

Moving toward a more natural elk refuge

On its 100th birthday, National Elk Refuge looks back at history and forward to future.

By Mike Koshmrl

As the National Elk Refuge turns 100, officials continue to prepare for a court-ordered gradual phase out of supplemental feeding and, ultimately, a smaller elk herd.

In its rich history, the current changes in management could be the most monumental. A more "balanced" refuge could be the end result, elk refuge manager Steve Kallin said.

"Certainly, we're looking at trying to have a closer balance between what the refuge can naturally support and the elk that winter here," Kallin said. "That process begins with reducing reliance on supplemental feeding."

The plan that mandates the changes, a 2007 environmental impact statement, gave the refuge 15 years to bring its wintering elk herd down to about 5,000. At its highest levels, in the winters of 1918, 1941, 1956, 1996 and 1997, the refuge has supported more than 10,000 elk. About 7,000 rely on supplementary feed each winter today, though that number can vary year to year.

Because the plan imposed no strict limits on feeding or hard-set dates, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has leeway in making changes and will do so based on climate, predation, forage and other conditions.

"It's a 15-year plan, however. Because of some of the risks associated with the supplemental feeding program, we are trying to move forward



National Elk Refuge officials count elk in 2007. Wintering elk numbers on the refuge fluctuate, but managers are now working to reduce the herd to 5,000.

as quickly as we can," Kallin said.

A century ago, a series of extremely severe winters that caused mass elk die-offs prompted the refuge's formation, Kallin said. Today, in part, it's fear of chronic wasting disease, scabies, foot rot and bovine brucellosis — all diseases that have potential to cause mass die-offs — that's again prompting change.

"One of the big benefits with less crowding is reduced potential for disease transmission within the elk herd," the refuge manager said.

The phaseout plan also aligns much better with the National Wildlife Refuge System's mission statement, which is much broader than managing for elk alone.

Greener pastures

Reducing browsing pressure on the refuge's shrubs and trees, which

provide important wildlife habitat, is another benefit of the reduction targets, Kallin said.

Fewer elk could improve habitat "for a whole array of birds" and give the refuge "opportunity to support wildlife that really aren't supported at this time," he said.

Photos from the book "Imperfect Pasture: A Century of Change on the National Elk Refuge," show dramatic differences in the makeup of vegetation over the years.

Authors Bruce Smith and Eric Cole — Smith, a former, and Cole, a current, refuge biologist — cite a 2002 field-mapping study that found the refuge's nine species of willows had been devastated by overgrazing.

"Willow plants were so reduced in height that they simply were no longer a dominant species across 95 percent of their present distribution

on the south half of the refuge," the biologists wrote.

On the whole, averaged out across four refuge areas, the biologists found an astounding 78 percent reduction in woody plants.

Feed reductions not new

Efforts to minimize feeding, though only recently required by court order, have existed internally for years.

In 1952, biologist John Craighead concluded the size of the Jackson Hole elk herd, then about 17,000, was twice the level that could be safely maintained by winter range in the valley, according to "Imperfect Pasture." Craighead recommended a "commensurate reduction" in the winter-feeding program and increased hunting in order to reduce the level to 8,000 to 9,000 elk.

Don Redfern, who was the elk refuge manager from 1966 to 1977, knows the history well.

"My efforts the whole time I was there was to create a situation where you could minimize the feeding," Redfern, now an Arizona resident, said. "One winter we did get through without putting out any feed."

Records show that nine times, most recently in 1977 and 1981, the refuge managed not to put out feed. Historically, that was more workable because there were simply fewer elk.

"Olaus Murie came up with an estimate that about 5,000 elk could probably be accommodated without feeding," Redfern said. "Then things got out of hand. I don't know how to characterize it. The numbers kept mushrooming until it was more like 7,500. Sometimes more. The range just wasn't capable of accommodating

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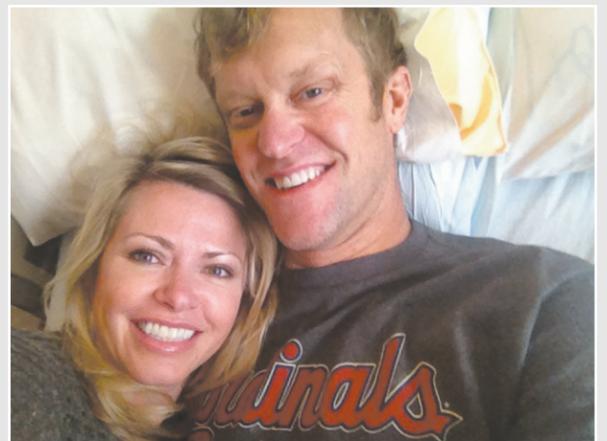
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Most importantly, I want to thank God. I do not know all of the reasons why this has happened, and I may never know, but there is no doubt in my mind that God has been actively involved. I do KNOW that God has worked a miracle in my life. I don't know why, why me or what all his reasons behind this miracle are, but it is clear to me that He has acted through His Grace, Love and Mercy on my behalf.



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