WYOMING GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT

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January 16, 2024

WER 13888.02b
United States Department of Agriculture
Forest Service
Bridger-Teton National Forest
Dell Creek and Forest Park Elk Feedgrounds
Long-term Special Use Permits
Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Lincoln and Sublette Counties

Chad Hudson
Forest Supervisor
Bridger-Teton National Forest
P.O. Box 1888
Jackson, WY 83001

Dear Mr. Hudson,

The Wyoming Game and Fish Department (Department) has reviewed the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) for the Dell Creek and Forest Park Elk Feedgrounds Long-term Special Use Permit project. The Department is statutorily charged with managing and protecting all Wyoming wildlife (W.S. 23-1-103) and the Wyoming Game and Fish Commission (Commission) is directed and empowered to make suitable provisions for the feeding of elk as may be deemed necessary (W.S. 23-1-301(a)(ix)). The Department or Commission shall only permanently cease feedground operations upon order of the Governor in accordance with W.S. 23-1-305. In addition, the Department is a signatory to a Memorandum of Understanding with the Wyoming Livestock Board and the United States Department of Agriculture Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service under 9 CFR part 78, which outlines the agreements required for maintaining brucellosis Class Free status and a Designated Surveillance Area. Pursuant to our mission and statutory requirements, we support the Proposed Action to continue the long-term use (20 years) of both feedgrounds.

The Department relies upon the feedgrounds primarily to reduce livestock conflict, disease transmission from elk to livestock, and decrease winter elk mortality in an effort to maintain Commission objectives. The stated purpose of the DEIS provided by the Forest Service is to decide whether to approve the Commission's request and, if approved, determine conditions that may apply. Given that, we offer the following recommendations:

Considerations to Improve the DEIS

A primary consideration for permitting the continued use of both feedgrounds is the spread of chronic wasting disease (CWD) in the Upper Green River and Afton Herd Units. CWD has not yet been detected in elk from either herd unit but elk in the region have tested positive for the disease. The DEIS uses the results of an analysis conducted by the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), Bridger-Teton National Forest (BTNF), the Department, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the National Park Service (hereafter referred to as the USGS report) to predict the impacts of CWD on elk with varied approaches to winter elk management. While the USGS report offers the best available information regarding probable impacts of the Department's elk feedground management program on the spread of CWD, the Department has reservations regarding the use of the USGS report and the model assumptions. We suggest the following clarifying points be added to help with understanding the results and identify the limitations to interpretation:

- A major assumption made in the USGS report is that feedground closures would reduce elk populations by 23 percent, which is based on density of winter range elk in herd units with feedgrounds versus herd units without feedgrounds. The Department recommends additional discussion be provided on this assumption and the results of the analysis if the assumption is violated. We provided specific text in the attached spreadsheet.
- More attention should be focused on explaining the causes and potential nuances of elk decline based on the Proposed Action or provided alternatives and expand beyond the impacts of CWD alone, specifically in Section 3.1.3.1.3.1. There is an acknowledgement of the interacting impacts of CWD and feedground closures on elk population size, but the various mechanisms of decline should be better addressed and represented where appropriate throughout the DEIS.
- Additional comments have been provided in the attached table.

The Department appreciates the continued coordination with the BTNF and we look forward to your favorable decision on the Proposed Action. Thank you for the opportunity to comment. If you have any questions or concerns please contact Richard King, Chief Game Warden, at (307) 286-4108.

Sincerely,

Angi Bruce
Deputy Director

AB/rc/kgb

cc: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Chris Wichmann, Wyoming Department of Agriculture

Dell Creek and Forest Park Elk Feedgrounds - WGFD additional DEIS document comments

Long-term Special Use Permits	Type	Text	Comment	Suggested Change
Draft Environmental Impact Statement	Specific	Effect on elk population numbers.	Need to clarify these impacts are at the Herd Unit (HU) level, under a scenerio where no changes are made at other feedgrounds in the HU.	Effect on elk population numbers at the Herd Unit scale.
3, 1.2.1	Specific	This feedground supports elk in the Upper Green River Herd Unit.	More information should be provided on the HU scale	The Dell Creek feedground is one of four feedgrounds that support elk in the Upper Green River Herd Unit (Figure 1). The 5-year (2016-2020) average Upper Green River Herd Unit elk trend count, the population estimate used for management purposes, was 3,155 individuals; 3,386 individuals were counted in 2022. The Upper Green River Herd Unit objective is 2,900 elk, which was approved by the WGFC in 2022.
5, 1.2.2	Specific	This feedground supports elk in the Afton Herd Unit.	More information should be provided on the HU scale	The Forest Park feedground is one of two feedgrounds that support elk in the Afton Herd Unit (Figure 1). The 5-year (2016-2020) average Afton Herd Unit elk trend count, which is the population estimate used for management purposes, was 2,197 individuals; 2,142 individuals were counted in 2022. The Afton HU objective is 2,200 elk, which was approved by the WGFC in 2017.
17, 2.2.4	Specific	Under the Emergency Feeding Only Alternative (EF), use of NFS lands for WGFC's winter elk-management activities would be permitted at Dell Creek and Forest Park feedgrounds and/or the designated trailing route (Forest Park only) for emergency use only over a 20-year period.	This alternative only allows for emergency feeding at the specific feedgrounds. It may be necessary to allow for emergency feeding away from feedgrounds, since depending on distribution it may not be feasible or reasonable to get them to the actual feedground.	Under the Emergency Feeding Only Alternative (EF), use of NFS lands for WGFC's winter elk-management activities would be permitted at Dell Creek and Forest Park feedgrounds and/or the designated trailing route (Forest Park only) and/or locations mutually agreed upon by the BTNF and WGFD that are in proximity to each feedground for emergency use only over a 20-year period.
17, 2.2.4	Specific	The two following criteria would be evaluated to determine the need for emergency feeding: (1) Elk/cattle comingling occurring during the period of risk for brucellosis transmission, and/or (2) natural winter mortality rates of the estimated juvenile population exceed 5 percent in hunt areas 87 (includes Dell Creek feedground) or 90 (includes Forest Park feedground).	This Alternative could work well in conjunction with WGFD management and the draft feedground plan. The criteria address current Department concerns. The Department does not currently have a method to monitor 'natural winter mortality rates of the estimated juvenile population' and we are willing to work with the USFS to develop effective methods.	(After the proivded text) USFS and WGFD will work collaboratively to develop mutually agreed upon methods to measure juvenile natural mortality rates, such as radio-tracking elk.
33	General	3rd paragraph	The Department has 24 GPS collared elk from Dell Creek (2 years each deployment) from 2011-2018. Contact Department personnel so the information from GPS collared elk can be integrated into this discussion point.	
33, 3.1.2.1	General		The references to Figure 3 after discussion of elk movement are awkward. We recommend adding one reference to Figure 3 (at the end of the 2nd full paragraph) and removing the current refernces.	Some elk that were tagged in the Dell Creek feedground have been observed utilizing the Black Butte and Soda Lake feedgrounds in subsequent winters. All relevant hunt areas and feedgrounds are displalyed in Figure 3.
33	Specific	The digitized maps in Maloney et al. (2020) included a variety of parameters that are important indicators of elk habitat suitability: elevation, vegetation type, snow water equivalent, distance to feedground, road density, and forage productivity.	We have concerns how the RSF predicts elk habitat use during severe winters. The analysis should provide more detail or provide a qualifying statement relative to extreme winter events.	The digitized maps in Maloney et al. (2020) included a variety of parameters that are important indicators of elk habitat suitability: elevation, vegetation type, snow water equivalent, distance to feedground, road density, and forage productivity. It should be noted that the RSF output predicts general selection by elk and does not capture or intend to capture extreme events that force elk into unique or unusual locations. For example, in winters with much higher than average snowfall and cold temperatures, the RSF may not accurately represent elk movements.
36	Specific		The figure would benefit from another row of RSFs that highlight the difference between Fed(All) and No Dell Creek or Forest Park.	Add another RSF row highlighting the differences with feeding and no feeding at the target feedgrounds.

Dell Creek and Forest Park Elk Feedgrounds - WGFD additional DEIS document comments

Long-term Special Use Permits	Type	Text	Comment	Suggested Change
43	Specific	WGFD used trend count data to estimate the elk population in 2020 at 2,379 and 2,701 for the Afton and Upper Green River herd units, respectively.	Clarifying text is needed to help readers understand trend counts are used to direct management actions by determining herd unit objectives. The population estimates used in the models are informed population estimates that integrate error.	WGFD used trend count data to estimate the elk population in 2020 at 2,379 and 2,701 for the Afton and Upper Green River herd units, respectively. It is important to note that the population estimates used for the models differ from WGFD population metrics (i.e., trend counts) and corresponding herd unit objectives and are therefore difficult to directly compare.
43	Specific	Herd units without feedgrounds had 23 percent lower densities of elk per area of winter range when compared against herd units with feedgrounds, after accounting for differences in sightability of elk during counts on and off feedgrounds. **Therefore, it was assumed** that feedground closures would reduce elk carrying capacity, resulting in an average decline of previously fed elk population segments by 23 percent (5th and 95th percentiles = 11 percent, 35 percent, respectively) by year 20.	We recommend additional text to clarify the impacts is this assumption if violated.	Herd units without feedgrounds had 23 percent lower densities of elk per area of winter range when compared against herd units with feedgrounds, after accounting for differences in sightability of elk during counts on and off feedgrounds. Therefore, it was assumed that feedground closures would reduce elk carrying capacity, resulting in an average decline of previously fed elk population segments by 23 percent (5th and 95th percentiles = 11 percent, 35 percent, respectively) by year 20. The density calculations were dependent on two sizable assumptions. First, that the true population size of each herd can be estimated with a simple correction factor applied to past counts (i.e., trend counts miss about one third of the unfed elk herd). Second, that elk are constrained to the currently defined Crucial Winter Range in the winter. A violoation of either of these assumptions would impact the 23 percent population decline. For example, if the correction factor consistently underestimated the population size of a herd unit with a feedground, the overall reduction would be much greater than 23 percent. Or, if the Crucial Winter Range expanded and positively impacted carrying capacity, the overall reduction would be lower than the predicted 23 percent. However, the currently-used 23 percent population reduction represents the best available estimate for current modeling efforts and should be viewed in the context of its limitations.
44	Specific	The mechanisms behind these rapid population reductions are not explicitly stated, as they would be under the discretion of the WGFC but would likely include a combination of liberalized hunting season and management takes.	Add clarifying text regarding increased natural winter mortality.	In addition to increased natural winter mortality, the mechanisms behind these rapid population reductions are not explicitly stated, as they would be under the discretion of the WGFC but would likely include a combination of liberalized hunting season and management takes.
80, 3.2.1.2	General		Bulleted cost information does not include Department personnel preventing or managing damage.	We recommend adding Department personnel time spent as a bulleted item.
183	Specific	With increasing rates of CWD, there is concern that a new form of human prion disease may arise. Currently, there is no evidence of transmission of CWD to humans.	We recommend adding citations to statements in the paragraph. If no citations exist, we recommend removing from the document.	With increasing rates of CWD, there is concern that a new form of human prion disease may arise (citation needed). Currently, there is no evidence of transmission of CWD to humans (citation needed).