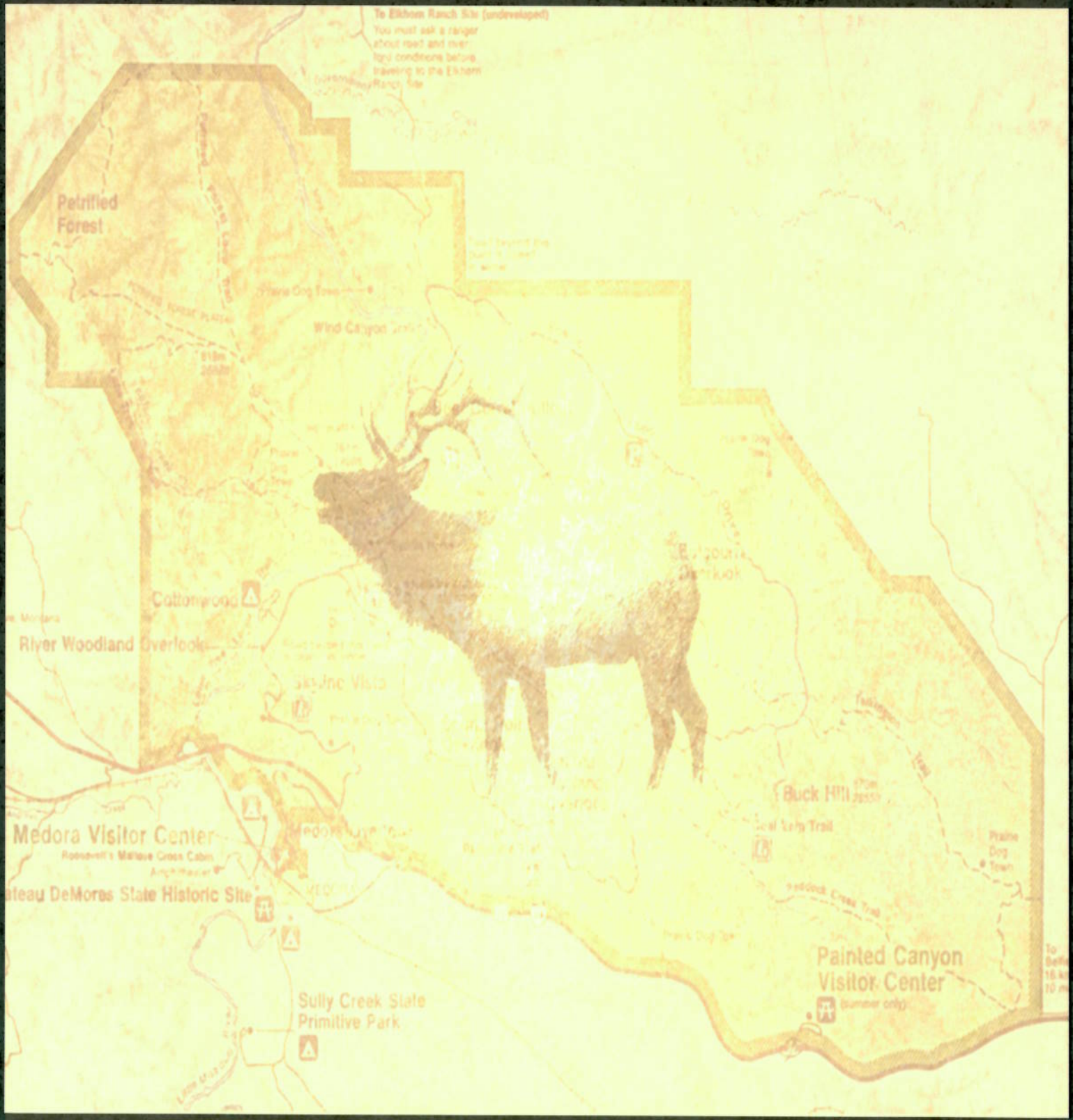
Theodore Roosevelt National Park Draft Elk Management Plan/Environmental Impact Statement Update

Preferred and Environmentally Preferable Alternatives

August 10, 2009



Dear Interested Citizens:

I am pleased to announce that the National Park Service (NPS) has identified a preferred alternative for managing the elk population in Theodore Roosevelt National Park. NPS has also identified an environmentally preferable alternative.

We thank all of you who provided comments on the Draft Elk Management Plan/Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) that was open for public review from December 17, 2008 - March 19, 2009, to all who participated in the public meetings, and to those that have been following this issue over the years.

A preferred alternative was not identified during the DEIS process because we wanted your informed comments. The park received about 285 correspondences on the DEIS, expressing a wide range of opinions and concerns.

We have identified a preferred alternative that will provide for management flexibility and address concerns of the public. It also has the potential to make elk available to other parts of the country and other parts of North Dakota.

During the public comment period on the DEIS, we received many comments regarding hunting in the park. Many commenters supported hunting inside the park boundaries, and many commenters opposed hunting. While the park does not have the authority to allow hunting within its boundaries (as explained in Chapter 2 of the DEIS), the preferred alternative identifies members of the public as skilled volunteers to assist the park with managing the elk herd.

Based on the substantive comments we received and analysis of costs, efficiency and environmental impacts, we have identified a preferred alternative that uses a suite of options contained in Alternatives B (direct reduction with firearms by federal employees and designated agents), C (roundup and euthanasia), and D (roundup and translocation).

Initial reduction would be carried out by federal employees and/or skilled volunteers using firearms, and will occur over a five-year period. The NPS will evaluate the program annually to determine if its population goals are being met. If goals are being met, the park would continue with direct reduction through firearms. Should the park determine that its population goals are not being met after the first two years of the initial reduction phase, it would continue with direct reduction activities but would also have the ability to capture elk for euthanasia and/or translocation in order to meet population objectives.

For herd maintenance, the park would use the same tools as those employed for the initial reduction phase. Under all management options, a sample of elk would be tested for chronic wasting disease (CWD). Meat will be donated pursuant to guidance of the NPS Office of Public Health, and in accordance with federal regulations. If translocation is utilized, live elk would be donated to willing recipients, which may include state or federal agencies, American Indian tribes, or other approved organizations that obtain all required state and federal authorizations for transport and release.

In all cases, the park would continue to work with the North Dakota Game and Fish Department in any way possible to enhance hunting opportunities outside the park.

I hope you will take the time to read the brief descriptions of the preferred and environmentally preferable alternatives, and the reasons why they were identified as such.

This supplemental newsletter is meant to be read in conjunction with the full DEIS, which contains in-depth information regarding the background and history of elk management in the park, legal and policy mandates the park must follow, and an in-depth impact analysis and methodology for all alternatives considered.

NPS is seeking public comment on both the preferred and environmentally preferable alternative. The 30-day comment period begins on August 10, 2009 and ends on September 9, 2009. Information on how and where to comment is included on the last page of this newsletter. Thank you for your interest in Theodore Roosevelt National Park.

Sincerely,

Valerie J. Naylor
Superintendent

National Park Service Preferred Alternative

The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ), which is responsible for ensuring federal agencies meet their National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) obligations, defines the preferred alternative as that "which the agency believes would fulfill its statutory mission and responsibilities, giving consideration to economic, environmental, technical and other factors" (NEPA's Forty Most Asked Questions, Q4a).

NPS did not identify a preferred alternative in the Draft Elk Management Plan/Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) because of the desire to consider the public's point of view before doing so. Following the close of the public comment period on the DEIS, the comments were compiled into a public comment report and distributed internally for review. An interdisciplinary team, working with senior park and NPS managers, considered the public comments received, cost efficiency, how effectively the alternatives meet the stated objectives of the plan, and the environmental benefits and adverse impacts for each alternative. Collectively, these factors were evaluated to arrive at the park's preferred alternative, which involves an initial herd reduction phase and a maintenance phase.

The park has identified a preferred alternative that uses a suite of options contained in Alternatives B (direct reduction with firearms by federal employees and designated agents), C (roundup and euthanasia) and D (roundup and translocation). For initial reduction, the preferred alternative involves direct reduction of elk through the use of firearms. Following each year of the initial reduction phase, the NPS will evaluate the program in order to determine if its population goals are being met. If population goals are being achieved, the park will continue with the use of firearms. Should the park determine that its population goals are not being met following the first two years of the initial reduction phase, it would continue with direct reduction activities but would also have the ability to use a roundup or other capture methods and then euthanize and/or translocate elk in order to meet its population objectives. Should the park need to capture animals, whether elk are euthanized or translocated will depend on whether adequate sampling has occurred to meet chronic wasting disease (CWD) surveillance goals, whether CWD is detected in the herd and whether there are willing recipients that can meet all federal and state requirements to transport and receive live elk.

For the maintenance phase, the park would continue with direct reduction through the use of firearms, and would still have the ability to use a roundup or other capture techniques and then euthanize and/or translocate elk if the park determines it cannot meet its population objectives through direct reduction. Under the preferred alternative, elk would be managed to a range between 100 and 400 elk. Approximately 900 elk are currently in the park.

> *"The preferred alternative is that which the agency believes would fulfill its statutory mission and responsibilities, giving consideration to economic, environmental, technical and other factors."*

While Alternatives B (direct reduction with firearms by federal employees and designated agents), C (roundup and euthanasia) and D (roundup and translocation) were evaluated as stand-alone alternatives in the DEIS, NPS has the authority to combine elements of alternatives. 43 C.F.R. 46.20(d) provides, *"The Responsible Official's decision on a proposed action shall be within the range of alternatives discussed in the relevant environmental document. The Responsible Official's decision may combine elements of alternatives discussed in the relevant environmental document if the effects of such combined elements of alternatives are reasonably apparent from the analysis in the relevant environmental document."*

The park has considered the effects of combining elements of Alternatives B, C and D in order to arrive at its preferred alternative and has concluded that the effects are reasonably apparent from the analysis contained in the DEIS. For an in-depth discussion of each alternative and its impacts, please refer to the DEIS.

The environmental effects of the preferred alternative fall within the effects of the range of alternatives analyzed in the DEIS. The preferred alternative will not result in any new effects not already disclosed in the DEIS, and there are no apparent synergistic effects as a result of incorporating parts of Alternatives B, C and D in order to arrive at a preferred alternative.

Initial Reduction Phase: Direct Reduction With Firearms, With The Ability to Use A Roundup or Other Capture Techniques and Euthanize or Translocate Should Population Goals Not Be Achieved

As discussed more fully in Chapter 2 of the DEIS, for the initial reduction phase, the park would attempt to remove approximately 275 elk per year during the fall and winter months in order to reach an in-the-park population of 100-400 elk. If logistics permit, the park could remove more elk in any given year to reduce the duration of the initial reduction phase. Every effort would be made to make the actions as humane as possible. The number of elk removed during state-sponsored hunts outside the park would be factored into the actual numbers of elk that need to be removed inside the park.

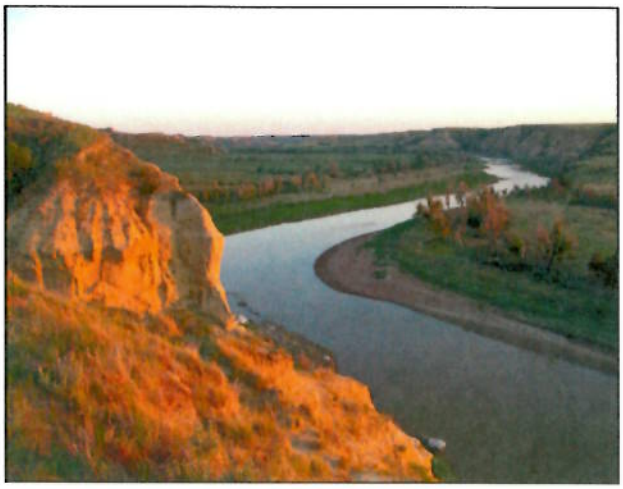
Direct reduction would be managed by the NPS and carried out by qualified federal employees and/or authorized agents. Authorized agents include, but are not limited to, NPS and other federal agency personnel and skilled public volunteers. Skilled volunteers would work in teams and be supervised and directed in the field by NPS personnel during any elk management actions. Skilled volunteers under NPS supervision would assist in conducting efficient, humane removal of animals to meet resource management objectives. Personnel engaged in direct reduction of elk would have the appropriate skills and proficiencies for the removal of wildlife. Skilled volunteers would include individuals identified through an NPS-developed system. Before assisting with removal actions with firearms, skilled volunteers would need to meet a number of requirements including a demonstrated level of firearm proficiency established by the park.

Direct reduction teams, as necessary, would be involved in activities in the field (spotting, shooting, field dressing, data collection, CWD sampling, carcass handling/transport) and subsequent management actions (carcass handling after removal from the field, data collection, shipping). Teams would generally access an area on foot. Teams would locate and take groups of elk to facilitate reduction activities, although individual elk located opportunistically would also be considered for removal. Teams would take advantage of opportunities to take a number of elk at any given time, depending on the situation. Adult cow elk will be the primary population segment targeted for removal. Only non-lead bullets would be used. Elk injured during the operation would be put down as quickly as possible to minimize suffering.

Qualified team members would be responsible for taking CWD samples and assisting in removing carcasses. Carcasses would be transported to a handling facility in the park, where additional personnel would be available for subsequent management activities, including, for example, loading carcasses into refrigeration trucks for temporary storage, collecting data, and shipping carcasses to processors for distribution or donations. Some carcasses could be left in the park because of the difficulty retrieving them given terrain, weather, etc., and to provide carrion for scavengers to help mimic natural conditions. If feasible, samples will be collected for CWD testing. Should any samples from these carcasses test positive for CWD, park staff would retrieve the carcasses to the extent possible and dispose of them.

All carcasses, except for the small number left in the field, would be held, processed, and donated in accordance with guidance from the NPS Office of Public Health. As long as there are no positive CWD tests, meat would be donated to state agencies, American Indian tribes, approved charities or other organizations in accordance with federal regulations.

After each year of the initial reduction phase, and for each remaining year of the initial reduction phase, the park will evaluate the program. If population goals are being achieved, the park will continue with the use of firearms. If direct reduction proves ineffective at meeting the population objectives, or if mortality or reproduction rates differ from the estimate used in the DEIS, after the first two years of the initial reduction phase the park would continue with direct reduction, but would also have the ability to conduct a roundup or use other capture techniques, and then euthanize and/or translocate elk in order to meet its population objectives.



Benefits of the preferred alternative for initial reduction phase:

- Volunteers would assist with this alternative; the park would not pay private contractors or outside individuals to shoot elk.
- The alternative does not overly burden other agencies or landowners, or require the park to manage elk beyond its jurisdiction.
- This alternative provides for control by the NPS for selecting which animals will be removed, and also the time and place of removal.
- This alternative may provide a robust sample of animals for CWD screening. The North Dakota Game and Fish Department (NDGF) has, to date, not required harvested elk to be screened. This alternative ensures the park would get an adequate sample for this critical information need for the park, NDGF, ranchers, and others with concerns about disease issues.
- Translocation could still be used if direct reduction fails to meet management objectives and willing recipients are identified in later years. However, elk would not be translocated as a sole or initial action.

Maintenance Phase: Continued Use of Direct Reduction With Firearms, With The Ability to Use A Roundup or Other Capture Techniques and Euthanize or Translocate Should Population Goals Not Be Achieved

Maintenance of the population would involve the same methods as those used for the initial reduction phase. Maintenance actions would be implemented annually, focusing on the removal of adult female elk. Based on a hypothetical scenario where initial reduction takes 5 years to reduce the elk population to 100-400 animals and subsequent annual removals of 20 to 24 female elk, it is anticipated that the park would remove a total of 200 to 240 elk for maintenance between years 6 and 15 of the plan. Annual population estimates and the number of elk removed outside the park would be used to refine the number of elk that must be removed by the NPS to stabilize the population.

Benefits of the preferred alternative for the maintenance phase:

- Volunteers would assist with this alternative; the park would not pay private contractors or outside individuals to shoot elk.
- Taking small numbers of elk each year, or larger numbers less frequently, would reduce the scope of the action needed to control the population during the maintenance phase. Disturbance to other wildlife, park visitors, and park operations would be of limited duration.
- Translocation could still be used if direct reduction fails to meet management objectives and willing recipients are identified in later years.

Environmentally Preferable Alternative

In addition to identifying a preferred alternative, the interdisciplinary team also identified an "environmentally preferable alternative." The environmentally preferable alternative is defined by CEQ as the alternative that "causes the least damage to the biological and physical environment; it also means the alternative which best protects, preserves and enhances historic, cultural and natural resources" (NEPA's Forty Most Asked Questions, Q6a). While NPS must identify an environmentally preferable alternative, there is no requirement that NPS select the environmentally preferred alternative for implementation.

After careful consideration of all factors involved, Alternative D (roundup and translocation) was identified as the environmentally preferable alternative. The fact that Alternative D would quickly and effectively reduce and maintain the elk herd within target population goals while preserving the current natural distribution/movement of elk into and out of the park were prime contributors to its selection.

The park has identified Alternative D as best meeting the CEQ definition of the environmentally preferable alternative, because it:

- Reduces elk numbers in the park in the most efficient manner (roundups)
- Allows for a rapid initial reduction, thus reducing impacts to park resources from high elk populations more quickly than other alternatives
- Causes only minimal disruption to park visitors and park operations
- Allows for non-lethal control of elk that are translocated
- Requires less frequent manipulation of the elk population than other alternatives
- Reduces the amount of animals that have to be killed over the life of the plan

How to obtain a copy of the entire Theodore Roosevelt National Park Draft Elk Management Plan/EIS:

- Download an electronic copy from: http://parkplanning.nps.gov/THRO. The Draft Plan/EIS can be found under the "document list" link.

- Request a hard copy from the park:
  Superintendent Attn: Elk Management Plan
  Theodore Roosevelt National Park
  P.O. Box 7
  Medora, North Dakota 58645
  Ph. (701) 623-4466

Public Comments

At this time, the National Park Service is seeking comments from the public on the preferred and environmentally preferable alternatives. A 30-day comment period begins on August 10, 2009 and ends on September 9, 2009.

Providing Comments:
The entire DEIS was open for public comment for a 90-day period from December 17-March 19, 2009. While you may comment on any aspect of the DEIS at this time, we ask that you try to confine your comments to the preferred and environmentally preferable alternatives and issues surrounding those alternatives. We will review every comment submitted; however, the way you word your comment can impact the response it receives and how it is incorporated into the final document. Here are some suggestions for making effective comments:

- Be as specific as possible with your comments.
- Avoid broad statements. Focus your comments on a particular issue and be as detailed as possible in describing your concern.
- If you think impacts on a certain resource would be greater than described, back up your statement with an explanation and facts.
- Provide a comment rather than a vote. Do not simply state that you agree or disagree with the preferred or environmentally preferable alternative. To be most helpful, provide reasons why.

Providing as much detail as possible and relating your comments back to the Draft Plan/EIS will make sure that your comments are understood and your concerns are fully addressed in the responses.

Before including your address, phone number, email address, or other personal identifying information in your comment, you should be aware that your entire comment- including your personal identifying information- may be made publicly available at any time.

Responding to Comments
NPS will respond to all substantive comments as part of its final EIS. Some responses may be reflected as edits to the text of the final plan/EIS if needed to clarify or add new information. The final plan/EIS will contain summaries of the substantive comments and responses to those comments in an appendix.
Substantive comments are defined as those that do one or more of the following:

- Question, with reasonable basis, the accuracy of information in the Draft Plan/EIS
- Question, with reasonable basis, the adequacy of environmental, cultural, or socioeconomic analysis
- Present reasonable alternatives other than those presented in the Draft Plan/EIS
- Cause changes or revisions to the management actions proposed in the alternatives

How to Comment
You can provide comments on the Draft Plan/EIS a number of ways:

- Electronically at:
  http://parkplanning.nps.gov/THRO

- By mail to:
  Superintendent
  Attn: Elk Management Plan
  Theodore Roosevelt National Park
  P.O. Box 7
  Medora, North Dakota 58645

- By fax at:
  (701) 623-4840

- By email to:
  thro_forum@nps.gov

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We're on the Web!
www.nps.gov/THRO