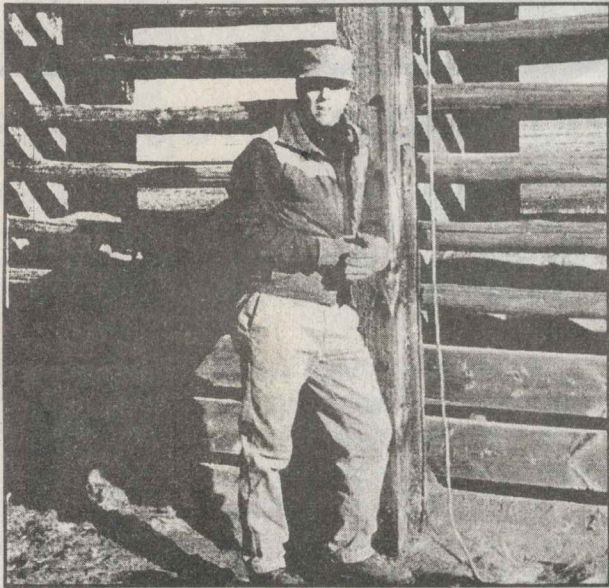


## President's Column



By Lloyd Dorsey  
WWF President

### Feedgrounds Aren't Forever

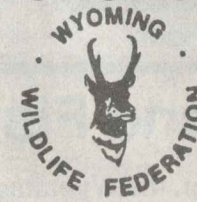
It's appropriate that I'm writing the first draft of this column while elk hunting on the northeast side of Huckleberry Mountain just south of Yellowstone National Park because I'm smack dab in the middle of one of Wyoming's largest and most troublesome wildlife dilemmas. That is the southern Yellowstone, Jackson Hole, western Wyoming elk herds. There are too many of them and too little winter range, and the policies of the Wyoming Game and Fish Department and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is to supplementally feed them during the last three months

here that wildlife enthusiasts and wildlife managers need to address: How intense should the animal husbandry techniques be applied to wildlife before you've really done the wildlife a grave disservice in the long term? If the remaining natural landscapes and ecosystems of the Rocky Mountains aren't places where the diversity of species are allowed to naturally interact and evolve, free from human intervention, then where?

Wyoming doesn't feed all its elk. The elk in the Cody country and the Big Horns do just fine relying on natural winter range. The Dubois country elk are another success story. The acquisition and protection of 45,000 acres of crucial winter habitat up the East Fork (see "Celebrate Game and Fish Habitat", page 4, in September-October 1996 Pronghorn, by Nancy Debevoise) has helped keep the elk there relatively disease-free and the herds are prospering. In these regions of our state, the historic protection of winter habitat for the express purpose of enabling the elk and other wildlife to winter over without undue human influences, has been the most pragmatic and cost efficient policy over the long run. It isn't hard to wistfully imagine a far different scenario in the Jackson Hole, Big Piney, Pinedale, Star Valley regions today if the millions of dollars that have been spent over the decades in maintaining feedgrounds had instead been directed at winter range protection and large scale habitat enhancement.

Today the WGFD is being forced to try to remedy some of the problems inherent in elk feedgrounds. The driving force here has been the federal Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS). However justifiable APHIS' motives and methods may be, these preliminary changes in the feedground system were long overdue. The WGFD is implementing

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feedgrounds in the western part of the state including the Star Valley, Big Piney, Pinedale and Jackson areas as well as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife managed National Elk Refuge just outside the town of Jackson. Wyoming is the only Rocky Mountain state that supplementally feeds elk on such a scale. Montana doesn't and they have more elk than we do, Colorado doesn't and they have more elk than we do. Idaho and Utah don't feed elk on an annual large scale basis.

Of course, Wyoming's policy of supplementally feeding elk had its beginnings many decades ago with what is now the National Elk Refuge. Public pressure was brought to bear when elk winter habitat was taken over by ranchlands and thousands of elk subsequently began to starve during the winters. So the federal government responded by obtaining a small amount of land in Jackson Hole and concentrating and feeding the elk there during the winter, thus alleviating the short-term problems when starving elk got into cattle ranchers' haystacks. That was in about 1912 and things have snowballed since. The state, without the benefit of the wildlife management information that's available today, began to <sup>widely</sup> institute winter feedgrounds in response to the same conflicts that were occurring in Jackson Hole. Before very long, those feedgrounds became the 800-pound gorilla that came for a meal and stayed.

Today it isn't difficult to realize that those feedgrounds weren't the relatively easy, obvious and correct solution that they were once thought to be. It's now known they offer perfect scenarios for disease transmission among the elk, they cause serious habitat degradation in the concentrated areas and they encourage artificially high numbers of elk to exist in the region. And, quite frankly, feeding elk, whether it's hay from a horse drawn sleigh or alfalfa pellets from a military style 6x6, takes some of the wild from wildlife. There's a significant ethical issue

enhancement efforts, vaccination of the elk to fight the spread of brucellosis and other feedground management techniques designed to alleviate inherent problems. The big question, currently unanswerable, is how far in the right direction will this change in feedground management take us?

It does need to be recognized that a drastic change in wildlife management such as eliminating, or significantly reducing, elk feedgrounds brings with it consequences that are beyond biological. There would also be social, economic and political ramifications in phasing out feedgrounds and these, being people and community oriented, might be the most difficult to work out. Narrow interest groups need to be made aware that the current feedground situation has made the elk extremely vulnerable to certain disease infestations that make brucellosis pale in comparison. Bovine tuberculosis and chronic wasting disease (similar to mad cow disease) are only two examples of diseases that are out there and can readily erupt in game farm and feedground situations and the only remedy for either scenarios is prompt, merciless and complete depopulation of the elk in the affected region. Whatever bitter pill we may have to swallow now in reducing our dependence on feedgrounds may save us from such a catastrophe in the future.

So, can we wean ourselves from this policy of short-term gratification that feeding massive surpluses of elk engenders? I would answer that we, the sporting public and wildlife managers, have been able to accomplish equally difficult policy changes in the past. For instance, we stopped historic market hunting of wildlife; we stopped unlimited sport hunting of migratory birds; we imposed taxes on our

**See PRESIDENT page 15**

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**Mission Statement**

The Wyoming Wildlife Federation is a conservation advocacy organization consisting of people from many walks of life bonded together by a common interest in natural resource conservation, especially as it relates to wildlife. The purpose of the WWF is to educate and empower citizens to take actions which conserve wildlife and wildlife habitat.

**Editorial Policy**

The Pronghorn welcomes contributions of articles, editorials, letters, photos and artwork. We reserve the right to edit or not print any materials. Please call or write for deadlines and guidelines.

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WGFD in the state legislature to pass legislation that increased our Game and Fish license fees. Sportsmen were willing to pay increased license fees only with the assurance that that increase would go to fund wildlife habitat and access across the state. We believe it's premature and unfair to go back to the public less than a year after the latest fee increase and ask for another increase. We encourage the Game and Fish Commission to reassess how existing Game and Fish

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## **G&F ACCESS**

### **Continued from page 1**

At the meeting in Casper the Game and Fish personnel were asked "Why not offer us no option? No option is the best option." Landowner Tom Anderson wondered if landowners would be liable for hunters if the landowner received money. He said he currently doesn't charge access for hunters because of the liability issue. Anderson also brought up the issue of manpower and whether or not the department had the personnel to negotiate deals with all of the many landowners in Wyoming and patrol the land as well. Attendees at the Casper meeting broke into applause when Casper hunter Sharon Wilson stated that public land should be open to the public, so the Wyoming Game and Fish Commission ought to concentrate on negotiating access to land-locked public land.

Commissioner Hal Corbett said the commission hasn't decided specifically how it will evaluate the public response. Results will be presented to the commission in December. Any changes to the current regulations would have to go through an additional public process.

## **Public access**

The Wyoming Wildlife Federation believes public access to federal and state lands is of high interest to all Wyoming citizens. We're proud to say that the vast majority of recreationists and wildlife enthusiasts in the state are responsible, law-abiding citizens who often leave the land in better shape than when they first arrived. State trust lands play an increasingly important role in providing recreation and wildlife habitat for the state. However, neither state statute nor the Constitution protect the public's right to access state trust lands. We urge the Committee to investigate the issue of public access to state trust lands.

The WWF supports measures that inform and encourage all other public lands users to responsibly use state lands. Signs should be posted informing the public that individuals who engage in illegal activities such as off road use, camping, littering and property damage, will be prosecuted and fined. On the ground solutions such as adequate signing, public education, and trail and road maintenance alleviate conflicts allowing recreation, grazing, wildlife and other multiple uses to coexist on our state trust lands.

## **Recreation user's fee**

Sportsmen and other recreationists understand that some weight should be attributed to the fact that state trust lands do afford some public access for hunting and fishing whereas private land leases don't. Therefore, we believe it's only fair that sportsmen and recreationists contribute to the management and maintenance of these state trust lands. We encourage a public debate regarding a state lands recreation fee, as originally proposed by the 1993 State Lands Task Force. Due to the benefits many recreationists receive from state lands and in light of the expressed

ability of the state to comprehensively evaluate state land values beyond a simple appraisal of cash generated from a sale.

In closing, WWF encourages the Select Committee to devise recommendations regarding state lands management to be fair to all livestock operators, schools, sportsmen and other affected parties by exercising sound fiduciary responsibility. By cultivating a free market approach to our state trust lands, the Board encourages entrepreneurship, healthy competition and a fair playing field for all other affected interests that desire to use state lands. We welcome the opportunity to work with all of these parties to provide balanced, public participation in the management of our state trust lands.

Respectfully submitted by,

Dan Chu, Executive Director

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## **PRESIDENT**

### **Continued from page 2**

selves to fund wildlife restoration and enhancement programs. We've helped lobby for and enact legislation that resulted in parklands and refuges that protected crucial wildlife habitat. We've moved to stop the traditional war against predators in the name of wildlife management. Certainly these were all difficult habits and policies and lifestyles to change. But as responsible wildlife enthusiasts we can look back and say we're now better off, and so is the resource, as a result of our current discipline, tolerance and modern management efforts in these areas. Feedgrounds don't have to be forever and shouldn't be, especially on the current scale. Let's move forward to do what we know is right.