

More payouts for elk damage proposed

By **DON JENKINS**
Capital Press

OLYMPIA — Washington farmers could be compensated for damage to irrigation equipment and pastures by elk and deer under legislation introduced Monday.

Producers already are eligible for payments for ruined food crops. Besides expanding the basis for claims, House Bill 1875 would double the maximum payout to \$20,000. The bill would not change an application process that farmers complain is cumbersome and discourages claims.

More compensation would help, but won't solve problems farmers and ranchers have in eastern Skagit County valleys overrun by elk, said Bill Schmidt, president of the county's Farm Bureau chapter.



Don Jenkins/Capital Press

Elk gather in a field in Skagit County, Wash. A bill introduced in the Washington Legislature would double the amount of compensation farmers could receive for damage to their property caused by deer or elk.

“To me, prevention is the ultimate goal,” he said. “But if it’s taking so long to fix the problem, you have to have more compensation, or you’ll lose more farmers.”

Elk and deer damage farmland across the state. Elk are particularly troublesome in Skagit County, where the Department

of Fish and Wildlife and Native Indian tribes trucked elk captured from Mount St. Helens. Over the past 15 years, the herd has grown and migrated from hills onto valley farmland.

Farmers say elk are breaking fences, tearing up hay bales, eating and contaminating crops, breaking sprinklers, and eating live-

stock forage. The county assessor’s office estimates that elk damage to farms may total \$1.5 million a year.

Applying for compensation requires farmers to submit an adjuster’s report, and business, insurance and tax records. and open land to hunters. No farmer in the eastern Skagit County val-

leys occupied by elk has applied for compensation since 2016, according to Fish and Wildlife.

HB 1875’s sponsor, Republican Rep. Carolyn Eslick, who represents eastern Skagit County, said she’s working on making documenting losses simpler, but hasn’t developed a proposal yet. She also said she wants to get elk back in the hills. “I hear them (farmers) loud and clear,” she said.

Efforts to obtain comment from Fish and Wildlife on Monday were unsuccessful. The department has said previously it is concerned about farmers filing frivolous claims.

Randy Good, vice president of the Skagit County Cattlemen’s Association, said farmers and ranchers have asked for changes to the compensation to allow producers to recover

actual losses. “I’m hoping they’ll get something together,” he said. “So far, that hasn’t happened.”

Eslick’s bill, co-sponsored by Rep. Tom Dent, R-Moses Lake, would require Fish and Wildlife to pay for an adjuster to assess damage. The Fish and Wildlife Commission adopted a rule in 2015 that requires farmers to split the cost with the state.

The bill calls for doubling a pot of money to compensate farmers statewide to \$240,000, though lawmakers would have to put the money in the state’s general fund. Dent sponsored a similar bill in 2017, but it did not pass.

The legislation was assigned to the House Rural Development, Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee.

Ditch-cleaning bill encounters environmental objections

By **MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI**
Capital Press

SALEM — A proposal to allow Oregon farmers to clean more sediment from ditches without a permit has encountered opposition from environmentalists who warn of unintended consequences.

Under House Bill 2437, farmers could dig out up to 3,000 cubic yards of dirt per mile of drainage ditch in wetland areas over five years without a state fill-removal permit, up from the current limit of 50 cubic yards per year.

The work could be conducted only when the channels are dry unless the landowner obtains a variance from the Oregon Department of Agriculture, which would oversee the program.

Farmers argue that removing 50 cubic yards per year isn’t enough to prevent ditches from clogging, interfering with field drainage while filling channels inhabited by fish with dirt.

“Both farmers and fish suffer if people can’t get in to do this work as often as it’s needed,” said Mary Anne Cooper, vice president of public policy for the Oregon Farm Bureau, during a Jan. 31 legislative hearing.

Several environmental groups urged the House Committee on Agriculture and Land Use against recommending the bill for

approval, claiming that allowing an “exponential” increase in the amount of dirt removed from ditches could adversely affect fish.

Ditches can serve as important winter habitat for salmon and steelhead as well as a “nursery” for juvenile fish but HB 2437 would let farmers dredge these channels with scant oversight from wildlife regulators, said Brian McLachlan, a volunteer with the Association of Northwest Steelheaders.

“These habitats are part of what used to be a vast off-channel floodplain complex,” he said.

While the bill would require Oregon State University to complete a study of dredging effects over five years, that may encourage farmers to remove as much sediment from ditches as possible before the report is complete, McLachlan said.

“We think that’s putting the cart before the horse,” he said.

The Nature Conservancy would prefer if the bill recognized that ditches in certain geographies and landscapes may need to be treated differently, such as coastal streams occupied by coho salmon. Other streams can be cleared aggressively without detriment to fish, said Jena Carter, the group’s Oregon coast and marine director.

The organization recommends that “essential salmonid habitat” be excluded

from the increased removal limit and requiring a “waiting period” during which the state government can review planned ditch-cleaning activities, she said.

Trout Unlimited believes the volume cap under HB 2437 should be reduced to 300 cubic yards per linear mile, which could be modified once the study of the law’s impacts was finished, said Chandra Ferrari, senior policy advisor with the group.

Under current rules, only about 20 farmers have actually sought fill-removal permits to dig out more than 50 cubic yards of dirt from ditches, which indicates growers are not using the permit process and the state isn’t enforcing the rules, said Rep. Susan McLain, D-Hillsboro, who led a work group that developed the proposal.

Treasure Valley reload center planners make progress

By **BRAD CARLSON**
Capital Press

ONTARIO, Ore. — Treasure Valley Reload Center could be operating within two years if work on the truck-to-rail shipping facility north of Nyssa, Ore., stays on track, Malheur County Economic Development Director Greg Smith told a meeting of onion growers Feb. 5.

He said Union Pacific Railroad recently instructed TVRC officials to complete 30 percent of the design for the rail portion of the facility, up from the earlier 10 percent.

This indicates Union Pacific will enter the reload center into its database of planned projects and continue working with the group. The parties are negotiating a potential rail service agreement.

The Oregon Transportation Commission last Septem-

ber accepted the reload center’s market-feasibility study, advancing the project for further review. Smith said that if the commission grants final approval — the panel is slated to meet Feb. 21 and March 21 — remaining state-pledged funding would be released.

The Oregon Legislature authorized a \$26 million grant for the project, from lottery-backed bonds, as part of the state’s 2017 transportation funding package.

Up to 5 percent became

available last year for developing a proposal when the Malheur Economic Development Corp. signed an initial contract with the Oregon Department of Transportation. The nonprofit corporation is spearheading the project and will oversee the planned industrial park it would anchor.

“Twenty-six-million (dollars) is a lot, and it takes time to go through the public process,” Smith told the group.

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