Field Report
National Elk Refuge

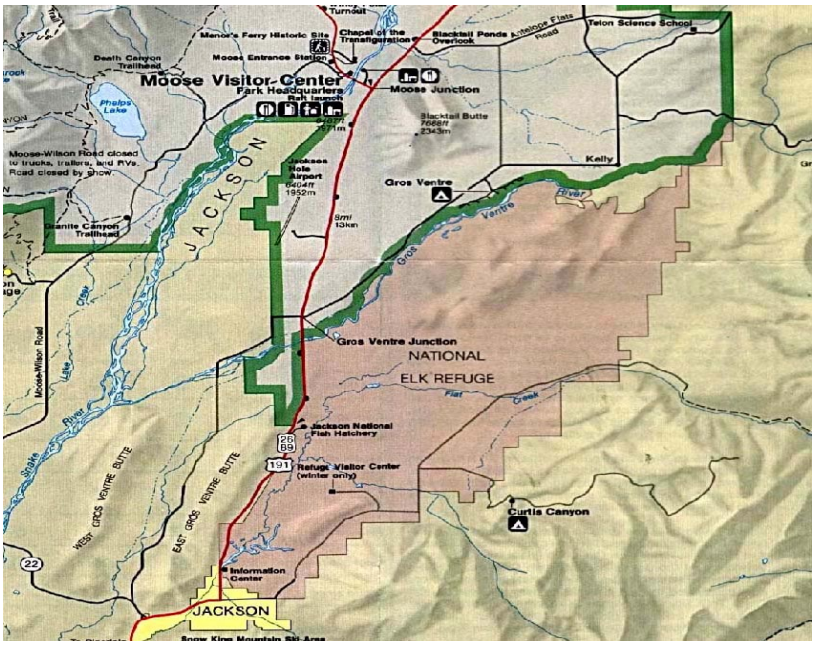
1.0 Summary

The USFWS manages this 23,754-acre territory located in northwestern Wyoming, adjacent to the southeast corner of Grand Teton National Park. The refuge serves as the annual winter range for between 5,000 and 10,000 elk. As winter approaches, elk start to migrate to this land, where supplemental feeding has been conducted since the early 1900s.

The National Elk Refuge is located in the north portion of the town of Jackson, Wyoming (see Figure 1). While the elk are on the property in the winter, the herd(s) can be easily seen from town streets and houses. Sleigh rides originating from the National Wildlife Art Museum, located west of and adjacent to the refuge, are offered during the winter periods when the elk are in residence and being fed. This is the only means by which visitors can regularly enter onto the refuge property; at all other times visitors must remain on the roads.

Due to the location of the property, the ease by which the wildlife can be viewed from adjacent public streets, the nature of the visitation, and the needs of the USFWS to provide a "refuge" for the wildlife, Alternative Transportation System (ATS) improvements are not recommended at this time.

Figure 1. National Elk Refuge



2.0 Background Information

2.1 Location

The National Elk Refuge is located in Teton County, Wyoming, in the northwest corner of the state. Highway 26-89-191 is on the western edge of the refuge. Flat Creek Road, maintained by Teton County runs within the refuge property along its southeastern edge.

2.2 Administration and Classification

The 23,754-acre property is managed by the USFWS as a wildlife refuge. The refuge manager is Barry Reiswig.

2.3 Physical Description

The National Elk Refuge is located at the southern tip of Jackson Hole. The name "Jackson Hole" refers to the valley region surrounded by mountain ranges and highlands. Jackson is the name of the town that is at the southern boundary of the Elk Refuge. The National Elk Refuge is located in land classified as the sagebrush community. It is a category of grasses, shrubs, and wildflowers. The coarse, rocky soil does not hold water well and therefore does not support large trees. The short growing season also makes it difficult, if not impossible, for the land to produce the feed required by the wintering elk herds.

2.4 Mission and Goals of the Wildlife Refuge

The management of individual refuge system units is dictated, in large part, by the legislation, executive order, or administrative action that creates the unit. The refuge purpose(s) reflected in enabling legislation, executive orders, and administrative actions may range from very narrow to very broad.

Operation and management of national wildlife refuges are also influenced by a wide array of other laws, treaties, and executive orders pertaining to the conservation and protection of natural and cultural resources. The Refuge Administration Act authorizes the Secretary of Interior, under such regulations as he may prescribe, to "permit the use of any area within the System for any purpose, including but not limited to hunting, fishing, public recreation and accommodations, and access whenever he determines that such uses are compatible with the major purposes for which such areas were established."

2.5 Visitation Levels and Visitor Profile

The only organized "visits" to the National Elk Refuge are through sleigh rides that operate from mid-December to mid-March/mid-April, depending on the suitability of the

resource to withstand the traffic. Each year there are an average of 20,000 people that ride the sleighs or wagons through the property to see the elk herd at close hand.

3.0 Existing Conditions, Issues and Concerns

3.1 Transportation Conditions, Issues and Concerns

The Jackson Hole Airport is located on the southeastern edge of Grand Teton, between Moose and Jackson. Regular passenger service is provided by two airlines. The nearest Greyhound bus service is to Idaho Falls, Idaho. There is also service from Salt Lake City, Utah to Cody, Wyoming. The Grand Teton Lodge Company provides shuttle service between Jackson, the Jackson Hole Airport, Jackson Lake Lodge, and Colter Bay Village. The Lodge Company also offers bus tours of the park and of Yellowstone National Park on a regular schedule during the summer. Similar tours are offered by at least one operator from Jackson.

Motorized Vehicles

The North-South Highway, Refuge Road, Curtis Canyon Road, and Flat Creek Road serve the National Elk Refuge. The North-South Highway and Refuge Road are open year-round. Curtis Canyon Road and Flat Creek Road are open seasonally.

Conditions for motorized vehicles on National Elk Refuge roads generally are favorable. There is very little congestion on these or other roadways, except during the summer, when the North-South Highway often backs up southbound into Jackson. It can be difficult for visitors to find Refuge Road. There is no signage within Jackson.

Bicycles and Pedestrians

Refuge Road is used extensively by bicyclists, hikers, and joggers. Many of these users drive to the intersection of Broadway and Refuge Road, where parking can be a problem.

3.2 Community Development Conditions, Issues and Concerns

The NPS (Grand Teton National Park), the USFWS (National Elk Refuge), the United States Forest Service (Bridger-Teton National Forest), the Jackson Hole Chamber of Commerce, the Jackson Hole Historical Society and Museum, Teton County, and the Town of Jackson have agreed to work cooperatively toward creation of a multi-agency campus to provide visitor information and services. The cooperating agencies plan to replace an existing facility located on the north edge of Jackson, in the southwest corner of the National Elk Refuge. The intent of the Multi-Agency Campus (MAC), encompassing the 29-acre site, is:

- Provide more parking for downtown merchants;
- Alleviate traffic in the square by directing summer visitors to the visitor's portion of the campus for initial orientation to the Town and region;
- Alleviate traffic and improve safety on North Cache by moving visitors to the campus area where they can park and leave their cars;
- Tie-in to the objectives of the new Jackson/Teton County Transportation Plan by providing a transportation hub at the north end of Town – a place where visitors and community members can park their cars and access public transit for the Town, Teton County, and/or up to Grand Teton and/or Yellowstone National Park;
- Provide a pathway linkage from downtown north towards Grand Teton National Park;
- Provide more much-needed housing for the community;
- Provide a park area that will be a pleasant gathering place for community members; and
- Provide additional large community meeting locations by sharing meeting room and auditorium space on the campus.

Community support for the MAC is wide and strong. Citizens and officials are actively lobbying various government agencies and foundations for political and financial support. Supporters are particularly enthusiastic about the ability of the MAC to promote the pooling of resources for providing visitor services and the ability for coordinating transportation services throughout the Jackson Hole region.

3.3 Natural or Cultural Resource Conditions, Issues and Concerns

The property is named the National Elk Refuge, in recognition of the fact that elk herds have historically migrated to protected land in Jackson Hole to spend the winters. As Jackson developed and settlers brought livestock and fenced their property, the land could not support the natural elk herds. Settlers began the practice of providing supplemental feed for the elk to protect their ranches and the crops intended for their livestock. While the elk are the predominate species that winters on the property, other species are found, including, moose, bison, mountain lion, trumpeter swan and numerous other water fowl, eagles and other raptors, and a vast variety of small mammals.

The land contained within the Elk Refuge is not accessible to the general public. During the spring, the refuge permits the local Boy Scout troops to enter the property to gather and auction the elk antlers that are naturally shed every spring. The Boy Scouts donate 80 percent of the auction proceeds to the refuge, which usually uses the funds to purchase supplemental winter-feed for the elk.

The refuge also permits the Jackson Hole Historical Society and Museum to conduct an annual visit to Miller Butte where there is evidence of the presence of a band of sheep-eaters, a native American group found in the area over 600 years ago.

3.4 Recreation Conditions, Issues and Concerns

The land contained within the Elk Refuge is not accessible to the general public.

4.0 Planning and Coordination

4.1 Public and Agency Coordination

The USFWS and management of the National Elk Refuge is working closely with other participants in the Multi-Agency Campus partnership to explore potential for cooperation and promote fund raising.

5.0 Assessment of Need

5.1 Magnitude of Need

The need for ATS specific to the National Elk Refuge is low at this time. Visitation levels are modest and are greatest in winter, while traffic congestion in and near Jackson primarily is a summer phenomenon. The greatest transportation needs seem to be improvement of traffic congestion in and near Jackson during the summer months, signage to Refuge Road, and the provision of parking at the Broadway/Refuge Road intersection for bicyclists, hikers, and joggers.

5.2 Feasible Alternatives

ATS specific to the National Elk Refuge would be difficult to implement. The refuge could work with the Town of Jackson, Teton County, and the State of Wyoming to address congestion issues in Jackson, signage to Refuge Road, and parking at the Broadway/ Refuge Road intersection.

6.0 Bibliography

Multi-Agency Campus Project, Jackson Hole, Wyoming, Mission Statement, Site Plan, and Project Description.

Visitor Campus Needs Assessment (prepared for Town of Jackson Planning Department, October 1997).

Jackson/Teton County Transit Development Plan 2000-2005.

7.0 Persons Interviewed

Steven Brock, Assistant Refuge Manager, National Elk Refuge

Don Cushman, Outdoor Recreation Planner, National Elk Refuge

Charlene Gallina, Planning Director, Town of Jackson, Wyoming

Michael W. Parda, Town Administrator, Town of Jackson, Wyoming

Rolf Belden, Superintendent of Public Works, Town of Jackson, Wyoming

Cam Hughie, Facilities Manager, Grand Teton National Park

Mel R. Denton, Buffalo Fork Subdistrict Chief Ranger, Grand Teton National Park

Kip E. Knapp, Gros Ventre Subdistrict Chief Ranger, Grand Teton National Park