

June 4, 2008

Suit Opposes Elk Feeding in Wyoming

By [JIM ROBBINS](#)

Environmentalists filed a lawsuit on Tuesday in an effort to stop a federal wildlife refuge in Wyoming from continuing its longtime practice of feeding wild elk. They say such feeding could lead to or worsen an outbreak of chronic wasting disease in the large wildlife populations around Yellowstone National Park.

Chronic wasting disease causes brain lesions in elk and deer that result in neurological damage and death. Animals with the disease must be killed to avoid spreading it, but there is no evidence it can be passed to humans by exposure although more research is being done.

Discovered in a Colorado research facility in the 1960s, chronic wasting disease has forced biologists to kill hundreds of infected wild deer from Wisconsin to Wyoming and thousands of others that are not infected to keep the disease from spreading.

Chronic wasting disease has been found just 70 or so miles from the ecosystem that includes the National Elk Refuge in Jackson, Wyo., and Yellowstone National Park, worrying environmentalists that it could sicken and kill animals in and around the park.

Wildlife biologists warn that feeding the animals that crowd together at the National Elk Refuge and at 22 other state feeding grounds in Wyoming is likely to worsen any outbreak of chronic wasting disease. Conditions at feed lots increase disease rates up to 10 times those found in the wild because diseases are passed rapidly among animals in close contact.

“If you crowd animals together, you’ll increase the probability of transmission,” said Markus Peterson, a wildlife-disease scientist from [Texas A&M University](#). “They really need to rethink the feeding of elk in Wyoming.”

Environmentalists and others say the crowding of elk into the refuge at Jackson has sharply altered natural conditions. About 8,300 elk winter there.

“Basically, we’ve got way too many animals on too small an area for too long a time,” said Barry Reiswig, a retired refuge manager who now lives near Cody, Wyo. “They’re way over the elk refuge’s carrying capacity.”

The refuge's current manager, Steve Kallin, said he had not seen the lawsuit. Asked about concern that feeding the elk could foster disease, Mr. Kallin said, "We're looking at managing to minimize that potential."

Wyoming's economy would be affected by ending the feeding of elk at the refuge, which has become a tourist attraction. Last winter more than 25,000 people paid \$16 each to ride on sleighs pulled by horses among herds of elk on snow-covered landscapes. In addition, ranchers do not want hungry wild elk competing with their cattle for food, and hunting outfitters want assurances that plenty of animals will be available for their clients to stalk.

The adjacent states of Montana and Idaho have banned the feeding of elk because of the risk of disease. Environmentalists said a plan completed by the refuge in 2007 acknowledged the seriousness of the threat, but did not recommend ending the feeding, which began a century ago during a harsh winter, to keep the elk from starvation.

If prions, the agents that cause chronic wasting disease, were to sweep through the refuge, experts say, they could live in the soil for decades and force the 25,000-acre refuge to close.

The lawsuit filed on Tuesday in federal court in Washington, D.C., by Earthjustice, on behalf of the Greater Yellowstone Coalition, Jackson Hole Conservation Alliance, Defenders of Wildlife, Wyoming Outdoor Council and the National Wildlife Refuge Association, was against only the National Elk Refuge, and not the State of Wyoming, because the National Wildlife Refuge Improvement Act requires that wildlife refuges be managed in a way that keeps the land and wildlife healthy. The law does not apply to state-managed wildlife.

Signs of other diseases that are spread more quickly through crowding, like brucellosis, scabies and hoof rot are present in the refuge, environmentalists say. Brucellosis, which causes cattle to abort their young, has been a particular problem in the Great Yellowstone Ecosystem. In Wyoming and Idaho the disease has been passed from elk or bison to cattle.

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