Brucellosis solution for elk and cattle in Wyoming

Submitted to Governor Dave Freudenthal

January 12, 2005

Feedgrounds, or free-ranging elk for Wyoming's future?

by

The Greater Yellowstone Coalition
Wyoming Outdoor Council
Jackson Hole Conservation Alliance

January 12, 2005

Dear Governor Freudenthal:

We thank you for the opportunity to submit this initial offering of alternative methods to effectively solve the brucellosis problem in cattle and elk in Wyoming. We also thank you for recognizing the severity of the brucellosis problem in Wyoming, and we offer our appreciation for the hard work done by members of your Brucellosis Coordination Team. Blessed with another budget surplus and rising cattle prices, this is a propitious time to start solving these problems – necessary monies are available combined with the growing public and political awareness that we need workable and realistic solutions that will best address the issue. Indeed, many of the factors that lead to high elk brucellosis rates will also make chronic wasting disease a nightmare when (not if) it hits western Wyoming and the feedgrounds. The time is now to implement a management program that gets at the root causes and perpetuation of wildlife diseases.

At this point in time, the relationships between concentrated animals in feedgrounds, the perpetuation of wildlife disease, and the threat to cattle are well accepted science. In the wild where there is no supplemental feeding, Wyoming elk are virtually brucellosis-free. In concentrated feedgrounds, however, elk test from 8% to 54% seropositive for exposure to brucellosis. As long as there are feedgrounds, there will be high percentages of seroprevalence in elk, and Wyoming's brucellosis-free status for livestock in continued jeopardy. The real problems and challenges lie in how we respond to these realities. Vaccinations in cattle and elk have proven ineffective; "reinforcement" projects on or around feedgrounds will only worsen these unnatural conditions, and a "test and slaughter" program will only reduce elk numbers while ignoring the core issue of artificial concentrations of elk. At the other extreme, if one were to eliminate all feedgrounds overnight, there are concerns about elk and cattle co-mingling, the potential for elk-die offs, and potential impacts to private ranchlands. The bottom line, however, given what's at stake here -- both for wildlife and for Wyoming agricultural interests-- is that something new and forward-thinking needs to be done. We've come too far to settle on methods and remedies that look backwards to the failed tactics of feeding, reinforcement of fences, test and slaughter, and vaccinations.

The unnatural concentration of wildlife in winter feedgrounds is one variable in this management conundrum that is in our control. While an overnight closing of all feedgrounds would be unacceptable on many fronts, we believe that <u>one</u> of your adopted strategies should address the feeding issues. We propose programs to carefully and incrementally over time eliminate feeding in some of these feedgrounds, which will allow for careful monitoring and adaptive changes based on resource conditions and stakeholder needs. We recognize that the adoption of any management proposal must protect our wildlife heritage and recognize the importance of sustainable, healthy wildlife populations for future generations.

Not only is the timing right with a budget surplus, but so too are the conditions for implementing this strategy. Vast tracts of public lands in western Wyoming can winter big game and many habitat improvement projects cooperatively done by the agencies, ngo’s and private landowners make an incremental phaseout of the right feedgrounds feasible. Hunter Management Areas have also been very successful at dispersing elk and dealing with some conflicts from wildlife on private lands. Indeed, as discussed below, these conditions have allowed feedgrounds in Wyoming to be effectively phased out without harm to livestock or wildlife populations.

On the economic front, please note that this proposal dealing with only 8 of 23 feedgrounds will *save* the state of Wyoming over $352,000 every year and more than $3.52 *million* dollars over ten years, compared to the proposal from the Coordination Team which *requests* millions from the legislature to prop up feedgrounds. Our proposal does *not* recommend vaccinations or test and slaughter of elk, nor any long wildlife-proof fences that impede migrations. Instead we recommend using the excellent tools and examples at hand to restore healthy elk populations along with a more intensive management of livestock to protect private lands and livestock. While the science is not disputed on the cause of these problems, we understand that no solution is perfect and no solution provides a quick fix. We look forward to working with you on a detailed plan for each feedground that involves all the necessary stakeholders and state professionals.

Sincerely,

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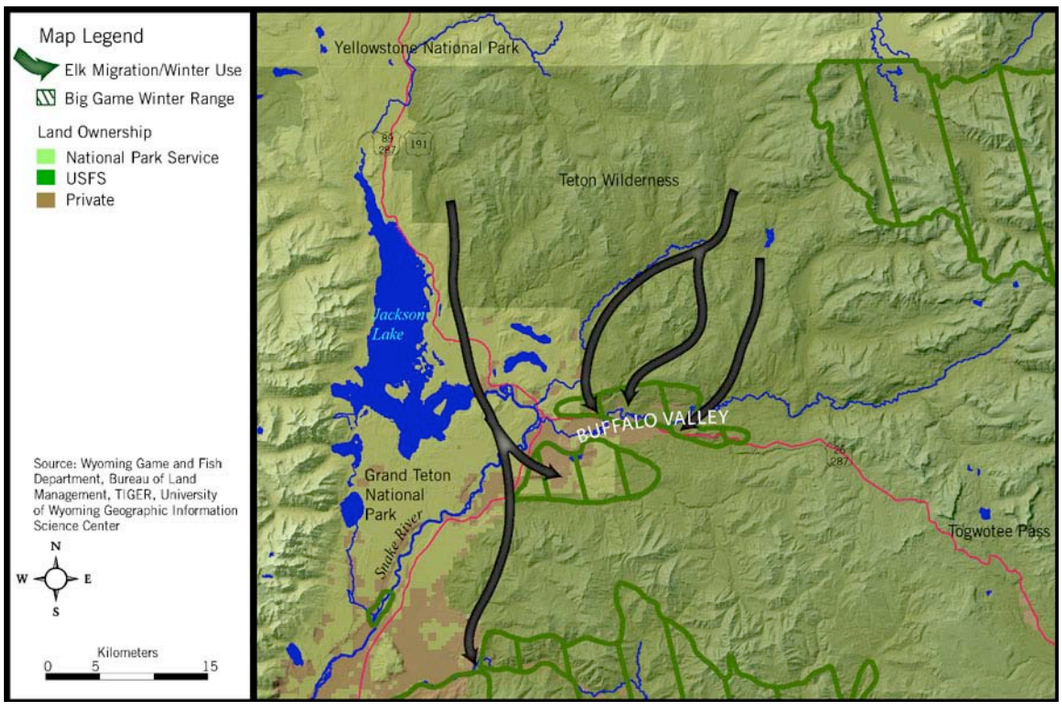
Project #1

The historical phase-out of feeding in Buffalo Valley eliminated brucellosis in northern Jackson elk herd

In recent decades, wildlife managers phased out feeding of big game in the Buffalo Valley area in northern Jackson Hole (see Map #1 below). Since the feeding of elk was stopped, a variety of tools have been used to maintain free-ranging big game populations and protect private property values. These have included extensive habitat improvement projects planned, funded and conducted by RMEF and the WGFD along with federal agencies (the same Jackson Interagency Habitat Improvement projects described below in the Gros Ventre Valley); one USFS grazing allotment willing seller buy-out funded by various stakeholders; and late season depredation hunts to keep elk off livestock feedlines using federal and private funds. Over the years, blood tests of hunter-harvested elk indicate that seroprevalence for brucellosis in this northern Jackson elk herd is nearly zero. Calf-to-cow elk ratios in this area are among the highest of any segment of the Jackson elk herd, while all native species of predators also exist along with other species of big game. Elk hunting is among the best in the region in this area of no feedgrounds.

This long-lasting prototype of ending feeding and maintaining abundant elk, protecting livestock operations, and maintaining hunting and wildlife viewing opportunities should be among the best prototypes the WGFD and their partners can showcase and replicate. It can also work in tandem with the Gros Ventre Valley prototype (see Project #3) directly to the south. Since there is no feeding of elk hereabouts, and no vaccinations, the Buffalo Valley has been among the most cost efficient and productive elk herds to manage in the entire western Wyoming area.



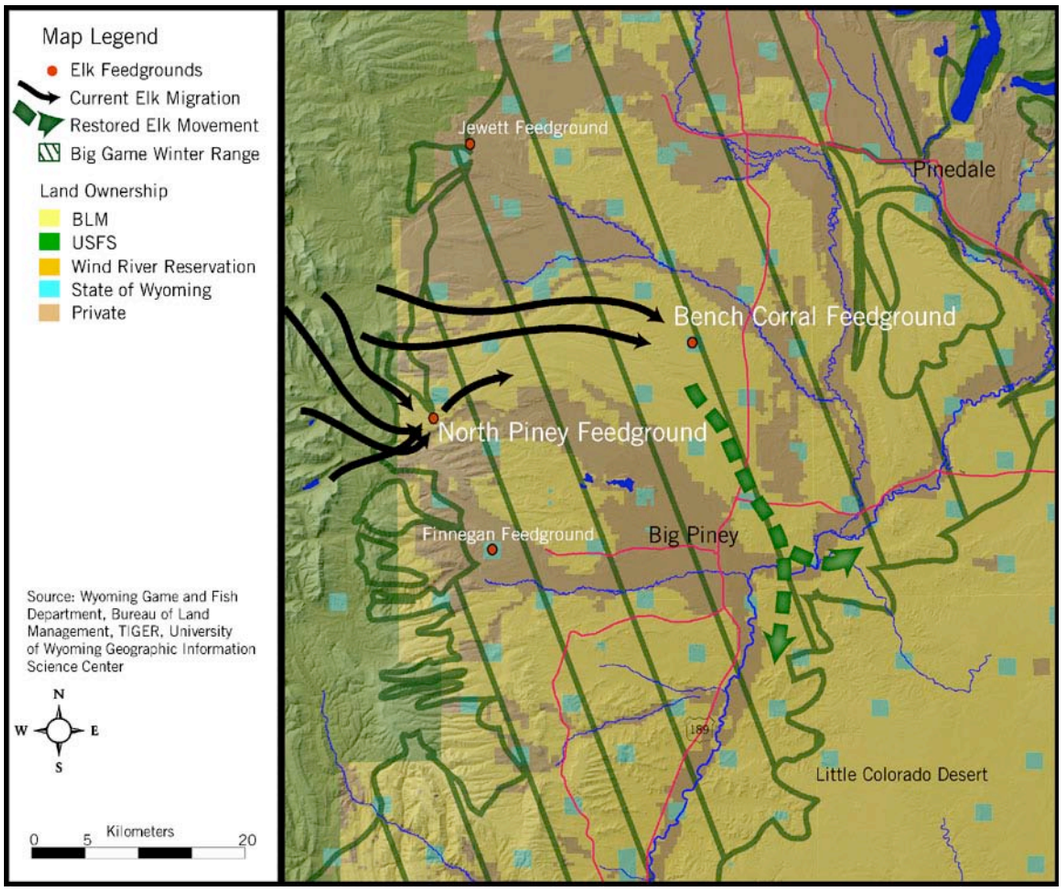
Project #2

The phase-out of the North Piney and Bench Corral feedgrounds

In 1995 the Wyoming Game and Fish Department effectively phased out the North Piney elk feedground. After years of scientifically assessing the residual forage amounts on over 33,000 acres of native winter range on public BLM lands in the Bench Corral elk feedground area (see Map #2) the Game and Fish decided to phase out the high altitude, deep snow, and expensive North Piney feedground. The BLM lands at the lower elevation east of the North Piney feedground are summer cattle allotments, but the Game and Fish determined that there was more than enough residual forage left to winter all the elk from both the Bench Corral and North Piney feedgrounds after the cattle had grazed their permitted season. The Game and Fish Department has long known that dispersing elk out on native range is the best way to solve the brucellosis problem in elk.

The phase-out of North Piney worked. The elk at North Piney were baited during the winter of 95-96, and the elk willingly followed a bait line to the lower elevation, windswept native ranges. This relocation of elk occurred in literally a matter of days. Since that winter, the elk of the North Piney country have migrated down country onto the Bench Corral range every winter proving that elk migrations can be restored if the elk are able to find forage at the end of their journey. During some winters, elk are fed at Bench Corral, but this project is a good step towards allowing elk to continue on their journey to their ancestral ranges across the Green River to the canyons along the Little Colorado Desert.

The direct cost savings by not feeding and not vaccinating at these feedgrounds would be approximately $59,836 annually, or $598,360 over ten years. This cost savings could help fund some of the mitigations, easements, and habitat improvements to help manage free-ranging elk while protecting livestock. Once elk are brucellosis-free, calf/cow ratios improve and hunting opportunities could also increase, and habitat for other species improves when big game are free-ranging.



Project #3

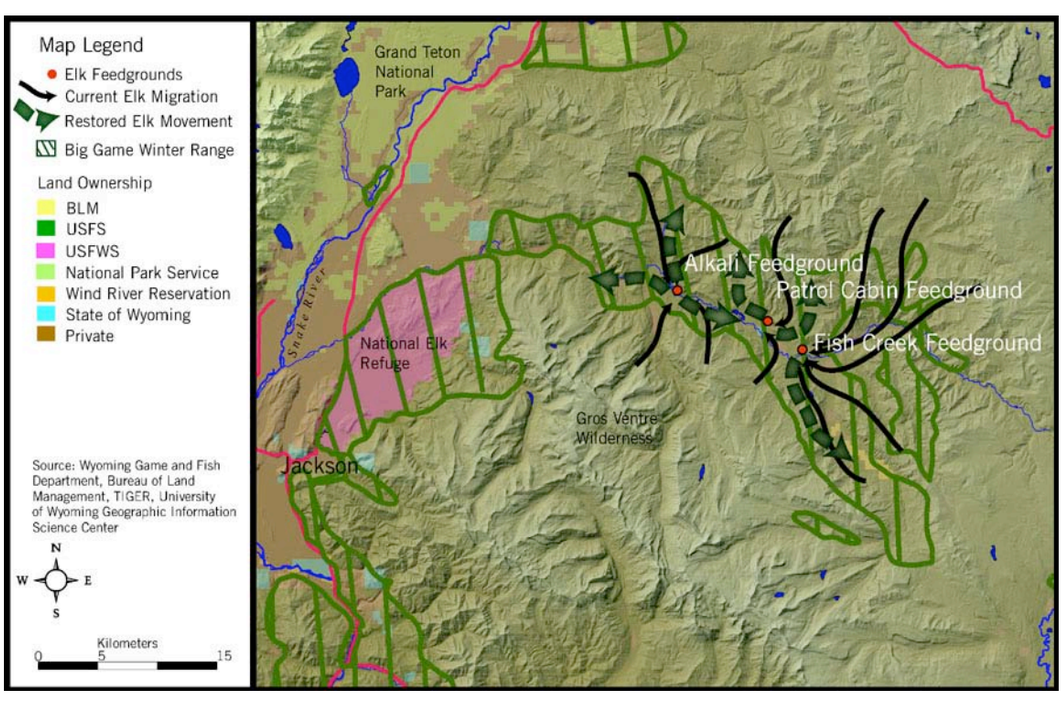
The phase-out of the Alkali Creek, Patrol Cabin, and Fish Creek feedgrounds in the Gros Ventre River Valley

One of the most encouraging elements of this project is the availability of vast tracts of public lands surrounding the three elk feedgrounds in the Gros Ventre Valley east of Jackson Hole (see map #3 below). This semiarid valley running east to west is in the middle of approximately one *million* acres of the Bridger Teton and Shoshone National Forests with no paved roads. The Gros Ventre also holds key portions of one of the longest big game migration routes in North America, the pronghorn antelope from Grand Teton Park to the Little Colorado Desert.

For more than a half-century elk have been fed at various locations in the Gros Ventre valley, now assimilated into the Alkali Creek, Patrol Cabin, and Fish Creek feedgrounds. Yet as far back as 1909, the chief Game Warden for Wyoming, D.C. Nowlin, recognized this valley for its excellent native big game winter ranges, and in 1919 the USFS protected large portions of the winter ranges against excessive livestock grazing (C. Anderson, 1958). Moose, mule deer, pronghorn, and bighorn sheep also use this area, and some bison from Jackson Hole have discovered it. Since settlement days, the main reason for feeding the approximately 2,800 elk on the feedgrounds in the winter in the Gros Ventre has been to keep them away from livestock wintering operations. Today, for various reasons, there are only 3 widely dispersed livestock wintering ranches in the valley, wintering approximately 150 horses and 85 cattle total.

Since the protected winter ranges on USFS lands already exist in the Gros Ventre, and since there are very few livestock to worry about, these 3 feedgrounds can be phased out most expeditiously. The 3 ranches that winter stock should be assisted in "elk-proofing" their winter feedlines and hay (one landowner already has done so), and the Bridger-Teton Forest officials and Game and Fish Department should collaborate to ensure that summer livestock grazing is managed to allow enough residual forage for wintering big game. Many habitat improvement and protection projects have already been accomplished by the two agencies with assistance from such ngo's as the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and Jackson Hole Land Trust,

Truly, the Gros Ventre is one area where potential conflicts are few and, as the Game and Fish Department has identified, opportunities exist to phase out elk feedgrounds. Additionally, this is an area that, due to its comparative geographic isolation, will afford us the opportunity to learn and improve other phase-out projects. Once elk are allowed to range free, science and experience have taught us that brucellosis eventually disappears among elk, calf/cow ratios improve and hunting opportunities could increase. Habitat for other species also improves when big game are allowed to range free. The direct cost savings from phasing out these three feedgrounds and not feeding and not vaccinating can be expected to be approximately $150,467 annually, or more than $1.5 *million* dollars over ten years,. The cost savings can be used to fund mitigation, conservation easements, and habitat improvement projects to help in managing free-ranging, healthy elk while protecting livestock.



Project #4

Phasing out Muddy Creek, Scab Creek, and Fall Creek feedgrounds

The best characteristic of this project is the vast amount of primarily BLM public lands to distribute the elk across (see Map #4), which at one time served as ancestral wintering grounds for vast herds of big game. Indeed, Warren Allred of the Wyoming Game and Fish Department called this area "one of the greatest wildlife wintering areas in the United States. ". (Allred, 1950) There are approximately *1.7 million acres* of public lands in the Little Colorado Desert, the Prospect Mountains, and the Big Sandy River area that can serve as big game transitional and winter ranges. Even today, some elk make it out to this region without conflict, as well as mule deer and thousands of pronghorn antelope. Some of the pronghorn and mule deer come from summer ranges in Grand Teton Park and the Gros Ventre Valley and surrounding mountain ranges.

This feedground phase-out project is not without its challenges, though, since there are private ranchlands and livestock that must be protected from co-mingling from elk while still encouraging elk to migrate "to the desert".

But, as we have learned from previous projects like the 1995 phase out of North Piney and elsewhere in Wyoming, ranchlands and livestock can be protected with a combination of tools already in hand such as stackyards to protect hay, elk-proof fencing of livestock feedlines on private property, and hunter management areas (HMA's) to use hunters to harvest and displace elk from private lands. Game and Fish, BLM, and livestock permittees can work together to manage available habitat in the outlying BLM lands beyond the private ranches so there is residual forage from the summer season where the elk can winter undisturbed.

The direct cost savings by not feeding or vaccinating at these three feedgrounds would amount to approximately $142,542 annually, or more than $1.4 *million* dollars over ten years. These savings could help fund mitigations, easements, and habitat improvements to help manage free-ranging elk while protecting livestock. After brucellosis disappears in free-ranging elk the calf/cow elk ratios would likely increase and the hunting opportunities would increase as well, and habitat for other wildlife species would improve when big game are allowed to free range.