



# Parks and Open Space

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**TO:** Boulder County Board of County Commissioners

**DATE AND LOCATION:** Tuesday, June 20, 2017, 3:00 pm, Commissioners Hearing Room, 3<sup>rd</sup> floor Boulder County Courthouse, 1325 Pearl Street, Boulder, CO

**AGENDA ITEM TITLE:** Rabbit Mountain Elk and Vegetation Management Plan

**PRESENTERS:** Therese Glowacki, Manager, Resource Management Division, Janet George, Senior Wildlife Biologist, Colorado Parks and Wildlife

**ACTION REQUESTED:** Approval

**Background:** The Rabbit Mountain elk population has grown from 25 to 350 in the last 10 years. The elk have learned to avoid hunters by not migrating--staying on or around Rabbit Mountain year-round and raiding neighboring agricultural fields at night, returning to the safety of Rabbit Mountain during the day. The elk herd's rapid expansion is causing extensive damage to the highly diverse native plants and wildlife habitat of Rabbit Mountain. According to the Colorado Natural Heritage Program, Rabbit Mountain is rated **B1: Outstanding Biodiversity** Significance, which means the plant and wildlife diversity is globally rare and **irreplaceable**. In addition, the elk have caused substantial damage to neighboring residential fences, landscaping, and agricultural crops. After careful consideration of many options, and in consultation with Colorado Parks & Wildlife, Parks & Open Space staff believes it is imperative to re-establish seasonal migration in this elk herd by allowing limited and controlled public hunting on Rabbit Mountain. This is in addition to existing private land hunting and will help reduce numbers, which is also imperative to reducing all impacts from this elk herd, public and private.

## Draft Plan

- Encourage migration – This is the primary goal for the plan. By having elk hunted on Rabbit Mountain, they will no longer have their safe haven during the day and will mix with other elk in the area.
- Use fencing, hazing, and adaptive management – These additional methods will help reduce the grazing and trampling impacts on the native vegetation and encourage migration.
- Permit limited hunting on cow elk – Cow elk reduction is necessary to reduce the reproductive rate of the herd. This also ensures that elk hunting is for resource management purposed only, not trophy hunting.
- Close property three days/week, after Labor Day through Jan. 31 – The plan states that we will close the property on three of the least busy days at Rabbit Mountain. This is for consistency with the public so they can plan their visits to Rabbit Mountain accordingly. We will use social media and the website to inform park visitors if we are able to open the property on the closed days for any reason.
- Mimic Rocky Mountain National Park and Centennial Cone (JeffCo) – the two nearest examples of using hunting (or culling as in Rocky Mountain National Park) in combination with fencing, etc., were both successful at reducing the impacts of stationary elk herds on native vegetation in the Front Range.

## Alternatives Considered

- BCPOS tried hazing for several months and the elk returned after one to six days.

- Culling has been suggested.
  - There is no established process for getting approval for culling by the state agency responsible for managing the state’s wildlife. There is no guarantee this option would be approved.
  - Culling can be either removing animals with volunteer sharp-shooters (hunters) who then don’t get the meat, or culling in some peoples’ minds is the rapid removal of 10-100 or more elk at one time by professionals.
  - Culling is expensive. Rocky Mountain National Park’s culling efforts cost \$4,700/elk.
- Fencing – BCPOS will use fencing for the high value and highly impacted area on Rabbit Mountain. Fencing is not feasible on neighboring property because it shifts the raiding elk from one private property to others without solving the refuge provided by Rabbit Mountain.
- Fertility Control – There is no legal method approved by EPA for fertility control in wild elk. BCPOS will work with researchers to determine if fertility control could be used in a research setting to keep elk numbers down once the plan’s objectives are reached. In addition, fertility control is not a primary option with our current herd size because it would take too long to reduce herd numbers and our experience trying to capture elk for radiocollaring indicates we could not feasibly trap these elk to administer the fertility control.

**Public Input**

- 353 people submitted written comments – these comments came before first POSAC meeting.
  - 73% Support the Plan or Support the Plan with changes
    - 60 comments, the largest group of any comments, support the limited hunting in order to conserve the biodiversity of Rabbit Mountain.
    - Culling was only mentioned by 7 people, less than 2% of all comments.
  - 27% Don’t support
    - No hunting on open space was the primary reason people mentioned in their comments.
    - Don’t close the property was the second most cited reason.

**POSAC**

- BCPOS presented the draft plan to POSAC at the April 27, 2017, meeting – 25 people testified
  - Boulder County Nature Association and Boulder County Audubon are two entities that support the plan in order to preserve the rich biodiversity of Rabbit Mountain.
  - All opinions were represented in public testimony including objecting to the plan for not closing the trails and not hunting on open space and support for the plan to preserve the unique natural resources of Rabbit Mountain or to protect the health of the herd in addition.
- Decision: POSAC requested more information on the alternatives we considered
  - Fertility control
  - Culling
  - Fencing

**Modified Plan**

BCPOS staff modified the plan before returning to POSAC.

- Include continued hazing from February through April to encourage migration in the spring.
- Recommend hunting on adjacent properties when Rabbit Mountain is open to the public for hiking, again to keep the pressure on the like to migrate.

- Move the start date to after Labor Day to allow users the whole summer to enjoy the property without closures.
- Recommend fencing around the most impacted natural areas on Rabbit.

**Public Input**

- 57 people wrote comments on updated draft.
  - 75% support the plan
  - 80% were from Boulder County or Loveland
- No mass letter-writing campaign – from either those supporting the plan or those opposing the plan.

**POSAC**

- May 25, 2017, meeting – On a motion to recommend approving the plan to the Board of County Commissioners, POSAC had a 3-3 vote.
  - 3 “Yes” votes recognized the need to take action quickly
  - 2 of the “No’s” wanted culling or lethal hazing/shorter property closure
  - 1 wants no lethal control

In order to protect the significant natural biodiversity of Rabbit Mountain, BCPOS recommends a combination of limited public hunting, fencing, and hazing to encourage this herd to migrate and reduce overall elk numbers on Rabbit Mountain. We propose using an adaptive management approach including continued elk and vegetation monitoring to determine the effects of this management throughout plan implementation.

**Action Requested:** Approval