

NEWS FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Contact: Lloyd Dorsey, Greater Yellowstone Coalition, 307-734-6004

Franz Camenzind, Jackson Hole Conservation Alliance, 307-733-9417

Mike Leahy, Defenders of Wildlife, 406-586-3970

Sophie Osborn, Wyoming Outdoor Council, 307-332-7031

Groups seek to restore health of Elk Refuge herds

Conservation organizations argue that artificial winter feedings are detrimental to elk and their habitat, and violate the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service's own mandate

JACKSON, Wyo. – In an effort to restore healthy elk herds, resume natural migrations and dramatically reduce the risk of catastrophic disease, five conservation organizations on Tuesday announced they are taking the U.S. Department of the Interior to court over its decision to continue the harmful artificial feeding of elk on the National Elk Refuge in Wyoming. The groups want the agency to follow its own scientists' advice by creating a plan that better protects the health of the habitat and its wildlife.

Winter feedings on the National Elk Refuge have altered the plant and animal communities so dramatically that it is no longer a healthy, properly functioning environment. This practice violates the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act, a directive from Congress to provide healthy habitat. The agency's current plan acknowledges the potent disease risk that accompanies high concentrations of animals like those found on the Elk Refuge in winter, and that the best way to reduce the threat and promote healthy populations of bison and elk is to phase out the annual winter feeding. Yet the plan takes no action to address the threats to the refuge and the elk that live there.

Organizations filing the action in U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia are: Greater Yellowstone Coalition, Jackson Hole Conservation Alliance, Defenders of Wildlife, Wyoming Outdoor Council and the National Wildlife Refuge Association. Earthjustice is representing the groups in the lawsuit.

“Basically we've got way too many animals on too small an area for too long a time,” said Barry Reisinger, a retired National Elk Refuge manager. “They're way over the Elk Refuge's carrying capacity.”

Brucellosis, chronic wasting disease, scabies and hoof rot are all diseases of concern for the estimated 7,500 elk that congregate on feed lines each winter. Scabies and hoof rot are already visibly prevalent on the refuge, and the crowded conditions foster brucellosis as well. The most ominous possibility is the spread of CWD. In the farm-like conditions of the refuge, disease can spread quickly through the herds. CWD has already been found as close as Thermopolis, Wyo., about 70 miles to the east.

By asking the Department of the Interior to follow its own scientists' recommendations to carefully phase out artificial feeding, the groups are ensuring healthy free-ranging wildlife herds for future generations while protecting livestock, hunting and the area's economy.

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