

**Responses from IDFG (Idaho Fish & Game) to SVEA's Questions Re: Elk Feeding
September 2009**

1.) What control does IDFG have over private feeding programs? **None**

Is the department's approval required? **No**

Would IDFG supervise this program? **No**

2.) What components are important for creating a successful elk feeding program?

There is rarely a need to establish a permanent elk feeding program. When feeding is being contemplated, there must be an appropriate reason to begin in the first place – this, in our opinion, equates to meeting established emergency feeding criteria, based on elk physiology and severity of winter conditions, to increase what otherwise might be abnormally low elk survival.

Proper amounts and type of feed, consistent feeding, feeding only under emergency conditions, feeding far (several miles) from urban or suburban areas.

3.) Based on IDFG experience, knowledge and guidelines, if a proper and timely feeding program is undertaken by the WRET will it keep the elk up on the hill away from Elkhorn residences?

When elk were fed in the past, there were few depredation problems in Elkhorn. However, since "official" feeding near Elkhorn terminated, wolves have begun to use the area during the winter and have altered the situation. Last winter, the Phantom Hill wolf pack moved south from their prior range and spent approximately one month moving between the hills and drainages behind Elkhorn, the East Fork Big Wood River drainage, and the hills behind Greenhorn. Observations of the wolves' hunting patterns indicated that they consistently pushed elk downhill from up to 1 mile away, then killed elk at the base of the hills where the terrain changed. In Greenhorn, these kills often occurred within meters of homes and yards. Assuming the wolves move into the areas around Sun Valley and mid-valley again this winter, elk may well move into subdivisions (and away from feed sites) during chases and in an effort to avoid the wolves. Because of this, it is our opinion, that elk are unlikely to remain on the hill away from Elkhorn residences.

4.) How have the numbers of animals in the Elkhorn herd changed? (Number when Dumke feeding began? Number at its peak? Number at IDFG's last count?)

According to a Mtn. Express article from 2007, in 1982 at least 36 elk visited the Dumke barn for feed. However, the same article referred to 114 elk counted in the Elkhorn complex; it is unclear about whether these elk were visiting the feed site, using the neighborhood, or counted nearby on natural winter range. In recent years, the counts have remained relatively stable: 60-80 elk have been counted annually in and around Elkhorn. The highest number counted during winter last year was 75-80. A larger group (100+) of elk were observed on Dollar Mountain earlier in the season (November), but some of these likely dispersed to other areas before winter really settled in.

5.) When and how was the most recent count conducted?

IDFG staff conduct ground counts of feed-site herds annually from the ground. In addition, every 4 years we conduct helicopter-based aerial surveys of elk in the Pioneer Zone (the Elkhorn herd is in the Pioneer Zone). Our most recent aerial survey was conducted in January, 2008.

6.) How much feed does an adult need on a daily basis at a feeding site before they would begin to roam in order to forage on private landscaping?

Elk at IDFG feed sites receive 8 lbs of pelletized alfalfa per animal per day. Elk are fed every other day, so feeders count the number of elk and distribute 16 lbs of pellets per animal per feeding. The

National Elk Refuge considers their feeding supplemental to natural forage and therefore feeds 3-5 lbs per elk per day.

However, no “amount” of feed will necessarily prevent elk from roaming away from the feed site. Elk are ruminants and browsers – in the wild, they eat little bits here and there while moving, then lay down to “ruminate” (chew their cud), which is part of how they digest their food. Then they get up and eat some more. Some elk will likely still move around away from the feed site when feed is not being immediately distributed.

In addition, if the Phantom Hill wolves move southward again this winter, they will almost certainly disperse elk from the feed site. Last winter, some elk moved into the Elkhorn neighborhoods, while others moved onto natural winter range in nearby drainages (such as Parker, Keystone, and East Fork).

How do you keep elk from destroying residential landscaping?

Only around feed sites that are close to residential areas do we receive extensive reports of elk destroying residential landscaping on an annual basis. The simplest answer to this question is: do not start a feed site anywhere near a residential area. However, since this feed site was started long ago, that is no longer a solution. Once elk are congregated near a residential area, the only way to prevent elk from foraging on residential landscaping is to keep them away from residential landscaping: this can be accomplished with tall fencing, wrapping of trees, chemical sprays, etc. There are no landscaping plants that are just plain “unattractive” to elk – although some are more attractive than others. “Hazing” using lights and noise can move elk away from a certain area for a short period of time, but eventually elk learn to ignore the hazing and will use the areas anyway.

7.) What is the best type of feed for elk: alfalfa hay, grass hay, hay cubes, hay pellets, or other?

The best type of feed for elk is natural forage. As for artificial feed, IDFG feeds pelletized weed-free alfalfa. Wyoming Game and Fish feeds baled hay because they feel that elk which are fed pellets are more likely to damage woody plants because they lack sufficient roughage in their diet. However, the National Elk Refuge also feeds pelletized alfalfa.

8.) What is the ideal number of feedings per day? One, two, or more?

At IDFG feed sites, elk are fed once every 2 days.

9.) If a feeding site has no water, will the elk travel to find water? How often do they need water during winter months?

Yes, elk will travel to water. However, ideal natural winter range has all 4 components of elk habitat: food, water, shelter, and space, all in a relatively close juxtaposition to one another. Reports of elk water requirements during winter vary.

10.) Two retired Idaho Fish and Game biologists familiar with the Elkhorn herd have stated that the elk will not disperse from Elkhorn in a few years if not fed. There are 10 to 15 year old cows that know this area to be their winter range and will continue to forage on the food that is available....

Do you agree that this may be true?

This is almost certainly true for at least a few elk in the Elkhorn herd. We have stated before that we believe that over time, most of the Elkhorn herd will learn to use nearby natural winter range.

Subdivisions are not inherently pleasant places for elk. There are lights, dogs, noises, cars, etc. Elk’s natural fears of these things can be overcome by abundant food. However, when that food is not available, they will try to find other ways to make a living – and that involves finding a balance between security and obtaining daily needs. Some will undoubtedly decide that the “scary” things in the subdivision are worth enduring in exchange for the tasty landscaping plants in the subdivision.

However, many others will decide that the tasty natural forage is plenty good, especially since it occurs far from dogs, cars, lights and noise.

In addition, the presence of wolves may push some elk onto natural winter range. It may also push some into the subdivision. However, elk are better equipped to deal with predators on natural winter range – they have more room to move around, and can do so better in shallower snow.

It is important to note that dispersion of elk away from the Elkhorn Village will not occur quickly. We have stated before that it will likely take 5 years or more for many of the elk to begin to use other areas, and that is assuming no feeding occurs during those 5 years. The Community School stopped feeding during the 2007-2008 winter. During that winter, some feeding occurred on private property near the golf course. During the winter of 2008-2009, elk had occasional access to small amounts of hay thrown over the fence by a homeowner. So long as even small amounts of food are available to elk, they will remain conditioned to stay in the area in anticipation of additional food.

11.) On a scale of 1-10, what is the real possibility that the elk, if not fed, will disperse and winter in locations away from the Elkhorn residential areas?

Discussed in above question.

12.) Has the cessation of the prior feeding program resulted in a tangible dispersion of the Elkhorn herd to areas outside of the populated areas? If yes, what percentage of animals are no longer living within the city limits of Sun Valley?

The cessation of the feeding program has not resulted in a tangible dispersion of the Elkhorn herd to areas outside of populated areas. However, we did not anticipate it would in such a short time frame as the past two winters. In addition, some occasional feeding has occurred during the past two winters. This has served to reinforce the elk's habituation to "hanging around" the Elkhorn Village area in anticipation of receiving food.

13.) If the Elkhorn elk herd is not fed is it likely they will continue to roam throughout the residential areas?

Yes, it is likely they will continue to roam throughout the residential areas - for the next few years, most of the Elkhorn herd will likely remain in and around Elkhorn Village. Several years from now, there will still likely be a few elk that continue to return to Elkhorn, while most of the remainder of the herd will likely winter on nearby winter range.

Does this put the human public and/or its pets at risk related to the wolf and mountain lion issues any more than if they were fed on a high slope above the Elkhorn residences?

Feeding has caused an unnatural concentration of elk in unnatural proximity to residences. Given what we observed at Greenhorn (adjacent to the Timber Gulch feedsite) last winter, high ridge elk feeding within one mile of residences is unlikely to prevent wolves from chasing elk downhill (towards residences) and then killing elk where the terrain changes (at residences). This will bring wolves into the vicinity of humans, pets, and homes. Similarly, if elk are using residential areas but not being fed, wolves may chase elk when they are at the edges of subdivisions. Cougars are not coursing predators (i.e. they do not tend to chase their prey for long distances prior to killing it); therefore, feeding a relatively short distance from town may decrease the likelihood of cougars using residential areas. However, cougars seldom use residential areas anyway, and the ones that do are usually either moving through the area OR occasionally hunting for small prey (pets), so the location of the elk is unlikely to affect cougar behavior or distribution relative to residences.

14.) Without the human feeding of the herd, how long will it take for the herd's size to stabilize and not put the local human and/or pet population at risk?

What risk is being referred to here? Risk of interactions with predators? Risk of landscaping damage? Risk of vehicle/elk collisions?

Without feeding, it is likely that the size of the Elkhorn herd will shrink somewhat. The smaller herd size will certainly help moderate the negative effects of the feeding operation that have arisen over the past few years. However, the larger effect will come when elk begin to use natural winter range rather than relying on human feed and/or using landscaping during the winters. This will likely not occur for 5+ years. As stated before (question 10), it is very likely that there will always be a few elk using the Elkhorn area during at least part of the winter because the subdivision was built on important elk winter range.

15.) What impact do you expect the recently approved wolf hunt to have on the Phantom Hill pack and their presence in Elkhorn?

The wolf hunt could have any number of effects on the Phantom Hill wolf pack and their presence in Elkhorn. Depending on the hunting pressure the Phantom Hill pack receives, hunting may reduce the number of wolves in the pack and may make the pack more wary of humans. This, in turn, may make the wolves less likely to move south this winter, and if they do move south, may make them less likely to frequent areas near human activity. However, if the pack receives little hunting pressure, this winter may not differ much from last winter.

16.) If the wolves return to hunt the Elkhorn elk, and a feeding program is in place up on the high ridge, will the wolves cause the elk to come down into the valleys and will the wolves follow, or will that activity stay on the hill?

This question has already been addressed in questions 3 and 13. In summary, the wolves will likely still chase elk down the hill and towards residences unless the feed site is several miles from residences.

17.) Will the mountain lions continue to have a presence in Elkhorn?

Yes – mountain lions make occasional use of residential areas throughout the Wood River Valley, regardless of whether elk feeding occurs there or not. Concentrations of prey animals like elk certainly increase the likelihood that a predator will frequent the area, but predators will use the areas occasionally regardless of feeding.

18.) Will a feeding program on SVEA land attract increased numbers of predators to SVEA neighborhoods?

Probably.

19.) IDFG administers elk feeding programs on public lands in other areas of the state to keep the elk away from residential areas; has the department looked into doing the same with the Elkhorn herd?

No.

If so, why have they chosen not to feed? What circumstances would cause IDFG to feed the Elkhorn herd?

The reason given in this question for IDFG feed sites only partially addresses why IDFG feeds in some areas. In this region, there are essentially 2 types of IDFG sponsored feed sites. The feed sites along the South Fork of the Boise River were started in the 1930s and 1940s when elk were reintroduced to the area. Those elk had no knowledge of traditional migration routes or locations of winter range,

and the winter range was many miles away. Therefore, with no expectation that those elk would find that winter range, the Department began feeding. Because the feeding started so long ago, the elk never had the chance to learn the migration routes or location of winter range. Ironically, since wolves have begun to make use of the South Fork drainage, many of the South Fork elk have been faced with a “migrate or perish” decision, and have discovered the winter range that exists south of the Smoky Mountains stretching from Fairfield to Mayfield.

The Department also sponsors the Bullwhacker feed site near Frenchman’s Bend on Warm Springs Creek. The purpose of this feed site is twofold: It is to keep elk up the drainage and away from residential areas, but it is also because there is no alternative nearby natural winter range for these elk to use. This is a key difference between the IDFG feeding at Bullwhacker and feeding near Elkhorn. On the north end of the Wood River Valley, winter range is more extensive on the East side of the highway than on the West side. Traditionally, Bullwhacker elk wintered in what is now the townsite of Ketchum. The only other winter range near the Bullwhacker feed site is on the Warm Springs face: currently, approximately 90-100 elk winter there. Numbers from previous aerial surveys suggest that this relatively small piece of winter range cannot support many more elk, and certainly cannot support the 160 elk that are currently fed at Bullwhacker. In contrast, aerial survey numbers indicate that between 140 and 280 elk winter in Parker, Keystone, and Independence Gulches. In recent years, the number of elk wintering in these drainages has been closer to 140, suggesting that these wintering areas can support the addition of as many as 80 elk from the Elkhorn subdivision.

It is also important to note that the Bullwhacker feed site is approximately 7 miles from the nearest subdivision in Ketchum. This greatly decreases the likelihood that elk fed at the Bullwhacker feed site, or their predators, will come into significant contact with humans near their residences.

IDFG does not feed at all department sponsored feed sites every year. We maintain criteria, based on winter severity and animal condition, that determines when feeding begins. In addition, IDFG has emergency feeding criteria. When a winter is particularly severe, IDFG may elect to feed in areas other than the department sponsored feed sites. I have attached those criteria to these questions for review by the SVEA board.

20.) If a feeding program was to resume for the Elkhorn herd, what is the best location and why? This is a difficult question to answer. The best location – from the standpoint of avoiding conflicts with humans – for a feed site is far (several miles) from residential areas. However, locations up Parker, Keystone, and Independence Gulches all have naturally wintering elk on native winter range. Placing a feed site up any of these drainages would likely attract non-feed site elk away from natural winter range. This would increase the size of the feeding operation, and make any subsequent termination of the feeding operation even harder.

21.) Ed Dumke fed the elk for approximately 30 years with little or no negative impact to the property owners of Elkhorn. The Community School then took over the program. Were the reduced amount of food and then the cessation of feeding the sole reasons the elk moved down into the lower valleys, or what would have prevented the current situation?

As we do not know the rations or frequency with which the Community School fed elk, we cannot speak to whether a reduced amount of food contributed to elk movement down into the Elkhorn Village subdivision. The cessation of feeding certainly contributed to elk movement into the subdivision. However, this problem ultimately arose from elk feeding. Had elk feeding never started near Elkhorn, some elk would have been displaced during the first few years of the subdivision’s

existence. Many of these elk would have found natural winter range in drainages adjacent to Elkhorn. The herd likely would have suffered higher mortality during the first few years of the subdivision. After that, the problem would likely have subsided. Once a feeding program has started, there is no “clean and easy” way to end it – it will take several years for fed elk to rediscover natural winter range, and during the interim, elk will use neighborhoods and some may even die in sight of homes and residents. Continuing feeding would likely have minimized the current situation, as more elk would spend their time higher up the ridge and away from the neighborhood. However, especially with the new presence of wolves in the area, feeding in this and subsequent years is unlikely to keep elk up the ridge and away from the neighborhood.

22. Are you aware of the WRET’s proposed operational plan for feeding the Elkhorn herd on SVEA land? **Yes.**

How does it compare with the feeding program administered by Mr. Dumke?

We do not have a copy of Mr. Dumke’s operational plan, so cannot compare them.

What is your opinion of the plan?

The plan lacks details about protein content of feed, specifications about how to feed (i.e. spreading out feed), and rations (which differ for pelletized alfalfa versus loose hay); therefore, there is little to comment on. However, we would strongly recommend that WRET II feed only under emergency conditions (i.e. severe winters). We would also recommend that WRET II feed at a location much farther from residences.

What are the risks of a non-IDFG sponsor feeding elk?

As seen in the Dumke/Community School situation, even with the best intentions, private citizens or entities may move, sell property, become disinterested, lack funding, etc., and may not be able to continue an adequate feeding operation.

23. With the existing elk problem in Elkhorn, general feeding policies aside, what is IDFG’s official position on feeding elk on SVEA land?

Our position is that elk should not be fed on SVEA land. It is too close to residences, and elk in this area have the alternative of natural winter range immediately adjacent to Elkhorn. Except in the most severe winters, feeding in this area is unnecessary and detrimental to both elk and people. There are several detrimental aspects of elk feeding not discussed heretofore in this document, including disease, continued erosion of herd knowledge of natural winter range and migration routes, and artificially dense populations that may overgraze other seasonal habitats. These are discussed in detail in the attached article, which was published in the Idaho Mountain Express in January, 2008.

24. Based on IDFG experience, knowledge and guidelines, what is the best long-range solution for the elk situation in Elkhorn and what is the anticipated time frame for implementation?

The best long term solution for the elk situation in Elkhorn is to stop feeding, and disallow feeding so that well-meaning residents do not inadvertently prolong the process of relearning to use natural winter range by occasionally throwing out hay to the elk. This is not a quick or painless solution – it will take several years for the situation to settle out. However, we anticipate that most of the Elkhorn herd will eventually learn to use nearby natural winter range. This will better enable them to maintain the survival skills that wild elk need, and will better enable them to avoid both human related hazards (such as vehicle collisions) and predation (on winter range, the snow is shallower, and elk are better able to move around to avoid predators).