

WILDLIFE

Fatal disease looms large over elk feeding grounds

Kylie Mohr, E&E News reporter • Published: Wednesday, January 27, 2021



Elk gather on the National Elk Refuge in Wyoming. Ameen Al-Ghetta/USFWS Mountain-Prairie/Flickr

The discovery of an elk with an inevitably fatal disease in Grand Teton National Park last month could be a harbinger of trouble in the Yellowstone region.

It's also put a spotlight on government-led elk feeding in big feedgrounds, which could provide an opportunity for disease to spread.

There's no vaccine or cure for chronic wasting disease, which infects deer, elk and moose. Although the disease has been found in 26 states, Canada, Scandinavia and South Korea, the Dec. 16 discovery of CWD in the Wyoming elk raises concerns of a superspreader event that could slash the population of an important animal in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem food chain.

"Whether you've been to the parks once or a hundred times or you've never been but it's on your bucket list, you should be concerned about a disease that has the potential to dramatically impact not only the species that it directly impacts — the ungulates — but a whole host of other species," said Scott Christensen, executive director of the Greater Yellowstone Coalition.

Mass elk deaths from CWD would reduce food sources for predators like wolves, as well as scavengers like ravens that rely on elk carcasses.

CWD was discovered in Wyoming in 1985 and has since **crept** across the state in both elk and deer populations. The elk found Dec. 16 was the first to test positive for CWD in northwestern Wyoming and in close proximity to elk feedgrounds.

That northwest corner, home to Grand Teton and Yellowstone national parks, is of particularly concern. All of the state-managed 22 elk feedgrounds are west of the Continental Divide, as well as the National Elk Refuge just outside Jackson Hole, Wyo., which is managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

About 20,000 elk cluster in large numbers on these 23 feedgrounds in the winter, creating a ripe opportunity for disease to spread. There's fear they could turn into hot spots that amplify the disease's spread, and consequences, in the region.

"Those feedgrounds are going to be like Amazon distribution centers, and the packages are going out to Idaho, Yellowstone park, etc.," said Bruce Smith, a former staff biologist at the National Elk Refuge who supervised the feeding program there for 22 years.

He expressed growing concern about CWD while working for the Fish and Wildlife Service but said he felt hamstrung by a slow response from the state of Wyoming.

Smith said the state has the prerogative to determine population targets and how to maintain them. Until Wyoming commits to phasing out feeding, he said, "it's not going to happen; they always seem to have the veto."

The stakes are high, he said.

"There's no way anybody who's knowledgeable about this can say with a straight face that they don't think it will be too bad when it gets to the feedgrounds. It will not be a pretty picture, say, 10 years from now."

CWD is a prion disease; animals infected with prions, which cause misfolded brain proteins, are highly infectious to one another and can excrete prions into the environment. There are fears that the disease could contaminate the soil and take hold in the valley's land.

Controlling the spread of CWD is an interstate issue in the West.

The Montana Fish and Wildlife Commission sent the Wyoming Game and Fish Commission a [letter](#) in 2017 asking it to begin closing feedgrounds. It read, "If we do not address CWD, we will all be culpable in leaving a greatly devalued landscape to future generations. As a Commission, we believe that we cannot successfully address CWD without Wyoming's help."

Why feed elk?

The federal government first fed hay to elk in 1912, a year after a rough Jackson Hole winter caused many of the animals to starve. The practice then spread to neighboring counties and eventually switched to alfalfa pellets.

Besides keeping elk alive, another goal of feeding is to keep them out of ranchers' haystacks, where they can spread another disease, brucellosis, to cattle.

National Elk Refuge manager Frank Durbian was unavailable for an interview, but the refuge's CWD response strategy includes reducing reliance on feeding and working with the Wyoming Game and Fish Department to consider lowering the herd's population goal. The national refuge last year began ending its feeding season earlier to cut down on crowds.

Ranchers worry that if state and federal agencies weren't feeding the elk, the animals would wander the region for other sources of food. Hunters and outfitters are also concerned that a halt in feeding — although no one is proposing an abrupt, outright stop — would hurt their livelihoods, pocketbooks and traditions. Hunting opportunities, they say, could decline if less feeding means fewer elk.

The strategy for now appears to be mostly the status quo.

"We don't intend to make any changes in the short term," said Brad Hovinga, Wyoming Game and Fish regional supervisor. "We've been a century-plus into how we manage elk with feedgrounds. It's not going to be a quick fix to get to a point where we can make them without it."

Wyoming Game and Fish is [accepting public feedback](#) on how to handle elk feedgrounds and CWD. Virtual public meetings took place last month, and the agency plans to develop recommendations for managing the disease over the long term. Staff say the process could take two years.

"There are so many facets to the elk feedgrounds issue; it's very complex and controversial," said Mark Gocke, a Wyoming Game and Fish spokesman. "We want to be thorough and deliberate with it; we're not rushing it."

The agency's [website](#) states that there are no plans now to close any feedgrounds. A 2020 chronic wasting disease management [plan](#) only says, "The Department will determine if closures of specific feedgrounds can occur where dispersal of elk will not cause damage, conflict, or co-mingling issues with private property (i.e., stored crops, and domestic livestock) or create a need to drastically reduce overall elk numbers," and it focuses on ways to keep the feeding system intact.

In the meantime, Hovinga said feed is being spread out in existing areas as much as possible to keep animals farther apart, not munching side by side on the same line, and his staff are working hard to shorten the supplemental feeding season altogether. He also said Game and Fish is increasing monitoring to detect and remove sick animals, as it has done in recent years.

At the federal level, the America's Conservation Enhancement Act, signed into law by President Trump last year, set up a CWD task force that would "collaborate with foreign governments to share research, coordinate efforts and discuss best management practices to reduce, minimize, prevent, or eliminate chronic wasting disease in the United States." But White House attorneys at the time said the provision would impinge on presidential powers, so Trump attached a statement saying his administration "will treat it as advisory and non-binding" ([E&E News PM](#), Oct. 30, 2020).

'Kind of shocking'

Conservation groups in the region, like the Sierra Club's Wyoming chapter and the Greater Yellowstone Coalition, think wildlife managers aren't acting to curb the spread of CWD quickly enough.

"The key takeaway that I hope people focus on coming out of December's news is that now is the time for action," said Christensen. "We've been talking about the issue for many, many, many years now, and we're past the time of just talking. ... Very little has changed, which in some ways is kind of shocking."

Connie Wilbert, director of the Wyoming chapter of the Sierra Club, would like to see all feedgrounds in Wyoming closed in the next two to five years. She thinks an orderly transition wouldn't result in major die-offs and points to other states, like Colorado and Montana, that don't feed their elk as Wyoming does as evidence that elk can find their own food in the winter.

"When CWD becomes established on these feedgrounds, it's way past time for all of us to recognize that it is completely irresponsible wildlife management to continue artificial feeding," she said.

And they've already taken the fight to the courts.

Attorney Tim Preso is representing Earthjustice, the Sierra Club, the National Wildlife Refuge Association and Defenders of Wildlife in a challenge to the national refuge's step-down plan ([Greenwire](#), Feb. 4, 2020).

The lawsuit, filed in February 2020 in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia, demands that the Fish and Wildlife Service take prompt action to transition away from feeding and calls the [existing plan](#) (which stemmed from another lawsuit led by the same environmental groups) inadequate.

"Instead of being a world leader of wildlife management in a world-priority conservation landscape, they're perpetuating an anachronistic program of feeding wildlife that yields all sorts of bad outcomes," Preso said. "It's not just the Jackson elk herd, it's not only the refuge, but also the integrity of the entire Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. It's hard to imagine a greater dereliction of duty on behalf of the American public and their interest in the nation's wildlife than that."

Sy Gilliland, a hunter and president of the Wyoming Outfitters and Guides Association, is upset with environmentalists for promoting the closure of feedgrounds and believes there isn't enough winter range habitat for the elk to feed themselves. Elk are "incredibly important to our way of life," he said, and he doesn't want to see the population diminished — from starvation or a deadly neurodegenerative disease.

"I'm not holding out any, and I mean zero, hope for a cure for CWD," Gilliland said. "It's just a real sad deal. Am I concerned about it? Damn right I'm concerned about it. Can I do anything about it? Nope."

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