

# Feeding wildlife is not a good idea

By Aaron Meier

For those who keep tabs on Nevada's wildlife, a frequently asked question during periods of heavy snowfall is "should we feed wildlife when winter limits their food availability?"

Idaho, Colorado and Utah have recently initiated limited amounts of winter feeding and "baiting" of mule deer and elk. These efforts are intended to prevent agricultural damage and provide for human safety on highways and interstates as animals are lured away from conflict areas. Although snowfall has been plentiful in many parts of Nevada this winter, rainfall and warmer daytime temperatures have minimized snow accumulations at lower elevations. Most mule deer, elk and pronghorn continue to have access to lower elevation winter ranges that assist in avoiding deep snows and locating suitable forage. Yet, even when winter conditions are most severe, winter feeding may not be a good idea.

"Feeding wildlife often feels like the right thing to do," said Cody Schroeder, mule deer biologist for the Nevada Department of Wildlife. "Yet in practice, it generally creates more problems than it solves."

Schroeder is part of the Mule Deer Working Group, a subcommittee of the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies. The group has been reviewing scientific literature on a number of issues facing deer in the West and prepared a fact sheet on the challenges of winter feeding. **Those challenges include:**

**Diet:** Mule deer and pronghorn are highly selective foragers. They tend to eat plant parts with the highest nutrient content. These animals are also ruminants, meaning they have a

four-compartment stomach and get nutrients from plant-based food by fermenting it in a specialized stomach prior to digestion. Rapid changes in their diet may result in the inability to digest their food. Some past efforts at supplemental feeding have failed when these animals died with full stomachs due to this rapid change.

**Behavior:** Many ungulates (deer, elk, antelope) are migratory in nature and respond to heavy winter conditions by moving to areas with less snow accumulation. Feeding may entice migratory animals to stay in one place when the best solution may be for them to move on.

**Disease:** Winter feeding concentrates wildlife and can lead to disease transmission among individuals. Sometimes the feed the animals consume may actually cause certain diseases, such as grain toxicosis.

**Predation:** Concentrating animals in a single location can also concentrate the animals that prey on them as well. While reducing herd size under severe conditions may limit the numbers of animals dependent on a limited food source, concentrated numbers can result in greater predation than what they would normally sustain.

**Competition:** When wildlife is concentrated, competition for food resources may be severe and young animals may be excluded from foraging. Young animals are among the least capable of surviving difficult conditions, and concentrated numbers can increase competition to the point that fawn survival may decrease beyond what may be experienced without the winter feeding. These concentrations may also result in increased damage to native rangelands beyond what would normally occur if animals were spread out.

**Finances and logistics:** To feed wildlife effectively, specific foods should be prepared that address the specialized needs of ruminant animals. Formulation and production takes time and

this formulated feed is relatively expensive. Delivering the feed to the best locations can be challenging because creating concentrations near easily accessed roads can create traffic hazards or lead to increased poaching events.

NDOW also wants the public to be aware that heavy snow may sometimes lead to wildlife coming into urban areas in search of food, but that it is never a good idea for the public to feed wildlife.

“We understand that when you see an animal that looks hungry, a person’s first instinct is to feed that animal. We just want the public to understand that feeding a wild animal is often unhealthy for the animal and it takes away their fear of people,” said Schroeder.

*Aaron Meier is with the Nevada Department of Wildlife.*