



Western Watersheds Project

PO Box 1770

Hailey, ID 83333

telephone: (970) 312-1828

email: dagny@westernwatersheds.org

website: www.westernwatersheds.org

Working to protect and restore Western Watersheds and Wildlife since 1993

September 16, 2025

Christopher Carlton
Objection Reviewing Officer
Dell Creek and Forest Park Elk Feedgrounds Project
USFS Intermountain Regional Office, Room 4403,
324 25th Street, Ogden, UT 84401

Submitted via email

objections-intermtn-regional-office@usda.gov

RE: Objection to the Bridger-Teton National Forest Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) and Draft Record of Decision (Draft ROD) for the Dell Creek and Forest Park Elk Feedgrounds: Long-Term Special Use Permits #60949

Dear Officer Carlton:

Western Watersheds Project (WWP) submits this administrative objection to the Draft Record of Decision (Draft ROD) and Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) for the Dell Creek & Forest Park Elk Feedgrounds: Long-Term Special Use Permits on the Bridger–Teton National Forest (BTNF).

Western Watersheds Project is a nonprofit conservation group founded in 1993 with more than 14,000 members and supporters whose mission is to protect and restore western watersheds and wildlife through education, public policy initiatives, and litigation. WWP members, supporters, and staff have a long history of involvement with and on the Bridger-Teton National Forest, including advocating for conservation especially of lands ecologically incompatible with livestock grazing, litigating cases including on elk feedgrounds, and commenting on projects involving elk feedgrounds. Continued artificial feeding of elk on NFS lands degrades wildlife habitat, elevates disease risk, alters migration, and diminishes the ecological conditions our members rely upon.

WWP submitted timely, substantive comments on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) on January 16, 2024. Those comments requested analysis of on-Forest livestock management to restore native winter range, consideration of large carnivore use in elk distribution and disease dynamics, a rigorous evaluation of Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) risks, and a candid accounting of vegetation and riparian damage from long-term feeding. We

incorporate those comments by reference. WWP therefore has standing to object under 36 CFR 218.5 and 218.8.

The Draft ROD selects a short-term, modified Proposed Action (PA) to continue operations at Dell Creek and Forest Park through September 30, 2028, with feeding generally occurring November 15–April 30 and no new construction. The justification leans on Wyoming Game and Fish Department (WGFD) Feedground Management Action Plans (FMAPs) expected in 2027 and anticipates later National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) review covering “all seven” Forest Service feedgrounds. The FEIS identifies the No Special Use Authorization (NF) alternative as environmentally preferable because NF yields lower long-term CWD prevalence, fewer CWD deaths, and slightly higher elk populations by year 20 than feeding alternatives. Despite that, the Draft ROD extends feeding through 2028 and defers core choices to future state planning. That approach diverges from the agency’s own analysis, does not grapple with new CWD detections at Dell Creek, and is out of step with the agency’s duties under NEPA, the National Forest Management Act (NFMA), and the Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act (MUSYA).

CWD-positive elk at Dell Creek

The FEIS designates NF as environmentally preferable. The decision record acknowledges six CWD-positive elk on or near the Dell Creek feedground in winter/spring 2025 and explains that dense winter aggregation hastens population-limiting effects of CWD and contaminates soils, vegetation, and nearby waters with infectious prions. Continuing to feed at a site with confirmed positive CWD cases is inconsistent with these findings and does not satisfy NEPA’s hard-look requirement in light of the changed baseline.

Requested remedy:

Select NF now. At minimum, suspend feeding at Dell Creek immediately and put disease-risk controls in place before any resumption (routine prion sampling, carcass handling and removal, feeding away from contaminated ground, and clear stop feeding rules tied to additional detections).

The reliance on WGFD FMAPs postpones federal decision-making

The Draft ROD frames the short-term PA as a bridge to WGFD FMAPs due in 2027 and a later NEPA review for “all seven” Forest Service feedgrounds. NEPA expects the Forest Service to address foreseeable effects in this current decision, not postpone them to a non-federal plan. The FEIS also shows that differences among alternatives become more pronounced when applied across feedgrounds and herd units, yet the Draft ROD chooses to wait until after 2028 to revisit those questions.

Requested remedy:

Do not tie this decision to FMAPs. Either select NF now, or prepare a supplemental analysis that evaluates disease and habitat outcomes across all BTNF feedgrounds and make a consistent decision.

Cumulative effects

The FEIS acknowledges that herd-level modeling shows larger differences among alternatives when applied across feedgrounds. It discusses 20-year disease, harvest, and population

trajectories but then reserves the all-feedgrounds decision for later. The Draft ROD adopts that deferral. That approach undercuts the long-term advantages of NF and keeps the analysis focused on two sites while assuming status-quo feeding elsewhere.

Requested remedy:

Fold the all-feedgrounds analysis into this decision or issue a supplement now. Do not assume non-Forest feedgrounds stay open by default and use that assumption to diminish the benefits of NF at Dell Creek and Forest Park.

“Emergency Feeding Only” criteria inadequate

The FEIS lists EF triggers: elk/cattle commingling during the February 1–June 15 brucellosis risk window and a five percent juvenile winter natural-mortality threshold, with a January 15 early-trigger relocation date. The FEIS adds a clause allowing the Forest Service and WGFD to revise criteria if current triggers are “ineffective or insufficient” and describes how mortality would be measured (carcass surveys, yearling male ratios, potential radio-tracking) and introduces a 30 percent yearling-mortality indicator for deeming EF “ineffective.” The record acknowledges EF could be triggered in many winters. This framework increases discretion without guardrails and risks turning EF into routine feeding under another label.

Requested remedy:

If any EF authority remains, set clear start and end triggers, require independent verification, and make ending EF automatic on any feedground with confirmed CWD cases. These conditions should be placed in permit terms, not informal guidance.

Forest Plan Goal 1.1(g) on elk migration is diluted in the FEIS comparison

The Bridger–Teton Forest Plan includes Goal 1.1(g) to help re-establish historic elk migration routes. In the DEIS, alternatives were ranked by how much they contributed to this objective. In the FEIS, that comparison is softened to “does not foreclose the opportunity,” which dilutes real differences and downplays how feeding reshapes migration and space use. Given the record on disease and distribution, NF and Phase-Out (secondarily), aligns better with the Forest Plan.

Requested remedy:

Acknowledge that NF (and Phase-Out) better meet Goal 1.1(g) and revise the decision accordingly.

Special-use screening questions are sidestepped

The FEIS treats this as a renewal of an existing special use and signals that second-level screening does not apply. That sidesteps the question central to the project’s purpose and need: whether this use can be reasonably accommodated off NFS lands, given goals to reduce conflicts with livestock and private lands. Renewal does not erase the duty to align special uses with current Forest Plan direction, updated disease science, and practical accommodation off NFS lands where warranted.

Requested remedy:

Apply and publish the special-use screening factors, including whether this use can reasonably occur off NFS lands, and revisit authorization considering that analysis.

Soil and water prion testing

The Draft ROD adds a design feature to begin soil testing for prions only if a feasible and economical test exists; it notes there are no state prion standards; and it replaces recurring buffer checks with a single aquatic/wetland condition review at the end of the 2027–2028 season. At the same time, the FEIS states the PA would provide a substantial source of infectious prions to soils and waters at feedgrounds. Conditional monitoring and a one-time buffer check do not control ongoing contamination risks where feeding continues on contaminated ground.

Requested remedy:

Put present-tense protections into the authorization: annual soil and receiving-water prion sampling with automatic responses (including suspending feeding upon detections); restore regular buffer monitoring with clear thresholds and follow-up actions; require public reporting each season.

Baiting/trailing at Forest Park widens the contamination footprint and conflicts with recreation

The FEIS carries forward a 700-foot-wide designated trailing/baiting route from Forest Park with temporary winter trail closures as needed. Spreading bait along corridors moves elk and feed off the line and enlarges the contaminated footprint while clashing with winter recreation along the Greys River corridor.

Requested remedy:

Do not authorize baiting/trailing corridors that disperse feeding. If any route remains, bar hay placement, avoid designated recreation routes, and require corridor-specific prion and water monitoring with automatic responses.

Range of alternatives: on-Forest livestock management is still missing.

WWP requested an alternative that reduces livestock use on NFS lands to rebuild native winter range and reduce reliance on artificial feeding. The FEIS does not provide a meaningful analysis of this approach, even as the record ties elk distribution and conflicts to winter forage availability.

Requested remedy:

Add a livestock-management component (or modify Phase-Out alternative) that reduces cattle use where needed to expand native elk winter range and reduce the need for feeding

Brucellosis risk modeling assumptions inflate commingling risk.

The FEIS assumes all nearby private lands host cattle throughout the brucellosis risk window, which overstates commingling and biases outcomes toward continued feeding. The Draft ROD

then leans on those outputs to reject NF and Phase-Out. Without actual livestock distribution and timing data, the claimed risk reductions from continued feeding at these sites are not supported by the record.

Requested remedy:

Update the analysis with data on livestock distribution and timing, publish the results, and revisit the decision once corrected.

Short-term differences of CWD effects shrink over time

The FEIS's hunting-related revenue analysis shows short-term declines where feeding stops and longer-term convergence as CWD effects grow under continued feeding. Differences across alternatives become meaningful mainly when applied across feedgrounds. At the two-site scale, long-term differences are modest, which undercuts the Draft ROD's reliance on short-term spending while downplaying long-term disease and habitat risks.

Requested remedy:

Align the decision with the FEIS's long-term record: select NF. If the Forest insists on a transition, set a short, fixed Phase-Out and pair it with on-Forest measures that reduce the future need for feeding.

Conclusion

WWP respectfully asks Reviewing Officer Mr. Carlton to: (1) sustain this objection and withdraw the Draft ROD; (2) select the No Special Use Authorization (NF) alternative identified by the FEIS as environmentally preferable; or (3) if the Forest opts for a transition, adopt a rapid Phase-Out with a short, explicit end date and, during any interim period, include these conditions: immediate shutdown of feeding at any CWD-positive site and no baiting/trailing that concentrates elk on contaminated surfaces; annual soil and stock water sampling for prions with automatic suspension of feeding if detections occur; restored aquatic/wetland buffer monitoring with clear thresholds and follow-up actions; a ban on hay sourced from CWD-affected counties/regions with documentation and audit; fixed, NEPA-vetted EF triggers with automatic shut-offs (no after-the-fact revisions), independent verification of mortality metrics, and removal of the January 15 early trigger; addition of an on-Forest livestock-management component to expand native winter forage and reduce conflicts; and a cumulative analysis across all BTNF feedgrounds so this decision comports with NEPA, NFMA, and MUSYA.

Respectfully submitted,



Dagny Signorelli
Wyoming Director
Western Watersheds Project
dagny@westernwatersheds.org