



Elk and Vegetation Management Plan/EIS

Progress and Status Update

August 2005

The National Park Service (NPS) and partners continue to develop the elk and vegetation management plan and environmental impact statement (EIS). This update is being distributed to keep you, the public, abreast of what has been occurring through the planning process and to inform you of the changes in the alternatives for elk and vegetation management and the EIS schedule.

You are an important part of the planning process, and the National Park Service wants to make sure that you are fully informed about this process, what is currently taking place, and what to expect in the future.

Thank you for your continued interest in Rocky Mountain National Park and the conservation of our valuable resources.

Vaughn L. Baker,
Superintendent
Rocky Mountain National Park

The EIS Process

As lead agency, the National Park Service is cooperating with the Town of Estes Park, the Estes Valley Recreation and Park District, the Colorado Division of Wildlife, Grand County, Larimer County, the Town of Grand Lake, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, and the U.S. Forest Service to develop the elk and vegetation management plan. This plan/EIS is intended to explore opportunities for collaborative management of elk and vegetation with other agencies; however, it only makes decisions for management of elk and vegetation within the park.

What Has Been Done

To date, the Interagency EIS Team has defined the project objectives, identified potential management tools, and developed preliminary alternatives, which were presented to you for review and comment. In summer and fall 2003, responses to newsletter and a series of public workshops helped determine the issues and concerns associated with managing elk and vegetation in and around the park. More than 1,100 of your comments were received and evaluated. Alternatives workshops were held in summer 2004 in Estes Park, Boulder, Grand Lake, and Loveland, Colorado. Over 1,000 comments on the preliminary alternatives were received through the workshops and the other methods provided. A report summarizing your comments on the preliminary draft alternatives is available for viewing or downloading at <http://www.nps.gov/romo/planning/elkvegetation>.

What We've Been Doing

This newsletter will update you on where we are in the EIS process and inform you as to what we've been doing since the summer 2004 newsletter. During the last round of public input, many commenters asked that the agencies develop the details of the alternatives. Over the past year, the park staff and the cooperating agencies have worked to finalize the range of alternatives and the details of those alternatives that will be analyzed in



the EIS to determine their effects on natural, social, and economic resources in the project area. Park staff have consulted with technical experts and have held internal workshops to develop the technical and logistical details of alternatives involving lethal removal, fertility control, and wolves. These workshops involved the participation of experts from Animal Plant and Health Inspection Service Wildlife Services Division, Colorado Division of Wildlife, Parks Canada, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Public Health Service, scientists from various universities, and numerous NPS resource experts.



Preliminary alternatives developed and presented in summer 2004 considered actions that other agencies might take to address elk-related issues outside the park. After further review over the winter and spring, those agencies decided to take no additional actions in conjunction with this plan. The alternatives have been restructured so that all actions taken to manage elk and vegetation would be conducted within the park boundaries. Therefore, objectives developed by the agencies to reduce the risk elk pose to public safety and private property outside the park have been eliminated. The plan's other objectives remain (see the plan website or the summer 2004 newsletter for details). Under all alternatives considered in the plan, collaboration with

other agencies will continue to monitor the elk population size and distribution, and the agencies will continue to share knowledge and experience regarding the management of elk and vegetation.

Agency discussions and input from technical experts have shaped the range of alternatives and have provided the detail of those alternatives that will be analyzed in the EIS. These alternatives, as well as those no longer considered, are summarized below. The details of the alternatives will be presented in the draft EIS, at which time you will be given another opportunity to provide input.



What Are the Alternatives for Managing Elk and Vegetation?

Draft Alternatives

The summer 2004 newsletter presented a range of alternatives to the public. The six alternatives included No Action, Maximum Lethal Reduction of Elk, Maximum Elk Fertility Control, Wolf Reintroduction, Moderate Reduction of Elk Using Public Marksmen in the Park, and Combination of Lethal Control and Fertility Control. Based on consultation with various agencies and experts and your input, the range of alternatives has been determined, as well as which alternatives would be infeasible and will not be considered further. The agencies involved also decided that all management activities proposed in this plan will occur within the park boundaries.

The following provides a summary of the four draft alternatives to manage elk and vegetation in the park. Additional modeling is underway to determine the number of elk that would need to be lethally removed and/or treated with fertility control agents under each action alternative to meet population size targets. Each action alternative would achieve the plan objective of reducing and maintaining the elk population within the natural range of variation (1,200 to 2,100); however, the alternatives vary in defining where within the natural range the target population would fluctuate, such as at the high or low end.

During the public scoping period on the alternatives, many commenters were concerned that other alternatives involving a different combination of tools were not being considered. As we proceed in the EIS process, the agencies will consider additional combinations of tools, which could be included when the preferred alternative is defined. Details of the alternatives considered, including the agency-preferred alternative, will be provided in the draft EIS, which will be available for public comment in winter 2006.

Alternative A – No Action

This alternative would continue the existing management framework. No new management actions would be applied, and the park elk population would continue to be regulated primarily by forage availability and weather conditions. Under this alternative, the elk population is expected to fluctuate between 2,200 and 3,100 animals, which is considered to be outside the range of natural variation. No formal framework for management of vegetation within the park would be developed.

Alternative B – Lethal Reduction by Agency Staff or Contractors

Under this alternative, the elk population would be reduced using lethal means implemented by trained and certified agency staff or contractors. The alternative presents two strategies to meet the plan's objectives:

B-1: Maximum Lethal Reduction, would involve agency removal of elk using lethal means, with aggressive reduction targets within the first four years of the plan to quickly reduce the size of the population, followed by less intensive yearly reductions to maintain target populations. The target elk population would fluctuate between 1,200 to 1,700 elk, which is considered to be on the lower end of the natural range. Due to a lower elk population in this alternative, no fencing would be required to protect vegetation. Elk redistribution techniques would be used to better attain vegetation restoration objectives.

B-2: Moderate Lethal Reduction, relies on gradual lethal reduction of elk over time to regulate the elk population and its distribution. Because this alternative would maintain the elk population at the higher end of the natural range (1,600 to 2,100 elk), up to 7,500 acres of fencing would be installed in willow communities in the high elk-use areas on the primary winter and summer ranges, and elk redistribution techniques would be used to a greater degree to support vegetation restoration objectives outside fenced areas.

Alternative C – Fertility Control and Lethal Reduction by Agency Staff or Contractors

This alternative involves the use of fertility control agents (single-year, multi-year, or lifetime duration) on elk inside the park to reduce and maintain the size of the elk population. Currently, due to the high number of elk that would need to be treated annually, it is logistically infeasible to meet the elk population objectives of the plan using only available fertility control agents. Therefore, the alternative involves the use of lethal reduction methods to supplement fertility control actions. Because this alternative would maintain the elk population at the higher end of the natural range (1,600 to 2,100 elk), up to 7,500 acres of fencing would be installed in the high elk-use areas of the primary winter and summer ranges, and elk redistribution techniques would be used to a greater degree to support vegetation restoration objectives outside of fenced areas.

Alternative D – Re-establish Wolves and Lethal Reduction by Agency Staff or Contractors

This alternative would involve re-establishing a small population of gray wolves in Rocky Mountain National Park in a phased approach, in combination with lethal control of elk, to achieve an elk population that would fluctuate within the natural range of variation between 1,200 to 2,100 elk. Wolves would be established in the park in very small numbers in the early phase of the plan and gradually allowed to increase in later phases once it is determined that the wolves can be effectively managed and that plan management objectives are being met. Wolves would be monitored and their movements and activities restricted to the park. As wolf predation of elk in the park increases, and based on monitoring of the elk population, the intensity of lethal reductions by agency staff or contractors would be modified to meet elk population objectives. It is assumed that wolves would

effectively redistribute the population; therefore, no other elk redistribution techniques or fencing would be required to support vegetation protection and restoration.

Elements Common to All Action Alternatives

The park has identified a number of management actions or strategies that would occur under each of the action alternatives. All of the action alternatives involve an adaptive management approach based on monitoring. Monitoring of park resource response to elk and vegetation management activities would be conducted under each action alternative, allowing the park to evaluate the degree to which management objectives are being achieved and to adjust management actions or implement mitigations as needed. The action alternatives would also involve selective fencing of aspen clones, the use of prescribed fire, and the reintroduction of beaver to augment the vegetative restoration techniques of each alternative. Under all action alternatives, elk that are subject to lethal removal would be tested for Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) to provide information about the prevalence of CWD in elk within the park. All action alternatives would involve enhanced public education efforts to provide additional information about elk and their role in the ecosystem and the effects of management activities on park resources.

Alternatives That Will No Longer Be Considered

During development of the alternatives, seven alternatives initially considered were not retained for further evaluation. A summary of the rationale for not considering the alternatives is as follows:

Hunting in the Park: Federal law prohibits public hunting in the park. In addition, the limited area that could be used within the park without disrupting visitor use and access would limit the scope of hunting and would not be sufficient to fulfill the plan purpose and management objectives.

Reduction of Elk Using Public Marksmen: This alternative would have relied on members of the public who qualified as marksmen to reduce the population through lethal controls. Based on NPS legal and policy guidance, the use of public marksmen would constitute hunting, which federal law prohibits in the park. In addition, the moderate level of elk reduction over time could be accomplished through more effective means using agency staff or contractors.

Translocation: Moving elk to areas outside the park conflicts with current NPS and state policies that prohibit exportation of elk from areas in which animals are known to have CWD to areas not known to have animals infected with the disease.



Shipment to Euthanizing Facility: Corraling and shipping elk to a facility to be euthanized was considered early in the planning process. Staff decided that shipment of the animals would cause greater stress and would increase the potential for self-induced injury to the animals, and that removal of elk in the field would achieve population objectives while lessening to the greatest extent possible the pain and distress caused to the animals.

Maximum Fertility Control: This alternative relied on the use of fertility control agents alone to reduce the elk population size. Park staff determined that using a short-term agent currently available for use in elk would be logistically infeasible, as the very high number of elk needing to be treated to meet elk population objectives would be very

difficult to accomplish. Longer-term agents that would control reproduction for multiple years are not currently available. Therefore, staff determined that the use of fertility control agents alone would not be feasible, and this alternative will not be evaluated further.

Maximum Habitat Manipulation: This alternative focused on fencing the entire core winter range habitat. It will not be evaluated because of concerns over shifting the issues related to elk to other areas, the logistical difficulties in fencing such a large area, and the unacceptable level of impact that could occur to resources outside of the fenced areas.

Self-sustaining Wolf Population: This alternative would have re-established wolves in the park and would have allowed their population to self-regulate. There would have been no limits imposed on population growth or distribution, and wolves would have been expected to disperse from the park, with their numbers increasing over time. This alternative is not being considered further because of the lack of support from other agencies, concerns by neighbors related to perceived and real threats, the degree of expected human-wolf conflicts, and the intensive management that would be needed to respond to external issues, such as social impacts, would likely interfere with meeting the objectives of the plan.

When Will the Draft EIS Be Available?

The development of the alternatives has required discussion and workshops with scientific and technical experts in the field of wildlife management and intensive consultation and coordination among the various agencies, municipalities, and governing jurisdictions involved in the planning process. The intensity and scale of these efforts has required that the previously estimated release date for the draft EIS be revised. At this time, it is expected that the draft EIS will be available for public review in winter 2006.

For further information, or to be added to the mailing list for the elk and vegetation management plan, please contact the park information office by phone or mail. You may use the reverse side of this update to change your mailing list option, and send it to the park.

Phone: 970-586-1206

Rocky Mountain National Park

Attn: Elk and Vegetation Management Plan

Estes Park, Colorado 80517

www.nps.gov/romo/planning/elkvegetation





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Rocky Mountain National Park
Elk and Vegetation Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement



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