



Contact: Desiree Sorenson-Groves
dgroves@refugeassociation.org
(202) 333-9075

NWRA Sues Over National Elk Refuge Feedlots

Washington, D.C. – June 3, 2008, the National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA) joined four other organizations in a lawsuit against the U.S. Department of the Interior regarding management of the National Elk Refuge in northwestern Wyoming. The lawsuit seeks to restore healthy populations of elk and reduce the risk of disease through the elimination of an established feeding program.

Elk are currently fed in feedlot conditions for approximately six months every winter. In the early 1900's this probably ensured their survival but could now lead to their demise. Represented by Earthjustice, NWRA, along with the Greater Yellowstone Coalition, Jackson Hole Conservation Alliance, Defenders of Wildlife, and the Wyoming Outdoor Council, seeks to uphold the 1997 Refuge Improvement Act by phasing out the feeding program.

The now 25,000-acre refuge was established in 1912 in an effort to protect dwindling elk populations. Similar to what occurred with another iconic ungulate, the bison, elk were devastated on the open plains as part of America's manifest destiny. Elk wintering lands in the valleys made way for domestic cattle. That coupled with several harsh winters, led to the elk-feeding program.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service policy directs that wildlife population levels on refuges be maintained at levels consistent with sound wildlife management principles, that populations be managed for natural densities and levels of variation, and that population management activities contribute to the widest possible natural diversity of indigenous fish and wildlife, even when population management activities are implemented for a single species. The crowded conditions of the wintering feed lines artificially concentrates wildlife, leading to many problems, including a higher incidence of disease.

Fewer than 70 miles from the boundary of the refuge, the devastating chronic wasting disease (CWD), similar to mad cow disease, has been reported. CWD is fatal to deer and elk and if the disease enters the refuge, the elk herd could be decimated. Other concerns are brucellosis, scabies and hoof rot; which have already been reported on the refuge. By ending the feedlot conditions, natural migrations and populations would be restored, thereby ensuring future healthy populations of elk while protecting livestock and the local economy.

The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge Association is to conserve America's wildlife heritage for future generations through strategic programs that protect, enhance, and expand the National Wildlife Refuge System and the landscapes beyond its boundaries that secure its ecological integrity.

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