, tribes, and other agencies in this planning process. We would like to thank all of you who came to our public meetings, reviewed draft planning documents, and gave us comments and suggestions. By bringing your issues and ideas to the table, you helped us work through this long and difficult process. We revised the proposed action in the draft plan, incorporated the many comments we received from agencies, tribes, other organizations, and the public during the comment period.

The final plan balances the most important management issues with the many differing viewpoints expressed and the purpose, mission, and management policies of the National Park Service. As a result, we believe the final plan provides us with guidance and direction for managing the elk and their habitat for the next twenty years.

If you would like to receive a copy of the Elk and Vegetation Management Plan or the Executive Summary, contact the Rocky Mountain National Park Information Office at 970-586-1206 daily 8 a.m.-4:30 p.m. (MST).

A limited number of paper copies are available but we would be happy to provide you with a compact disc.

You can also download the the final environmental impact statement, the eventual Record of Decision, and other planning documents at:

nps.gov/romo/parkmgmt/elkvegetation

Elk and Vegetation Management Plan for Rocky Mountain National Park

Rocky Mountain National Park has released its *Final Elk and Vegetation Management Plan*. The result of seven years of research, followed by four years of planning, the plan will use adaptive management principles and guide park management for the next 20 years.

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. As a result, willow and aspen stands are declining, depriving other wildlife of the important habitat they need.

The National Park Service (NPS) is obligated by law and policy to maintain and restore natural conditions wherever possible in NPS sites.

Reducing the elk herd in the park to numbers more comparable with natural conditions will allow vegetation that supports other wildlife species the opportunity to recover.

Elk heavily use aspen and willow communities, which support high levels of biodiversity; as a result, these communities are declining in areas where elk concentrate. High concentrations of elk have degraded natural communities that support large numbers of bird, butterfly, and plant species.

The final plan analyzes five alternatives to manage elk and vegetation within the park. Alternative One calls

for no action. The “action” alternatives (Alternatives Two through Five) incorporate adaptive management and monitoring to determine the level and intensity of management actions. These actions include reducing the elk population, fencing, and redistributing the elk. Population numbers would be estimated annually. The number of animals to be removed would be determined based on the most current population estimates and hunter harvest outside the park. If the elk population is within the target range and vegetation management objectives are being met, no lethal reduction activities would take place.

Development of this plan/Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) involved the cooperation of multiple agencies at various levels of participation. The NPS was the lead agency responsible for all aspects of developing the plan/EIS, including selection of a preferred alternative and preparing a record of decision, which will be released no sooner than 30 days following publication of the Notice of Availability of the Final EIS by the Environmental Protection Agency. This plan will be implemented by the NPS inside Rocky Mountain National Park. Cooperating agencies include the Town of Estes Park, the Estes Valley Recreation and Parks District, Colorado Division of Wildlife, Grand County, Larimer County, Town of Grand Lake, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, and U.S. Forest Service.



An overpopulation of elk eat the vegetation available to them, including all of the young aspen during the winter. If these effects continue, aspen trees in these areas will eventually disappear or exist only in a shrub form.

NPS Photo by Jerry Brown



Willows are large shrubs found near streams or in wetland areas. Willow distribution in Moraine and Horseshoe Parks has declined by 20% over the last 50-60 years. Declines in these areas correlate with declines in beaver and other wildlife populations. Elk currently suppress the growth and reproduction of willow.

Once vegetation conditions improve, restoration techniques such as planting willows and restoring beaver habitat can be implemented.

The beaver population in Rocky Mountain National Park has decreased by 90% since the 1940s. Restoring the beaver population may also increase the amount of surface water in the park.

NPS Photo by Kathleen Kelly

Selection of Alternative Three as the Preferred Alternative

We carefully considered environmental and other relevant concerns presented by agencies, organizations, and individuals on the five alternatives. Alternative Three, the preferred alternative in the final plan, would use a variety of conservation tools including lethal reduction (culling) and redistribution of elk, fencing, and vegetation restoration techniques.

Alternative Three was selected as the preferred alternative because it relies on gradual lethal reduction of elk, which is less expensive and would minimize impacts on visitors compared to intensive culling, as proposed in the draft plan. The target elk population is the high end of the natural range, between 1,600 and 2,100 animals.

Reductions would be carried out by NPS staff and its authorized agents. To the extent possible, carcasses and/or 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.

This alternative would also include redistribution techniques, such as herding and aversive conditioning, and installing temporary fences in aspen and montane riparian willow habitat to meet vegetation objectives.

In future years, with appropriate interagency cooperation, management actions could include the adaptive use of wolves and/or fertility control as management tools.

Public Responses to the Draft Plan

The NPS received approximately 2,700 responses during the public comment period on the draft plan. Both negative and positive comments were received regarding all of the alternatives. In addition, many comments were received in support of public hunting in the park and restoration of a self-sustaining wolf population. Both were considered as alternatives but were eliminated from further consideration. Concern was also expressed about the high cost of the preferred alternative. There is strong public support to take action, however, there are wide-ranging and differing views on what actions should be taken.

The presence of Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) in the population limits the options available to park managers because elk cannot be relocated out of the area.

Strong public response to the draft plan regarding a public hunt in the park and proposed legislation allowing the use of hunters in the plan's implementation resulted in more than 300 public comments, both in favor and against public hunting in the park. In 1929, Congress prohibited hunting in the park. The final plan clarifies the difference between culling carried out by NPS staff and its authorized agents and public hunting and strengthens the reasons for not pursuing a public hunting alternative.

Plan Implementation

In the first several years of implementing the plan, in conjunction with lethal reduction of elk, the NPS would opportunistically conduct studies to evaluate procedures for testing live elk for CWD and the effectiveness of a new experimental multi-year fertility control agent. In the first year up to 120 female elk would be captured, tested for CWD, and administered the fertility control agent (Gonacon). Any elk which tested positive for CWD would be lethally removed from the population, thereby contributing to the annual population reduction target. Over the next three years, elk population reduction would gradually remove study elk and the pregnancy and CWD status would be evaluated. Information gained from these studies could contribute to the advancement of a test for CWD in live elk and a fertility control agent that is more logistically feasible than those currently available.

As implementation of the plan proceeds we would continue to manage adaptively using a variety of techniques over the life of the plan.



Elk were abundant when this area was settled in 1860, but, through market hunting, were eliminated by 1875. In 1913 and 1914, before the park was established, 28 elk from the Yellowstone National Park area were reintroduced here. By that time, the gray wolf and grizzly bear no longer occurred in the area, and elk flourished in the absence of its major predator, the wolf. Concern about the size of the population first arose in the early 1930s because vegetation conditions on the elk winter range appeared to be deteriorating. From 1944 through 1968, elk populations were controlled. Since that time, elk in the park and the surrounding Estes Valley have increased, particularly during winters.

The purpose of the *Elk and Vegetation Management Plan* is to guide actions which reduce the impacts of elk on vegetation and restore the natural numbers of elk and affected plant and animal communities.

U.S. Department of the Interior
National Park Service
Rocky Mountain National Park
1000 U.S. Highway 36
Estes Park, Colorado 80517