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Winter feeding on Elk Refuge continues

Crowded feed lines lead to spread of disease and threaten herd health.

Official counts conducted on Feb. 8 show that there are more elk feeding on the National Elk Refuge during this snowy winter than in any year since 1998. This year's count of 7,947 surpasses last year's number by 668. The same day, officials also counted 920 bison feeding on the refuge.

Although we all enjoy sharing the valley with our iconic wildlife, the concentration of so many elk and bison on feed lines is worrisome. The recent government decision to keep on feeding clearly violates the dual mission of the Wildlife Refuge System to "provide for the conservation of fish, wildlife and plants, and their habitats within the system" and to "ensure that the biological integrity, diversity and environmental health of the system are maintained for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans." Why? Because winter feeding and crowded feed lines perpetuate the elk herd's high rate of brucellosis infection and hoof rot, and leave it vulnerable to chronic wasting disease (see below). Ironically, the government's written decision acknowledges the fact that eliminating

winter feeding would result in the lowest risk of disease to Jackson Hole's elk herd – disease that could jeopardize the herd's survival.

The Conservation Alliance recognizes that native habitat has been lost through development, and that the only way to sustain current elk and bison numbers is through wintertime feeding. But because of the looming danger of disease, we believe the responsible course of action is to begin phasing out feeding on the refuge. Managers also need to accelerate programs to enhance and expand winter range, and to reduce both elk and bison numbers through a controlled hunting season. We're concerned about the long-term health of the herds, the habitat they rely on and the economies of the surrounding communities. By not making hard decisions now, we're putting ourselves, and the wildlife we cherish, at risk of a catastrophic event in the future. For more information, please see our 2004 report, "Wildlife Diseases in Greater Yellowstone," available at www.jhalliance.org/libraryreports.htm. ■

What's Chronic Wasting Disease?

By **Franz J. Camenzind**, *Executive Director*

Chronic wasting disease, the wildlife equivalent to mad cow disease, is a fatal neurological disease caused by a mutated protein, known as a prion. It was first recognized in captive mule deer in the 1960s at a wildlife research facility near Fort Collins, Colo., and later at a similar facility north of Laramie, Wyo. It's assumed that the disease spread to wild deer from one or both of these facilities. Since then, it's been found in whitetail deer, mule deer, elk, and most recently, moose.

The CWD prion is found primarily in nerve tissue and becomes concentrated in the brain, where it slowly kills normal brain cells. Symptoms include emaciation and listlessness; the ears of infected animals droop; the animals drool and seem constantly thirsty. Once symptoms are apparent, all animals die within a few months. Although the prion is similar to mad cow disease, there is no evidence at this time that it can infect humans, domestic cattle or wild buffalo.

The CWD prion persists in the environment for years even after concerted efforts to sterilize the site. Its transmission is unclear, but it's believed

to be through direct contact, via saliva, feces or urine. The one thing certain is that it is always fatal, and there is no known prevention or cure.

Evidence strongly suggests that concentrating animals in one place greatly enhances the spread of the disease. Controlled studies have shown that upwards of 50 percent of confined animals can become infected within a few years of the first exposure.

Computer models have generated predictions for CWD in wild mule deer herds. The results are sobering. Since initial spread of the disease is very slow in dispersed herds, there is little visible drop in the population for the first 20 to 30 years. Within 50 years of infection, the model predicts that the herd will have been halved, and at 100 years, the herd will be cut by 90 percent, while other models predict that the herd will be wiped out – and this is in wild conditions.

Since its first discovery four decades ago, CWD in deer has been creeping west and north across the state – toward the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, home of Wyoming's largest elk herds. Because the spread of CWD is greatly enhanced by crowded conditions, the Conservation Alliance is gravely concerned that the crowded feed lines stemming

from winter feeding will provide a near-perfect environment for the disease to take hold and cause catastrophic declines in elk numbers. (The ripple effect just to grizzly bears and wolves would be disastrous if they were to lose their primary food source.)

During the 2007 hunting season, 10 new cases of CWD were detected in Wyoming from hunter-harvested deer and elk representing eight new herd management units. The new deer infections came from the west slopes of the Bighorn Mountains, a mere 50 to 80 miles across the Bighorn Basin from the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. This brings to 23 the number of infected deer found in just this area in the past 10 years.

As the most informed experts say, "It's not a question of *if* chronic wasting disease gets to Greater Yellowstone, but *when* it gets there."

We can't wait till then to take action. Native winter forage and range must be increased, winter feeding must be phased out, and some elk herd numbers must be reduced. Only by spreading elk out can we hope to keep the impacts of CWD at a tolerable level. Even that may not be enough, but for now we have no better weapons to fight this deadly disease.