

# Rocky Mountain National Park

## Fact Sheet

March 2008

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### Title: Elk and Vegetation Management Plan

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#### Current Status:

- Research has shown that 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 Elk and Vegetation Management Plan/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 draft plan was released to the public in April 2006. The Final Plan was released in December 2007. The Record of Decision (ROD) was signed February 15, 2008.
- Approximately 2700 responses, which included about 150 substantive comments, were submitted on the draft plan. Comments were received on all of the alternatives including lethal reduction, intensively managed wolves, fertility control, redistribution, and vegetation restoration. In addition, comments were received in support of public hunting in the park and restoration of a self-sustaining wolf population, both of which were 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.
- A variety of conservation tools will be used including fencing, redistribution, vegetation restoration and lethal reduction (culling). Culling is the primary conservation tool that will be used for lethal reduction of the herd. See below for discussion of culling vs. hunting. In future years, the park will, using adaptive management principles, reevaluate opportunities to use wolves or fertility control as additional tools.
- The costs of the various options were 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) was 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 by agency personnel.
- Other alternatives in the DEIS proposed a slower rate of reduction, which could be accomplished by agency personnel and their authorized agents. Revised cost estimates for the lethal reduction portion of the final plan are anticipated to be around \$100,000 a year on average 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 will be taken to control the population size will be adjusted annually based on the current population size 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 and vegetation objectives are being met.
- Carcasses from culling operations would be tested for chronic wasting disease and 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.
- 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.
- On October 23, 2007, Sinapu notified the Secretary of the Interior of its intent to sue over the failure to fully consider the reintroduction of a self-regulating population of wolves as an alternative within the draft management plan.

### **Background Information:**

- What is the difference between hunting and culling?

**Hunting** is a recreational activity that includes the elements of fair chase and personal take of the meat, as well as being a conservation tool. Hunting is administered by the state fish and game agency, which licenses hunters. If areas of the park were opened to hunting those areas 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 would be administered by the NPS and carried out by NPS personnel and their authorized agents, and would not require licensing by the state. The personnel doing the shooting would be responsible for killing and processing several animals in any session. Carcasses from culling operations would be tested for chronic wasting disease and 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. Short term road closures (a few hours most likely early in the morning) would be implemented while culling activity is ongoing.

NPS personnel would be responsible for culling operations. There may be circumstances when additional personnel are needed to achieve annual population goals. NPS personnel would be augmented by authorized agents who would be afforded the opportunity to assist in culling operations under the direct supervision of NPS personnel. Cost, efficiency and effectiveness will be the factors that determine when supplemental personnel are needed. For purposes of this plan, "authorized agents" could include: professional staff from other federal, state or local agencies or Indian tribes; contractors; or qualified volunteers. Qualified volunteers would be managed and selected by NPS personnel. 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 to participate in culling activities. Cullers would be expected to work in teams under the supervision of a NPS team leader, cull and process multiple

animals in any one culling event, and spend the time necessary to ensure humane dispatch and quality meat recovery.

- 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 and authorized agents to reduce the elk herds under conditions that would minimize the impacts on park operations, visitors, private inholdings and neighbors. There are over 90 years of expectations that recreational activities can take place in Rocky Mountain National Park without interference from hunting. Rocky Mountain National Park receives three 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 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. 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 though hunting.

- 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. Research shows two-thirds

of the population spends at least 7 months outside the park.

## **Current Status:**

- What new elk research is taking place?

Starting in the winter of 2008, researchers began conducting studies to evaluate procedures for testing live elk for CWD and the effectiveness of a new experimental multi-year fertility control agent. Currently, there is a live CWD test effective for deer, but CWD diagnosis in live elk has received limited evaluation to date. The disease can only be diagnosed after death in elk. This will be the first time free ranging elk will be tested for CWD.

In 2008, while capturing up to 120 female elk and testing them for CWD, researchers are planning to administer the fertility control agent (GonaCon) to 60 elk. Researchers are already handling the elk for the CWD test and can learn more about this multi-year agent at the same time. Any elk which tests positive for CWD would be lethally removed from the population, thereby contributing to annual population reduction targets. These targets will be developed each year based on annual population surveys and hunter success outside the park. Over the next three years elk population reduction would gradually remove study elk and the CWD status and pregnancy 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.

Initial elk captures will take place in the winter of 2008 with monitoring continuing over the next three years. Most of the darting will take place in the Moraine Park, Beaver Meadows and Horseshoe Park areas on the east side of Rocky Mountain National Park.

- When may recruiting for qualified volunteers begin?

A process for determining the requirements of qualified volunteers is still being developed. The earliest we would ask for volunteers is fall 2008, for winter 2008-09; this would be based on population monitoring and the need to cull. We are not currently accepting volunteer applications or a list of interested parties since no culling is planned for winter 2007-08.

If the National Park Service does plan to use qualified volunteers in winter 2008-09, park staff will notify the public on the park's website. Check the park website in fall 2008, for further information and volunteer applications.