

For Immediate Release

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## **CROSSING THE LINE: BRUCELLOSIS TEAM EXPLORES ELK FEEDGROUNDS**

Has Wyoming lost its brucellosis-free status because of the victimization of cattle by infected elk?

If so, what can be done to halt future encounters and to eradicate the disease from livestock and wildlife?

With questions like these in mind, the governor-appointed Brucellosis Coordination Team, chaired by University of Wyoming College of Agriculture Dean Frank Galey, walked the hills of the Muddy Creek elk feedground in the Boulder area near where brucellosis was diagnosed in a herd of cattle several months ago.

Ideally, Muddy Creek and the 21 other state-operated feedgrounds in Sublette, Lincoln and Teton counties provide a winter home for elk who might otherwise starve and also fence the animals to separate them from cattle feeding on adjacent private land.

As producer Jerry Jensen, owner of the now depopulated cattle herd stricken in December, and Joel Bousman, owner of a quarantined herd, discovered, though, some man-made barriers can be penetrated.

Mild weather and the lure of lower elevation green-up once the snows begin to melt can result in elk tromping through calving pastures and rubbing shoulders with foraging livestock.

With brucellosis infection rates in elk estimated at 10 to 40 percent and the success of vaccinations questionable, watching an elk eat hay out of the back of a rancher's pickup truck raises several kinds of red flags.

It is the team's job to report back to the governor at the end of the year what concrete steps can be taken to solve the state's brucellosis problem, recently aggravated by the discovery of another

infected cow in the Jackson area.

Many elk and bison in western Wyoming are thought to be carriers of the disease, which causes cattle to abort and can lead to a serious flu-like illness in exposed humans.

The group toured Muddy Creek and also the Soda Lake feedground during a two-day meeting in Pinedale in July. Such gatherings began in March and will continue monthly until recommendations are forwarded to the governor.

“We almost always make the decision when to start feeding the elk but not when to stop feeding,” explained Scott Werbelow, Wyoming Game and Fish Department feedground manager.

“At spring green-up the elk want to face the new grass no matter how far away it is. They leave before we stop feeding them,” he added. “Sometimes they have done just the opposite of what we thought they would do.”

The Muddy Creek area is designed to house 600 elk from November 1 to April 30. Hay is spread by contracted feeders via draft horses and sleds once snow covers the tall-grass pasture. Feeding spots are rotated to help scatter the elk and discourage the spread of brucellosis from animal to animal.

According to Werbelow, the length of the feeding season lasts from 70 to 160 days. His department purchases some 6,000 to 9,000 tons of certified weed-free hay annually, primarily from the Star Valley and Pinedale areas. Elk are generally given between 8 and 10 pounds daily.

The wooden trap on the Muddy Creek property currently being used to tag, collar and test elk is small and also inefficient in deep snow, Werbelow told the group. The Strain 19 brucellosis vaccine once used for cattle, which are now inoculated by RB51, is administered to the elk in 25-caliber bio bullets accompanied by paintball markers.

Jared Rogerson, a biologist for the Wyoming Game and Fish Department, explained to the task force that there is a push to improve the vaccination program and also to revitalize habitats to make the elk less dependent on feed lines in the winter.

“If we spread the animals around, we can reduce the transmission of the disease from elk to elk,” Rogerson said.

He noted that 10,000 acres are being treated in the Pinedale herd unit to kill decadent sage and to cut aspen to make way for new growth. “The elk won’t benefit if their habitat is completely covered

by snow. It's the idea of managing the land versus managing the wildlife," the biologist said.

The game and fish department built a large fence across Jensen's acreage in the early 1970s to help keep the Muddy Creek herd at the high-elevation feedground. At the time, when the last of the state's 22 elk feedgrounds were being developed, the fence was thought to be a viable means of separation and protection. Such fences are expensive to install and maintain.

In an earlier coordination team meeting, Werbelow outlined the pros and cons of the feedground system.

On the positive side he noted the fact that the feedgrounds gather elk at specific locations away from private lands, allow the maintenance of higher numbers of elk than the habitat could otherwise support, prevent starvation, thwart damage to shrubs and ranch fences, keep the animals safe from collisions with vehicles, allow elk to be vaccinated against brucellosis, provide accurate classifications for large herds to better structure population models and set hunting seasons, and reduce competition with other species for critical winter habitat.

Negatives noted by Werbelow included the fact that feeding congregates elk and increases disease transmission, that it is expensive and that it draws attention away from the importance of wildlife habitat.

Many people view feedgrounds as "a necessary evil," according to Eric Peterson, a UW Cooperative Extension Service Educator in Sublette County. Peterson joined the task force for its two-day meeting in Pinedale.

"Some environmentalists hate to see elk not be free rangers. The hunting community doesn't want low numbers. Ranchers want to stop elk from coming down and eating their hay," Peterson explained.

"It's a heavily charged political issue," he noted, "and this additional concern about brucellosis and other diseases that might be more easily transmitted in a congested environment certainly isn't helping the situation."

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