



## ADMINISTRATIVE RULES OF MONTANA



### 12.9.104 ELK FEEDING POLICY

- (1) Past experience in Montana and elsewhere has shown that artificial feeding of game animals is not a sound game management program - neither economically nor biologically. It is expensive, is not good for the animals, and not good for the range upon which these animals are dependent. It can only be justified under extreme winter conditions which indicate a winter loss of major proportions is imminent.
  - (a) invite local sportsman's groups to participate in the program;
  - (b) feed only hay of high quality free from all forms of pollution;
  - (c) feed hay in sufficient quantity so that at least some hay is left uneaten; (this normally means about 12 pounds per animal per day) ;
  - (d) feed will be scattered over large areas in an attempt to maintain a normal distribution;
  - (e) the department will determine feeding areas and only those areas will be utilized; these are wild animals and consideration must be given to the establishment of feeding areas located specifically to avoid harassment.
- (2) In the Gallatin River drainage the elk feeding policy for the department is as follows:
  - (a) for the area in the vicinity of the northwest corner of Yellowstone National Park: encompassed by the drainages of Buffalo Horn Creek, Cinnamon Creek, Wilson Creek, Teepee Creek, Lodgepole Creek, Sawmill Creek, Monument Creek, Sage Creek, and the portion of Taylor Creek below the Taylor Narrows, there will be no feeding, whether hay or other food supplements, of elk.
  - (b) For the remainder of that portion of the Upper Gallatin Canyon where elk feeding is not excluded by the provisions of subsection (2) (a) , the following guidelines are the elk feeding policy of the department.
- (3) Purpose. The purpose of this plan is to establish criteria for the monitoring and evaluation of winter conditions for a portion of the Upper Gallatin elk herd in order to avoid catastrophic losses during a severe winter.
  - (a) The department is responsible for managing the wildlife on national forest lands in Montana. The forest service, however, has responsibility for the management of wildlife habitat, necessitating the two agencies work closely together in game management within the boundaries of the national forest. Yellowstone national park contains a portion of the Upper Gallatin elk habitat. The three agencies therefore coordinate their responsibilities under a cooperative agreement for the management of the Upper Gallatin elk herd.

- (b) In any winter, regardless of severity, natural elk mortality will vary from 1% to 10%. Nature has the ability to recover losses rapidly. The ratio of calves to adult cows may vary from 25% to 60% in a given year. Elk herds have the potential of doubling their size within two years. Nevertheless, a loss in excess of 15% of the total herd could be considered catastrophic, necessitating feeding or other emergency measures.
- (4) Objective. The objective of this plan is to establish guidelines for evaluating winter conditions affecting Upper Gallatin elk and the condition of the elk themselves. An additional objective of this plan is to establish guidelines for feeding, should the need arise, that will minimize damage to soil, vegetation, and water while providing for the needs of elk through a crisis period. It is hoped that elk feeding when needed can be achieved through the cooperative efforts of concerned citizens working with the department and the forest service.
- (5) Background. Research has shown that once animals are suffering from severe malnutrition, feeding may do no good. Also, once animals have become weak from use of reserve body fat, the animals may not be able to adjust to a change of diet. If feeding is to be done then, it must begin before the animals' condition is so poor that they do not respond. A decision to feed must also recognize the following adverse impact on the environment and the animals:
  - (a) making healthy animals dependent on artificial feed when they would be better off foraging;
  - (b) stopping or interrupting natural migration habits;
  - (c) tending to deplete emergency food reserves in the vicinity of feed grounds; (research has shown that elk will severely browse conifers and shrubs in the immediate vicinity of the feed ground regardless of the amount of hay put out) ;
  - (d) concentrating animals when their resistance is down, increasing the risk of the spread of any disease or virus present;
  - (e) decreasing water quality by concentrating animals near open water;
  - (f) allowing genetically inferior animals to survive, thus interfering with the natural selection process;
  - (g) changing social behavior patterns may cause problems; for example, if bulls are attracted into cow groups, increased stress may be placed on weaker or smaller animals through fighting and jostling.
- (6) Even though late winter storms can be quite severe, usually after a couple of days the snow melts and food becomes available again. Those animals which are too weak to wait out a few days will not be helped by feeding.

As a general rule, artificial feeding will not be started after April 1. To avoid losses from a late spring storm, such as occurred in April, 1975, managers will need to make a thorough analysis of the available feed and animal condition prior to April 1.

- (7) Criteria for evaluating winter conditions for the Upper Gallatin elk herd. The department will set up monitoring stations at Taylor Fork and Porcupine to monitor snow depth, icing, and crusting. The following criteria will indicate that feeding may be necessary:
  - (a) snow depth 20 inches or more with crusts and/or ice forming;
  - (b) weak adult cows forced to bottom lands along streams and Highway 191;

- (c) adult cows foraging during middle of daylight hours;
- (d) adult cows not seeking cover after feeding;
- (e) emergency food sources not available;
- (f) groups of adult cows (not isolated animals) generally in poor condition;
- (g) signs of malnutrition in road-kills of adult cows (bone marrow pink, jelly-like, lack of body fat, especially around kidneys) ;
- (h) adult cows weak and moving with difficulty through snow cover;
- (i) weather outlook for cooler than normal with above normal precipitation forecast.

Note: Since some calf losses are not preventable but are expected most years and since this plan is designed to prevent catastrophic reductions in the elk herd, the criteria for feeding is based on factors affecting the reproductive base (adult cows) only.

Procedure: In the event hay feeding becomes necessary, the following procedure will be followed:

- (a) every effort will be made to avoid concentrating animals; hay will be fed where the elk are found, scattered over a wide area and in small amounts;
  - (b) approximately 3 to 7 pounds of hay per animal is sufficient per feeding;
  - (c) hay will be fed from sleigh or snow machine;
  - (d) distribute feed away from streams and highway and emergency food sources, such as willow and dogwood;
  - (e) scatter feed at the break (or toe) of the slope;
  - (f) only "certified weed-free" grass hay will be used;
  - (g) hay will be furnished or approved by the department;
  - (h) all feeding will be monitored and supervised by the department with assistance of the forest service; the results of any feeding program should be carefully documented for future reference;
  - (i) feeding will stop when natural feed becomes available or when elk stop using hay, whichever comes first;
  - (j) the department will obtain a forest service permit for feeding on national forest land.
- (8) Responsibility and coordination. The department will be responsible for making the final decision on whether or not to feed hay to elk, and will supervise the procurement and distribution of hay.
- (a) The forest service will make the final decision on whether to allow the placing of hay on national forest land for feeding of elk. The location of feeding areas on national forest land must receive prior approval from the forest service. Feeding will not take place inside Yellowstone National Park.
  - (b) The forest service and department will jointly monitor snow, weather, and animal conditions, with the department having the primary responsibility for monitoring.

- (c) If conditions indicate that feeding may be necessary, a thorough analysis of snow and animal conditions will be made by department and forest service personnel. Porcupine and Taylor Fork Creek above the narrows will be checked as a minimum. A joint meeting will be held and the department will decide whether or not to feed and where feeding will be most effective.
  - (d) Proposed national forest feeding sites will be approved at that time.
  - (e) The department then may invite private ranchers and organizations to participate and establish a schedule for monitoring the feeding and recording results. Forest service personnel may participate in monitoring the feeding operation.
- (9) The elk herds in the Gallatin drainage provide a peculiar problem for management in this state as they move over their normal winter range.

Therefore, when it has been determined that extreme winter conditions exist on department-owned lands, an emergency feeding program may be undertaken and the following regulations shall be policy:

**Authorizing statute(s):** 87-1-201, MCA

**Implementing statute(s):** 87-1-301, MCA

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**History:** NEW, Eff. 12/31/72; AMD, 1978 MAR p. 1620, Eff. 12/15/78.